PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 284

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1996–97

COMPRISING PERIOD
23 October—7 November 1996

Chronology of "The Parliamentary Debates"

The Parliamentary History contains all that can be collected of the Legislative History of this country from the Conquest to the close of the XVIIIth Century (1803), 36 vols. The chief sources whence these Debates are derived are the Constitutional History, 24 vols.; Sir Simonds D'Ewes' Journal; Debates of the Commons in 1620 and 1621; Chandler and Timberland's Debates, 22 vols.; Grey's Debates of the Commons, from 1667 to 1694, 10 vols.; Almons Debates, 24 vols.; Debrett's Debates, 63 vols.; The Hardwicke Papers; Debates in Parliament by Dr. Johnson, &c. &c.

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES commenced with the year 1803, and the contents are set forth in the following Chronological Table:—

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House of Commons

Alphabetical List of Members

[Returned at the General Election, 9 April 1992]

A

Abbott, Ms Diane Julie (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington)
Adams, Mrs. Katherine (Paisley, North)
Adley, Robert James (Christchurch) *[died, May 1993]*
Ainger, Nicholas Richard (Pembroke)
Ainsworth, Peter Michael (East Surrey)
Ainsworth, Robert William (Coventry, North-East)
Aitken, Rt. Hon. Jonathan William Patrick (South Thanet)
Alexander, Richard Thain (Newark)
Alison, Rt. Hon. Michael James Hugh (Selby)
Allason, Rupert William Simon (Torbay)
Allen, Graham William (Nottingham, North)
Alton, David Patrick Paul (Liverpool, Mossley Hill)
Amess, David Anthony Andrew (Basildon)
Ancram, Rt. Hon. Michael (Devizes)
Anderson, Donald (Swansea, East)
Anderson, Janet (Rossendale and Darwen)
Arbuthnot, James Norwich (Wanstead and Woodford)
Armstrong, Ms Hilary Jane (North-West Durham)
Arnold, Jacques Arnold (Gravesham)
Arnold, Sir Thomas Richard (Hazel Grove)
Ashby, David Glynn (North-West Leicestershire)
Ashdown, Rt. Hon. Jeremy John Durham (Yeovil)
Ashton, Joseph William (Bassetlaw)
Aspinwall, Jack Heywood (Wansdyke)
Atkins, Rt. Hon. Robert James (South Ribble)
Atkinson, David Anthony (Bournemouth, East)
Atkinson, Peter Landreth (Hexham)
Austin-Walker, John Eric (Woolwich)

B

Baker, Rt. Hon. Kenneth Wilfred CH (Mole Valley)
Baker, Nicholas Brian (Dorset, North)
Baldry, Antony Brian (Banbury)
Banks, Matthew Richard William (Southport)
Banks, Robert George (Harrogate)
Banks, Tony (Newham, North-West)
Barnes, Harold (North-East Derbyshire)
Barron, Kevin John (Rother Valley)
Bates, Michael Walton (Langbaurgh)
Batiste, Spencer Lee (Elmet)
Battle, John Dominic (Leeds, West)
Bayley, Hugh (York)
Beckett, Rt. Hon. Mrs. Margaret Mary (Derby, South)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Beith, Rt. Hon. Alan James (Berwick-upon-Tweed)
Bell, Stuart (Middlesbrough)
Bellingham, Henry Campbell (North-West Norfolk)
Bendall, Vivian Walter Hough (Ilford, North)
Benn, Rt. Hon. Anthony Neil Wedgwood (Chesterfield)
Bennett, Andrew Francis (Denton and Reddish)
Benton, Joseph Edward (Bootle)
Beresford, Sir Alexander Paul (Croydon, Central)
Bermingham, Gerald Edward (St. Helens, South)
Berry, Roger Leslie (Kingswood)
Betts, Clive James Charles (Sheffield, Attercliffe)
Biffen, Rt. Hon. William John (North Shropshire)
Blackburn, John Graham (Dudley, West) *[died, October 1994]*
Blair, Rt. Hon. Anthony Charles Lynton (Sedgefield)
Blunkett, David (Sheffield, Brightside)
Boateng, Paul Yaw (Brent, South)
Body, Sir Richard Bernard Frank Stewart (Holland with Boston)
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas Cosmo (Upminster)
Booth, Vernon Edward Hartley (Finchley)
Boothroyd, Rt. Hon. Miss Betty (West Bromwich, West)
Boswell, Timothy Eric (Daventry)
Bottomley, Peter James (Eltham)
Bottomley, Rt. Hon. Mrs. Virginia Hilda Brunette Maxwell (South-West Surrey)
Bowden, Sir Andrew MBE (Brighton, Kemptown)
Bowis, John Crocket OBE (Battersea)
Boyce, James (Rotherham) *[died, January 1994]*
Boyes, Roland (Houghton and Washington)
Boyson, Rt. Hon. Sir Rhodes (Brent, North)
Bradley, Keith John Charles (Manchester, Withington)
Brandreth, Gyles Daubeney (City of Chester)
Bray, Dr. Jeremy William (Motherwell, South)
Brazier, Julian William Hendy (Canterbury)
Bright, Sir Graham Frank James (Luton, South)
Brooke, Rt. Hon. Peter Leonard (City of London and Westminster, South)
Brown, Rt. Hon. James Gordon (Dunfermline, East)
Brown, Michael Russell (Brigg and Cleethorpes)
Brown, Nicholas Hugh (Newcastle upon Tyne, East)
Browning, Mrs. Angela Frances (Tiverton)
Bruce, Ian Cameron (South Dorset)
Bruce, Malcolm Gray (Gordon)
Budgen, Nicholas William (Wolverhampton, South-West)
Burden, Richard Haines (Birmingham, Northfield)
Burns, Simon Hugh McGuigan (Chelmsford)
Burt, Alistair James Hendrie (Bury, North)
Butcher, John Patrick (Coventry, South-West)
Butler, Peter (Milton Keynes, North-East)
Butterfill, John Valentine (Bournemouth, West)
Byers, Stephen John (Wallsend)

C

Caborn, Richard George (Sheffield, Central)
Callaghan, James (Heywood and Middleton)
Campbell, Anne (Cambridge)
Campbell, Ronald (Blyth Valley)
Campbell, Walter Menzies CBE QC (Fife, North-East)
Campbell-Savours, Dale Norman (Workington)
Canavan, Dennis Andrew (Falkirk, West)
Cann, James Charles (Ipswich)

Carlile, Alexander Charles QC (Montgomery)
Carlisle, John Russell (Luton, North)
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth Melville (Lincoln)
Carrington, Matthew Hadrian Marshall (Fulham)
Carttiss, Michael Reginald Harry (Great Yarmouth)
Cash, William Nigel Paul (Stafford)
Channon, Rt. Hon. Henry Paul Guinness (Southend, West)
Chaplin, Mrs. Sybil Judith OBE (Newbury) *[died, February 1993]*
Chapman, Sir Sydney Brookes (Chipping Barnet)
Chidgey, David William George (Eastleigh) *[By-election, June 1994]*
Chisholm, Malcolm George Richardson (Edinburgh, Leith)
Church, Judith Ann (Dagenham) *[By-election, June 1994]*
Churchill, Winston Spencer (Davyhulme)
Clapham, Michael (Barnsley, West and Penistone)
Clappison, William James (Hertsmere)
Clark, David George (South Shields)
Clark, Michael (Rochford)
Clarke, Eric Lionel (Midlothian)
Clarke, Rt. Hon. Kenneth Harry QC (Rushcliffe)
Clarke, Thomas CBE (Monklands, West)
Clelland, David Gordon (Tyne Bridge)
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey Robert (Cirencester and Tewkesbury)
Clwyd, Mrs. Ann (Cynon Valley)
Coe, Sebastian Newbold (Falmouth and Camborne)
Coffey, Ann (Stockport)
Cohen, Harry Michael (Leyton)
Colvin, Michael Keith Beale (Romsey and Waterside)
Congdon, David Leonard (Croydon, North-East)
Connarty, Michael (Falkirk, East)
Conway, Derek Leslie (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
Cook, Francis (Stockton, North)
Cook, Rt. Hon. Robert Finlayson (Livingston)
Coombs, Anthony Michael Vincent (Wyre Forest)
Coombs, Simon Christopher (Swindon)
Cope, Rt. Hon. Sir John Ambrose (Northavon)
Corbett, Robin (Birmingham, Erdington)
Corbyn, Jeremy Bernard (Islington, North)
Cormack, Sir Patrick Thomas (South Staffordshire)
Corston, Jean Ann (Bristol, East)
Couchman, James Randall (Gillingham)
Cousins, James Mackay (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central)
Cox, Thomas Michael (Tooting)
Cran, James Douglas (Beverley)
Critchley, Sir Julian Michael Gordon (Aldershot)
Cryer, George Robert (Bradford, South) *[died, April 1994]*
Cummings, John Scott (Easington)
Cunliffe, Lawrence Francis (Leigh)
Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry, South-East)
Cunningham, Rt. Hon. John Anderson (Copeland)
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna (Perth and Kinross) *[By-election, May 1995]*
Currie, Mrs. Edwina (South Derbyshire)
Curry, Rt. Hon. David Maurice (Skipton and Ripon)

D

Dafis, Cynog Glyndwr (Ceredigion and Pembroke, North)
Dalyell, Tam (Linlithgow)
Darling, Alistair Maclean (Edinburgh, Central)
Davidson, Ian Graham (Glasgow, Govan)
Davies, Bryan (Oldham, Central and Royton)
Davies, Chris (Littleborough and Saddleworth) *[By-election, July 1995]*
Davies, Rt. Hon. David John Denzil (Llanelli)
Davies, John Quentin (Stamford and Spalding)
Davies, Ronald (Caerphilly)
Davis, David Michael (Boothferry)
Davis, Terence Anthony Gordon (Birmingham, Hodge Hill)
Day, Stephen Richard (Cheadle)
Denham, John Yorke (Southampton, Itchen)
Deva, Niranjan Joseph Aditya (Brentford and Isleworth)
Devlin, Timothy Robert (Stockton, South)
Dewar, Rt. Hon. Donald Campbell (Glasgow, Garscadden)
Dickens, Geoffrey Kenneth (Littleborough and Saddleworth) *[died, May 1995]*
Dicks, Terence Patrick (Hayes and Harlington)
Dixon, Rt. Hon. Donald (Jarrow)
Dobson, Frank Gordon (Holborn and St. Pancras)
Donohoe, Brian (Cunninghame, South)
Dorrell, Rt. Hon. Stephen James (Loughborough)
Douglas-Hamilton, Rt. Hon. Lord James (Edinburgh, West)
Dover, Densmore Ronald (Chorley)
Dowd, James Patrick (Lewisham, West)
Duncan, Alan James Carter (Rutland and Melton)
Duncan Smith, George Iain (Chingford)
Dunn, Robert John (Dartford)
Dunnachie, James Francis (Glasgow, Pollok)
Dunwoody, Hon. Mrs. Gwyneth Patricia (Crewe and Nantwich)
Durant, Sir Robert Anthony Bevis (Reading, West)
Dykes, Hugh John Maxwell (Harrow, East)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eastham, Kenneth (Manchester, Blackley)
Eggar, Rt. Hon. Timothy John Crommelin (Enfield, North)
Elletson, Harold Daniel Hope (Blackpool, North)
Emery, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Frank Hannibal (Honiton)
Enright, Derek Anthony (Hemsworth) *[died, October 1995]*
Etherington, William (Sunderland, North)
Evans, David John (Welwyn Hatfield)
Evans, John (St. Helens, North)
Evans, Jonathan Peter (Brecon and Radnor)
Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
Evans, Roger Kenneth (Monmouth)
Evennett, David Anthony (Erith and Crayford)
Ewing, Mrs. Margaret Anne (Moray)

F

Faber, David James Christian (Westbury)
Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Mid-Staffordshire)
Fairbairn, Sir Nicholas Hardwick QC (Perth and Kinross) *[died, February 1995]*
Fatchett, Derek John (Leeds, Central)
Faulds, Andrew Matthew William (Warley, East)
Fenner, Dame Peggy Edith (Medway)
Field, Barry John Anthony (Isle of Wight)
Field, Frank (Birkenhead)
Fishburn, John Dudley (Kensington)

Fisher, Mark (Stoke-on-Trent, Central)
Flynn, Paul Phillip (Newport, West)
Fookes, Dame Janet Evelyn (Plymouth, Drake)
Forman, Francis Nigel (Carshalton and Wallington)
Forsyth, Rt. Hon. Michael Bruce (Stirling)
Forsythe, Clifford (South Antrim)
Forth, Eric (Mid-Worcestershire)
Foster, Rt. Hon. Derek (Bishop Auckland)
Foster, Donald Michael Ellison (Bath)
Foulkes, George (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
Fowler, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Norman (Sutton Coldfield)
Fox, Rt. Hon. Sir John Marcus MBE (Shipley)
Fox, Liam (Woodspring)
Fraser, John Denis (Norwood)
Freeman, Rt. Hon. Roger Norman (Kettering)
French, Douglas Charles (Gloucester)
Fry, Sir Peter Derek (Wellingborough)
Fyfe, Mrs. Maria (Glasgow, Maryhill)

G

Galbraith, Samuel Laird (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)
Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
Gallie, Philip Roy (Ayr)
Galloway, George (Glasgow, Hillhead)
Gapes, Michael John (Ilford, South)
Gardiner, Sir George Arthur (Reigate)
Garel-Jones, William Armand Thomas Tristan (Watford)
Garnier, Hon. Edward Henry QC (Harborough)
Garrett, John Laurence (Norwich, South)
George, Bruce Thomas (Walsall, South)
Gerrard, Neil Francis (Walthamstow)
Gilbert, Rt. Hon. John William (Dudley, East)
Gill, Christopher John Fred RD (Ludlow)
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
Godman, Norman Anthony (Greenock and Port Glasgow)
Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Small Heath)
Golding, Mrs. Llinos (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
Goodlad, Alastair Robertson (Eddisbury)
Goodson-Wickes, Dr. Charles (Wimbledon)
Gordon, Mrs. Mildred (Bow and Poplar)
Gorman, Mrs. Theresa Ellen (Billericay)
Gorst, Sir John Michael (Hendon, North)
Gould, Bryan Charles (Dagenham) *[resigned, May 1994]*
Graham, Thomas (Renfrew, West and Inverclyde)
Grant, Bernard Alexander Montgomery (Tottenham)
Grant, Sir John Anthony (South-West Cambridgeshire)
Greenway, Harry (Ealing, North)
Greenway, John Robert (Ryedale)
Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh, South)
Griffiths, Peter Harry Steve (Portsmouth, North)
Griffiths, Winston James (Bridgend)
Grocott, Bruce Joseph (The Wrekin)
Grylls, Sir William Michael John (North-West Surrey)
Gummer, Rt. Hon. John Selwyn (Suffolk, Coastal)
Gunnell, John (Leeds, South and Morley)

H

Hague, Rt. Hon. William Jefferson (Richmond, Yorks)
Hain, Peter Gerald (Neath)
Hall, Mike Thomas (Warrington, South)
Hamilton, Rt. Hon. Sir Archibald Gavin (Epsom and Ewell)
Hamilton, Mostyn Neil (Tatton)
Hampson, Keith (Leeds, North-West)
Hanley, Rt. Hon. Jeremy James (Richmond and Barnes)
Hannam, John Gordon (Exeter)
Hanson, David George (Delyn)
Hardy, Peter (Wentworth)
Hargreaves, Andrew Raikes (Birmingham, Hall Green)
Harman, Ms Harriet Ruth (Peckham)
Harris, David Anthony (St. Ives)
Harvey, Nick (North Devon)
Haselhurst, Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough (Saffron Walden)
Hattersley, Rt. Hon. Roy Sydney George (Birmingham, Sparkbrook)
Hawkins, John Nicholas (Blackpool, South)
Hawksley, Philip Warren (Halesowen and Stourbridge)
Hayes, Jeremy Joseph James (Harlow)
Heald, Oliver (North Hertfordshire)
Heath, Rt. Hon. Sir Edward Richard George KG, MBE (Old Bexley and Sidcup)
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt. Hon. David Philip (Wells)
Henderson, Douglas John (Newcastle upon Tyne, North)
Hendron, Dr. Joseph Gerard (Belfast, West)
Hendry, Charles (High Peak)
Heppell, John (Nottingham, East)
Heseltine, Rt. Hon. Michael Ray Dibdin (Henley)
Hicks, Sir Robert Adrian (South-East Cornwall)
Higgins, Rt. Hon. Sir Terence Langley (Worthing)
Hill, Trevor Keith (Streatham)
Hill, Sir Stanley James Allen (Southampton, Test)
Hinchliffe, David Martin (Wakefield)
Hodge, Margaret Eve (Barking) *[By-election, June 1994]*
Hoey, Miss Catharine Letitia (Vauxhall)
Hogg, Rt. Hon. Douglas Martin QC (Grantham)
Hogg, Norman (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)
Home Robertson, John David (East Lothian)
Hood, James (Clydesdale)
Hoon, Geoffrey William (Ashfield)
Horam, John Rhodes (Orpington)
Hordern, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Maudslay (Horsham)
Howard, Rt. Hon. Michael QC (Folkestone and Hythe)
Howarth, Alan Thomas CBE (Stratford-on-Avon)
Howarth, George Edward (Knowsley, North)
Howell, Rt. Hon. David Arthur Russell (Guildford)
Howell, Sir Ralph Frederic (North Norfolk)
Howells, Dr. Kim Scott (Pontypridd)
Hoyle, Eric Douglas Harvey (Warrington, North)
Hughes, Kevin Michael (Doncaster, North)
Hughes, Robert Gurth (Harrow, West)
Hughes, Robert (Aberdeen, North)
Hughes, Royston John (Newport, East)
Hughes, Simon Henry Ward (Southwark and Bermondsey)
Hume, John (Foyle)
Hunt, Rt. Hon. David James Fletcher MBE (Wirral, West)
Hunt, Sir John Leonard (Ravensbourne)
Hunter, Andrew Robert Frederick (Basingstoke)
Hurd, Rt. Hon. Douglas Richard CH, CBE (Witney)
Hutton, John Matthew Patrick (Barrow and Furness)

I

Illsley, Eric Evelyn (Barnsley, Central)
Ingram, Adam Paterson (East Kilbride)

J

Jack, John Michael (Fylde)
Jackson, Glenda May (Hampstead and Highgate)
Jackson, Helen Margaret (Sheffield, Hillsborough)
Jackson, Robert Victor (Wantage)
Jamieson, David Charles (Plymouth, Devonport)
Janner, Hon. Greville Ewan QC (Leicester, West)
Jenkin, Bernard Christison (Colchester, North)
Jenkins, Brian David (South-East Staffordshire) *[By-election, April 1996]*
Jessel, Toby Francis Henry (Twickenham)
Johnson Smith, Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey (Wealden)
Johnston, Sir David Russell (Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber)
Jones, Gwilym Hadyn (Cardiff, North)
Jones, Ieuan Wyn (Ynys Môn)
Jones, Jonathan Owen (Cardiff, Central)
Jones, Lynne Mary (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
Jones, Martyn David (Clwyd, South-West)
Jones, Nigel David (Cheltenham)
Jones, Robert Brannock (West Hertfordshire)
Jones, Stephen Barry (Alyn and Deeside)
Jopling, Rt. Hon. Thomas Michael (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
Jowell, Tessa Jane Helen Douglas (Dulwich)

K

Kaufman, Rt. Hon. Gerald Bernard (Manchester, Gorton)
Keen, David Alan (Feltham and Heston)
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Mary Elaine (Lancaster)
Kennedy, Charles Peter (Ross, Cromarty and Skye)
Kennedy, Jane Elizabeth (Liverpool, Broadgreen)
Key, Simon Robert (Salisbury)
Khabra, Piara Singh (Ealing, Southall)
Kilfedder, Sir James Alexander (North Down) *[died, March 1995]*
Kilfoyle, Peter (Liverpool, Walton)
King, Rt. Hon. Thomas Jeremy CH (Bridgwater)
Kinnock, Rt. Hon. Neil Gordon (Islwyn) *[resigned, February 1995]*
Kirkhope, Timothy John Robert (Leeds, North-East)
Kirkwood, Archibald Johnstone (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
Knapman, Roger Maurice (Stroud)
Knight, Mrs. Angela Ann (Erewash)
Knight, Rt. Hon. Gregory (Derby, North)
Knight, Dame Joan Christabel Jill DBE (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
Knox, Sir David Laidlaw (Staffordshire, Moorlands)
Kynoch, George Alexander Bryson (Kincardine and Deeside)

L

Lait, Mrs. Jacqueline Anne Harkness (Hastings and Rye)
Lamont, Rt. Hon. Norman Stewart Hughson (Kingston upon Thames)
Lang, Rt. Hon. Ian Bruce (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale)
Lawrence, Sir Ivan John QC (Burton)
Legg, Barry Charles (Milton Keynes, South-West)
Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough and Horncastle)
Leighton, Ronald (Newham, North-East) *[died, March 1994]*
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark Alexander (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
Lester, Sir James Theodore (Broxtowe)
Lestor, Miss Joan (Eccles)
Lewis, Terence (Worsley)
Liddell, Mrs. Helen (Monklands, East) *[By-election, June 1994]*
Lidington, David Roy (Aylesbury)
Lightbown, Sir David Lincoln (South-East Staffordshire) *[died, December 1995]*
Lilley, Rt. Hon. Peter Bruce (St. Albans)
Litherland, Robert Kenneth (Manchester, Central)
Livingstone, Kenneth Robert (Brent, East)
Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Stretford)
Lloyd, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Robert Cable (Fareham)
Llwyd, Elfyn (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)
Lofthouse, Sir Geoffrey (Pontefract and Castleford)
Lord, Michael Nicholson (Central Suffolk)
Loyden, Edward (Liverpool, Garston)
Luff, Peter James (Worcester)
Lyell, Rt. Hon. Sir Nicholas Walter QC (Mid-Bedfordshire)
Lynne, Elizabeth (Rochdale)

M

McAllion, John (Dundee, East)
McAvoy, Thomas (Glasgow, Rutherglen)
McCartney, Ian (Makerfield)
McCartney, Robert QC (North Down) *[By-election, June 1995]*
McCrea, Rev. Robert Thomas William (Mid-Ulster)
MacDonald, Calum Alasdair (Western Isles)
McFall, John (Dumbarton)
McGrady, Edward Kevin (South Down)
MacGregor, Rt. Hon. John Roddick Russell OBE (South Norfolk)
MacKay, Andrew James (East Berkshire)
McKelvey, William (Kilmarnock and Loudoun)
Mackinlay, Andrew Stuart (Thurrock)
Maclean, Rt. Hon. David John (Penrith and The Border)
McLeish, Henry Baird (Fife, Central)
Maclennan, Robert Adam Ross (Caithness and Sutherland)
McLoughlin, Patrick Allen (West Derbyshire)
McMaster, Gordon (Paisley, South)
MacNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick Michael Ernest David (New Forest)
McNamara, Joseph Kevin (Kingston upon Hull, North)
MacShane, Denis (Rotherham) *[By-election, May 1994]*
McWilliam, John David (Blaydon)
Madden, Maxwell Francis (Bradford, West)
Maddock, Mrs. Diana (Christchurch) *[By-election, July 1993]*
Madel, Sir William David (South-West Bedfordshire)
Maginnis, Kenneth (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Mahon, Mrs. Alice (Halifax)
Maitland, Olga Helen (Sutton and Cheam)
Major, Rt. Hon. John (Huntingdon)

Mallon, Seamus (Newry and Armagh)
Malone, Peter Gerald (Winchester)
Mandelson, Peter Benjamin (Hartlepool)
Mans, Keith Douglas Rowland (Wyre)
Marek, Dr. John (Wrexham)
Marland, Paul (West Gloucestershire)
Marlow, Antony Rivers (Northampton, North)
Marshall, David (Glasgow, Shettleston)
Marshall, James (Leicester, South)
Marshall, John Leslie (Hendon, South)
Marshall, Sir Robert Michael (Arundel)
Martin, David John Pattison (Portsmouth, South)
Martin, Michael John (Glasgow, Springburn)
Martlew, Eric Anthony (Carlisle)
Mates, Michael John (East Hampshire)
Mawhinney, Rt. Hon. Brian Stanley (Peterborough)
Maxton, John Alston (Glasgow, Cathcart)
Mayhew, Rt. Hon. Sir Patrick Barnabas Burke QC (Tunbridge Wells)
Meacher, Michael Hugh (Oldham, West)
Meale, Joseph Alan (Mansfield)
Mellor, Rt. Hon. David John QC (Putney)
Merchant, Piers Rolf Garfield (Beckenham)
Michael, Alun Edward (Cardiff, South and Penarth)
Michie, Mrs. Janet Ray (Argyll and Bute)
Michie, William (Sheffield, Heeley)
Milburn, Alan (Darlington)
Miller, Andrew Peter (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
Milligan, Stephen David Wyatt (Eastleigh) *[died, February 1994]*
Mills, Iain Campbell (Meriden)
Mitchell, Andrew John Bower (Gedling)
Mitchell, Austin Vernon (Great Grimsby)
Mitchell, Sir David Bower (North-West Hampshire)
Moate, Sir Roger Denis (Faversham)
Molyneaux, Rt. Hon. Sir James Henry KBE (Lagan Valley)
Monro, Rt. Hon. Sir Hector Seymour Peter AE (Dumfries)
Montgomery, Sir William Fergus (Altrincham and Sale)
Moonie, Dr. Lewis George (Kirkcaldy)
Morgan, Hywel Rhodri (Cardiff, West)
Morley, Elliot Anthony (Glanford and Scunthorpe)
Morris, Rt. Hon. Alfred (Manchester, Wythenshawe)
Morris, Estelle (Birmingham, Yardley)
Morris, Rt. Hon. John QC (Aberavon)
Morris, Rt. Hon. Michael Wolfgang Laurence (Northampton, South)
Moss, Malcolm Douglas (North-East Cambridgeshire)
Mowlam, Ms Marjorie (Redcar)
Mudie, George Edward (Leeds, East)
Mullin, Christopher John (Sunderland, South)
Murphy, Paul Peter (Torfaen)

N

Needham, Rt. Hon. Richard Francis (North Wiltshire)
Nelson, Richard Anthony (Chichester)
Neubert, Sir Michael Jon (Romford)
Newton, Rt. Hon. Antony Harold OBE (Braintree)
Nicholls, Patrick Charles Martyn (Teignbridge)
Nicholson, David John (Taunton)
Nicholson, Miss Emma Harriet (Torridge and West Devon)
Norris, Steven John (Epping Forest)

O

Oakes, Rt. Hon. Gordon James (Halton)
O'Brien, Michael (North Warwickshire)
O'Brien, William (Normanton)
O'Hara, Edward (Knowsley, South)
Olner, William John (Nuneaton)
O'Neill, Martin John (Clackmannan)
Onslow, Rt. Hon. Sir Cranley Gordon Douglas (Woking)
Oppenheim, Phillip Anthony Charles Lawrence (Amber Valley)
Orme, Rt. Hon. Stanley (Salford, East)
Ottaway, Richard Geoffrey James (Croydon, South)

P

Page, Richard Lewis (South-West Hertfordshire)
Paice, James Edward Thornton (Cambridge, South East)
Paisley, Rev. Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
Parry, Robert (Liverpool, Riverside)
Patchett, Terry (Barnsley, East) *[died, October 1996]*
Patnick, Sir Cyril Irvine (Sheffield, Hallam)
Patten, Rt. Hon. John Haggitt Charles (Oxford, West and Abingdon)
Pattie, Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Edwin (Chertsey and Walton)
Pawsey, James Francis (Rugby and Kenilworth)
Peacock, Mrs. Elizabeth Joan (Batley and Spen)
Pearson, Ian (Dudley, West) *[By-election, December 1994]*
Pendry, Thomas (Stalybridge and Hyde)
Pickles, Eric Jack (Brentwood and Ongar)
Pickthall, Colin (West Lancashire)
Pike, Peter Leslie (Burnley)
Pope, Greg James (Hyndburn)
Porter, David John (Waveney)
Porter, George Barrington (Wirral, South)
Portillo, Michael Denzil Xavier (Enfield, Southgate)
Powell, Sir Raymond (Ogmore)
Powell, William Rhys (Corby)
Prentice, Mrs. Bridget Theresa (Lewisham, East)
Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
Prescott, Rt. Hon. John Leslie (Kingston upon Hull, East)
Primarolo, Ms Dawn (Bristol, South)
Purchase, Kenneth (Wolverhampton, North East)

Q

Quin, Ms Joyce Gwendolen (Gateshead, East)

R

Radice, Giles Heneage (North Durham)
Randall, Stuart Jeffrey (Kingston upon Hull, West)
Rathbone, John Rankin (Lewes)
Raynsford, Wyvill Richard Nicolls (Greenwich)
Redmond, Martin (Don Valley)
Redwood, Rt. Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
Reid, John (Motherwell, North)
Rendel, David Digby (Newbury) *[By-election, May 1993]*
Renton, Rt. Hon. Ronald Thomas (Mid-Sussex)
Richards, Roderick (Clwyd, North-West)

Richardson, Miss Josephine (Barking) *[died, February 1994]*
Riddick, Graham Edward Galloway (Colne Valley)
Rifkind, Rt. Hon. Malcolm Leslie QC (Edinburgh, Pentlands)
Robathan, Andrew Robert George (Blaby)
Roberts, Rt. Hon. Sir Ieuan Wyn Pritchard (Conwy)
Robertson, George Islay Macneill (Hamilton)
Robertson, Raymond Scott (Aberdeen, South)
Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry, North-West)
Robinson, Mark Noel Foster (Somerton and Frome)
Robinson, Peter David (Belfast, East)
Roche, Barbara Maureen (Hornsey and Wood Green)
Roe, Mrs. Marion Audrey (Broxbourne)
Rogers, Allan Ralph (Rhondda)
Rooker, Jeffrey William (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
Rooney, Terence Henry (Bradford, North)
Ross, Ernest (Dundee, West)
Ross, William (East Londonderry)
Rowe, Andrew John Bernard (Mid-Kent)
Rowlands, Edward (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney)
Ruddock, Ms Joan Mary (Lewisham, Deptford)
Rumbold, Rt. Hon. Dame Angela Claire Rosemary CBE (Mitcham and Morden)
Ryder, Rt. Hon. Richard Andrew OBE (Mid-Norfolk)

S

Sackville, Hon. Thomas Geoffrey (Bolton, West)
Sainsbury, Rt. Hon. Sir Timothy Alan Davan (Hove)
Salmond, Alexander Elliott Anderson (Banff and Buchan)
Scott, Rt. Hon. Sir Nicholas Paul MBE (Chelsea)
Sedgemore, Brian Charles (Hackney, South and Shoreditch)
Shaw, David Lawrence (Dover)
Shaw, Sir John Giles Dunkerley (Pudsey)
Sheerman, Barry John (Huddersfield)
Sheldon, Rt. Hon. Robert Edward (Ashton under Lyne)
Shephard, Rt. Hon. Mrs. Gillian Patricia (South-West Norfolk)
Shepherd, Sir Colin Ryley (Hereford)
Shepherd, Richard Charles Scrimgeour (Aldridge-Brownhills)
Shersby, Sir Julian Michael (Uxbridge)
Shore, Rt. Hon. Peter David (Bethnal Green and Stepney)
Short, Clare (Birmingham, Ladywood)
Simpson, Alan (Nottingham, South)
Sims, Sir Roger Edward (Chislehurst)
Skeet, Sir Trevor Herbert Harry (North Bedfordshire)
Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
Smith, Andrew David (Oxford, East)
Smith, Christopher Robert (Islington, South and Finsbury)
Smith, Sir Dudley Gordon (Warwick and Leamington)
Smith, Rt. Hon. John QC (Monklands, East) *[died, May 1994]*
Smith, Llewellyn (Blaenau Gwent)
Smith, Timothy John (Beaconsfield)
Smyth, Rev. William Martin (Belfast, South)
Snape, Peter Charles (West Bromwich, East)
Soames, Hon. Arthur Nicholas Winston (Crawley)
Soley, Clive Stafford (Hammersmith)
Spearing, Nigel John (Newham, South)
Speed, Sir Herbert Keith (Ashford)
Spellar, John Francis (Warley, West)
Spencer, Sir Derek Harold (Brighton Pavilion)
Spicer, Sir James Wilton (West Dorset)
Spicer, Sir William Michael Hardy (South Worcestershire)
Spink, Dr. Robert Michael (Castle Point)
Spring, Richard John Grenville (Bury St. Edmunds)
Sproat, Iain MacDonald (Harwich)
Squire, Mrs. Rachel Anne (Dumfermline, West)
Squire, Robin Clifford (Hornchurch)
Stanley, Rt. Hon. Sir John Paul (Tonbridge and Malling)
Steel, Rt. Hon. Sir David Martin Scott (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)
Steen, Anthony David (South Hams)
Steinberg, Gerald Neil (City of Durham)
Stephen, Michael (Shoreham)
Stern, Michael Charles (Bristol, North-West)
Stevenson, George William (Stoke-on-Trent, South)
Stewart, John Allan (Eastwood)
Stott, Roger CBE (Wigan)
Strang, Gavin Steel (Edinburgh, East)
Straw, John Whitaker (Blackburn)
Streeter, Gary Nicholas (Plymouth, Sutton)
Sumberg, David Anthony Gerald (Bury, South)
Sutcliffe, Gerald (Bradford, South) *[By-election, June 1994]*
Sweeney, Walter Edward (Vale of Glamorgan)
Sykes, John David (Scarborough)

T

Tapsell, Sir Peter Hannay Bailey (East Lindsey)
Taylor, Sir Edward Macmillan (Southend, East)
Taylor, Ian Colin MBE (Esher)
Taylor, Rt. Hon. John David (Strangford)
Taylor, John Mark (Solihull)
Taylor, Matthew Owen John (Truro)
Taylor, Mrs. Winifred Ann (Dewsbury)
Temple-Morris, Peter (Leominster)
Thomason, Kenneth Roy (Bromsgrove)
Thompson, Sir Donald (Calder Valley)
Thompson, Hugh Patrick (Norwich, North)
Thompson, John (Wansbeck)
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23 October 1996

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 27 APRIL 1992]

FORTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES — VOLUME 284

FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 1996–97

House of Commons

Wednesday 23 October 1996

The House met at twenty-nine minutes past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Message to attend Her Majesty:

The House went; and having returned:

The sitting was suspended until half-past Two o'clock, and then resumed.

2.30 pm

On resuming—

SESSIONAL ORDERS

ELECTIONS

Ordered,

That all Members who are returned for two or more places in any part of the United Kingdom to make their Election for which of the places they will serve, within one week after it shall appear that there is no question upon the Return for that place; and if anything shall come in question touching the Return or Election of any Member, he is to withdraw during the time the matter is in debate; and that all Members returned upon double Returns do withdraw until their Returns are determined.

Resolved,

That no Peer of the Realm, except a Peer of Ireland, hath any right to give his vote in the Election of any Member to serve in Parliament.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath been elected or returned a Member of this House, or endeavoured so to be, by Bribery or any other corrupt practices, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against all such persons as shall have been wilfully concerned in such Bribery or other corrupt practices.

WITNESSES

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath been tampering with any Witness, in respect of his evidence to be given to this House, or any Committee thereof, or directly or indirectly hath endeavoured to deter or hinder any person from appearing or giving evidence the same is declared to be a high crime and misdemeanour; and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath given false evidence in any case before this House, or any Committee thereof, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

METROPOLITAN POLICE

Ordered,

That the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis do take care that during the Session of Parliament the passages through the streets leading to the House be kept free and open and that no obstruction be permitted to hinder the passage of Members to and from this House, and that no disorder be allowed in Westminster Hall, or in the passages leading to this House, during the Sitting of Parliament and that there be no annoyance therein or thereabouts; and that the Serjeant at Arms attending this House do communicate this Order to the Commissioner aforesaid.

Votes and Proceedings

Ordered,

That the Votes and Proceedings of this House be printed, being first perused by the Speaker; and that she do appoint the printing thereof; and that no person but such as she shall appoint do presume to print the same.

Outlawries

A Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries; read the First time; to be read a Second time.

Journal

Ordered,

That the Journal of this House, from the end of the last Session to the end of the present Session, with an index thereto, be printed.

Ordered,

That the said Journal and Index be printed by the appointment and under the direction of Donald William Limon Esq. CB, the Clerk of this House.

Ordered,

That the said Journal and Index be printed by such person as shall be licensed by the Speaker, and that no other person do presume to print the same.

Queen's Speech

Madam Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a Most Gracious Speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy.

I shall direct that the terms of the Gracious Speech be printed in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

The Duke of Edinburgh and I look forward to receiving the State Visits of His Excellency the President of Israel in February and of the President of Brazil in December next year. We also look forward to our visit to Canada in June and July and to our State Visits to Thailand later this month and to Pakistan and India in October next year, the fiftieth anniversary of their independence.

National security continues to be of the highest importance. My Government will continue to play a major role in NATO's adaptation and in decisions on its enlargement, and to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security. The United Kingdom's minimum nuclear deterrent will be maintained.

Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction remains a priority. Early provision will be made for the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. My Government will pursue negotiations on a Convention to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and other explosive purposes.

In the European Union, my Government will work for an outcome to the Intergovernmental Conference which supports an outward-looking, economically liberal and flexible Union based on a partnership of nations. They will promote policies designed to improve the Union's competitiveness and economic well-being. They will work towards the opening of accession negotiations with countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

My Government will promote the further global liberalisation of trade, in particular at the Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation, and will continue to work for transatlantic free trade in this context.

My Government will continue actively to support peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraging full compliance with the Peace Agreement and promoting reconciliation between the former warring parties.

Support will continue for the search for a durable peace in the Middle East.

My Government will continue to work for a successful transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997. They will work on behalf of its people to preserve their way of life and to promote the territory's continued stability and prosperity, founded on a high degree of autonomy and the rule of law.

Preparations will be made for the meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government to be held in Edinburgh in October 1997, and for the second Asia-Europe Meeting in London in 1998.

Support for the United Nations remains a priority. My Government will continue to work for a United Nations that is more effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of its Member States.

The fight against terrorism, organised crime and drug misuse and trafficking will remain a priority as will action to protect and improve the environment.

My Government will continue to promote respect for human rights and the international rule of law.

A substantial aid programme will be maintained to help improve the quality of life in poorer countries, by contributing to sustainable development and reducing poverty and suffering.

In Northern Ireland, my Government's priority will be to maintain progress towards peace, prosperity and reconciliation, based on a comprehensive political settlement commanding widespread support. They stand ready to introduce legislation to provide for the decommissioning of firearms, ammunition and explosives in Northern Ireland. They will maintain close and friendly relations with the Republic of Ireland.

Members of the House of Commons

Estimates for the public service will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government will continue with firm financial policies designed to support sustained economic growth and rising prosperity, while maintaining low inflation. Fiscal policy will continue to be set to bring the public sector borrowing requirement back towards balance over the medium term. My Government will reduce further the share of national income taken by the public sector. They will continue to promote enterprise and further improve the performance of the economy with the aim of creating the strongest industrial economy in Western Europe in the medium term and doubling living standards over the next twenty-five years. They will promote fewer, better and simpler regulations to reduce unnecessary burdens on business.

My Government will continue to support competitiveness through advancing knowledge, improving educational and skill levels and promoting a flexible, efficient labour market. Legislation will be introduced to widen choice and diversity, improve discipline and raise standards in schools.

A Bill will be introduced to reform the sentencing and supervision of serious, dangerous and persistent offenders so as to provide greater protection for the public. Legislation will be introduced to support the fight against organised crime, including establishing a National Crime Squad. A Bill will be introduced to strengthen controls on the ownership of firearms.

Legislation will be brought forward to strengthen the powers to protect the United Kingdom coastline from pollution from merchant shipping. A Bill will again be brought before you to authorise the construction and operation of a high speed rail link between London and the Channel Tunnel.

Legislation will be introduced to improve and develop primary health care services. A Bill will be brought forward to combat social security fraud.

Legislation will be introduced to implement proposals contained in the English and Welsh Rural White Papers in relation to parish and community councils and to provide rate relief for small village shops.

In Scotland legislation will be introduced to abolish automatic early release from prison and to make other changes in the criminal justice system to improve public protection. A Bill will be brought forward to enable the transfer of publicly-owned crofting estates to crofting trusts.

My Government will introduce legislation to enable reform of the procedures of the civil courts, and other measures of law reform.

Other measures will be laid before you.

My Government will also publish Bills in draft for consultation on the introduction of voluntary identity cards and on measures to help people make better provision for their long term care needs in old age.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

Debate on the Address

Madam Speaker: It will be for the convenience of the House to know that the subjects for debate on the Queen's Speech will be as follows.

Thursday 24 October—foreign affairs and defence; Friday 25 October—social policy; Monday 28 October—home affairs; Tuesday 29 October—education and local government; Wednesday 30 October—the economy.

2.34 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

I first entered the House of Commons in 1970. In some ways, it was another age. I shared a small office in a decrepit building across the road with five other Members of Parliament, divided between the political parties. On one side of me was my right hon. and learned Friend, the current Chancellor the Exchequer; on the other side was the current deputy Leader of the Opposition. Thus, from an early stage in my parliamentary career I discovered the overwhelming advantage of working in the Library. I continue to believe that the Library is one of the best facilities in the House of Commons—I thank my wife for that addition to my speech.

As it happens, I could never quite shake off my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has just arrived in the Chamber. He served with me in opposition and in government, and the story soon got round that, if I could put up with his smelly cigars and old hush puppies—I think I have the adjectives the right way round—I could put up with anything. Another persistent smoker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newton), immediately volunteered to join our band at the Elephant and Castle. Then came my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). At least he did not smoke, but he had one distinctive habit: he was the only Minister I knew who, when taking a meeting of civil servants, took off his coat, stood on a chair and invited questions.

Sadly, it must be admitted that the best known thing that I did in the Government was to resign from it. I left to spend more time with my family—*[Laughter]*. I like to unite the House on such matters. It is extraordinary that, despite all the memorable phrases that I coined over the years on resource allocation in the health services, earnings disregards on social security and so on, only my resignation letter makes it into the "Oxford Book of Political Quotations".

Although I never regretted that decision, there was speculation about why I really left, mainly started by my children. I concede that a small part of it was being worked over by the Opposition in a classic nasty cop/nice cop manner. The nasty cop, if he will forgive the description, was the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher). For years, he opposed me on health, social security and employment. He condemned me for everything: for my policies; even for the result of the World cup.

Then suddenly one day the hon. Gentleman was reshuffled and his place was taken by none other than the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair). An amazing new tactic was then employed: he started to listen to me. He conceded that I had a point. He even began to agree with me. Those are familiar disorientation tactics, now practised more widely, but at the time they helped do the trick.

I settled happily on the Back Benches, having served the noble Lady Thatcher for 15 years, man and boy, persecuted and oppressed. For a short period before that, I served my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). I was the last Front-Bench appointment that he made, in 1974. Indeed, he was reported as saying, "My God, if it's come to this, I'm off."

Just after the 1992 election, my family came to the conclusion that it was about time that I spent more time with my party. As it happened, the Prime Minister called me in to discuss the chairmanship. "Fowler," he said—we always had this close personal relationship—"I want you to get out there and pulverise them." And that was only our own side that he was talking about. You can imagine, Madam Speaker, what he said about the Opposition.

Less controversially, I want to say that I have represented Sutton Coldfield since 1974, my first constituency of Nottingham, South having been abolished in redistribution. For almost 450 years, Sutton Coldfield stood independent as a royal town. It had been given its royal charter by Henry VIII, together with 2,500 acres of wild parkland, which remains to this day a place of outstanding natural beauty, to be used by its citizens, of whom my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) was once one.

The undoubted benefactor of Sutton Coldfield in those distant days was Bishop Vesey, who was a social reformer of some note. He built and endowed a grammar school, which successfully continues to this day; he provided widows' pensions in the parish, and built more than 50 houses for the poor. He was nevertheless strongly attacked for taking away money from his own cathedral, showing that, even then, it was dangerous for bishops to get too involved in politics.

The local government status of Sutton Coldfield was changed in 1972, but in spite of the fears at the time, Sutton has not lost the exceptional sense of community symbolised by the great number of local voluntary organisations. The problems we have are rather different: we are on the edge of Birmingham and, unless checked, there is a tendency for cities to push outwards, with the result that green belt land is eaten up year by year. The Gracious Speech mentions the preservation of the environment; I hope that that includes the preservation of agreed green belts around our cities.

As you well know, Madam Speaker, political controversy in the midlands is real and heated. However, on one point there is bipartisan agreement: a determination to fight for the interests of the region. I concede that we were a trifle disappointed that the millennium exhibition did not come to its natural home at the national exhibition centre; but we are magnanimous and we wish Greenwich luck. We gather that there is some delay in putting the exhibition together, but, if the commission wants to celebrate the millennium in 2002, that is its affair. We welcome, however, the commission's

£50 million grant, announced last week by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage, which will revitalise an area of inner Birmingham.

I also welcome the legislation to be introduced by the Department of National Heritage, as well as other measures on education and on improving access to justice. Above all, I welcome two new Bills.

First, although there may be disagreement on how far they should go, there is no dispute that the Government are right to introduce legislation on firearms. I have heard it argued that all that is required is better licensing; I disagree with that. Last week in my constituency, there was a theft from a car in which a licensed member of a gun club had left two semi-automatic pistols and 140 rounds of ammunition under the seat while he visited a local leisure centre. I cannot believe that that casual approach to gun safety can be remotely justified.

The second set of measures that I particularly welcome are those aimed at crime generally. I believe that the whole country has been moved by the courage with which Mrs. Lawrence put forward her proposals, and that the award for citizenship, announced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary in honour and remembrance of her husband, will be welcomed. I hope also that the measures which the Government now intend to enact will attract public support. In particular, I believe it is sensible to provide deterrent minimum sentences for drug pushers who represent such a terrible danger to young people in this country.

Doubtless, all the measures in the Gracious Speech will be fiercely debated in the coming days and months. If I were to sum it up, however, I would be tempted to use the words of a Liberal Democrat who reviewed the 1993 Queen's Speech and said:

"It is the speech of a Government determined to change Britain for the better."

Those were the words of the hon. Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Thurnham), who seconded the motion on the Loyal Address. He ended with the memorable words:

"So let us go forward with this programme—forward under strong leadership, Conservative leadership and leadership that is working."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1993; Vol.233 , c.16.]

I would not dream of ending my speech in such a frankly partisan way. I will only say that I count it a great privilege to have served with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I wish him well in the months ahead, and I look forward to his Government's next legislative programme in 1997.

2.45 pm

Mr. Barry Field (Isle of Wight): In seconding the motion on the Loyal Address, I pay tribute to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) as well as to the service he has given to the House in government. He is a friend indeed, for as Secretary of State for Employment he ensured that the Isle of Wight obtained its own training and enterprise council. It was also he who first spotted the economic recovery on the Isle of Wight, when, with the assistance of the Secretary of State for National Heritage, he helped to organise, as he does every year, the Seaview regatta. He reported to the *Isle of Wight County Press*, our island's only newspaper, which was founded in 1884, that the entries for the egg and spoon race were up on the previous year. He said that that was a sure sign that the economy is showing a strong recovery.

That is not the only good news I bring the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He will be mightily relieved to learn that the Liberal Democrat council on the Isle of Wight has decided that the island is not leaving the United Kingdom after all. I know that the Chancellor will want to recognise that act of outstanding generosity on its part with a special mention of the Isle of Wight in his Budget.

The fact that I have been asked to second the motion moved so brilliantly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield has awarded to my constituents the highest honour that Parliament can bestow upon them. I and my family bathe in their reflected glory on this special and historic occasion.

The Isle of Wight has returned a Member of Parliament since the 1300s. This is the first occasion upon which the Member for the island has been called to second the motion on the Loyal Address. The first record of parliamentary activity was in 1377 when one of my predecessors shot the commander of the invading French forces and he did so

"with an arrow from his silver bow through a loophole in the west side of Carisbrooke Castle."

So there we have it: it is all the Isle of Wight's fault, for it was that incident that showed the French just how useful a loophole can be—a lesson they have never forgotten.

When the news that I was to second the motion got out, a House of Commons journalist telephoned me to congratulate me on that wonderful honour. He slightly took the shine off it by asking, "But surely it's usually reserved for brilliant young Back Benchers with a promising career." As a Territorial soldier and a Member of Parliament, and despite my usual modesty, I restrained myself from pointing out to him that one of my predecessors had gone on to become the Duke of Wellington, and no fewer than three of them, Palmerston, Canning and Melbourne, had become Prime Minister. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Certainly, the island's fishermen appreciate that it was another of my predecessors who played a crucial part in defeating the Spanish fleet just off the Isle of Wight. His ship was called Hope.

I am sure that, with his love of books, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows that Sir Robert Cotton, although said to have first entered the House for Huntingdonshire, in fact sat for the Isle of Wight for two years previously, and that his vast collection of books led to the foundation of the British library. As the island had the first free public libraries in the country, thanks to the generosity of the Seely family, I just wonder whether it was the Isle of Wight that inspired Sir Robert's collection.

My family and I, Madam Speaker, live in Cowes—where else would you expect to find the Fields? Our house faces down the Solent towards HMS Victory, and past my window every day come the ships carrying passengers to and from the island. As all hon. Members know, there are many legends in Parliament, but I am the only Member of this House who can prove that I really do have ferries at the bottom of my garden.

The motto of our island is "All this beauty is of God". The Isle of Wight is the biggest constituency in the country, with more than 100,000 electors—the original home of the floating voter—and despite the occasional lump falling into the sea, we are told that our boundaries are to remain unaltered. More than half the island is designated an area of outstanding natural beauty.

[Mr. Barry Field]

Our villages are at the heart of island life, and I am so pleased that the three pillars of village life are to be supported in the Government's forthcoming programme. The village shop will be helped with rate relief, the village school will be helped by the education reforms, which only leaves the village pub. I am confident that the Cabinet's call for Brussels to leave British beer alone will soon be answered positively.

We have a number of award-winning vineyards and two breweries. One of them, Goddards, produces a beer called Fuggel De Dum. It should have a warning that just two glasses of this potent brew can induce bungee jumping and produce such memorable headlines as "Bungee Barry".

The garlic and sweetcorn grown on the island is sold throughout the land. Colleagues may think it appropriate in my case that legend has it that it was an island dog that ate a clove of garlic—the first dog in Britain whose bark really was worse than his bite.

The island is, of course, famous for its dinosaurs—that is, the dead ones, Madam Speaker—and our cliffs contain some of the finest fossils in Europe. Our picturesque island has witnessed the presence of King Charles I, Queen Victoria, Dickens, Darwin, Macaulay, Swinburne, Tennyson and the most dangerous of them all, Karl Marx.

We have the delightful red squirrel, and the island is the only place in Britain where the Glanville Fritillary butterfly is found. Also, although it was thought to be totally extinct, we have the reddish buff moth thanks to a concerted effort involving the island's council. Surely that is an omen for someone in this Chamber. Not only are the reds still alive, but, as we read in the national press, the old red buffers are breeding furiously again on the Isle of Wight.

Tourism plays a vital part in the economy of the island and the challenge that we continue to face is how best to sell the island to the British holidaymaker. With two glorious summers behind us, it should not be a difficult task. We have many promising young sportsmen and women and the annual Cowes week provides a sporting occasion of world renown. The royal yacht Britannia has graced the event for 34 regattas since her launch.

We were delighted with the appointment of Sir Colin Cowdray and hope that he will persuade the cricketing authorities to allow the island to remain independent of Hampshire. The whole island joins me today in commending to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and to the House Mr. Andy Cassell, who won a gold medal for Britain in the paralympic sailing event this summer. Andy Cassell was born without legs and he has inspired many young islanders with his love of and success at sport and we are all very proud of him indeed.

Industrially, we have household names such as Siemens Plessey, GKN Westland and Vickers Trucast, but less well known is the plethora of small companies with world-beating technology. The island has the scientist that put the only British rocket with the only British satellite into space, and all that enterprise is reinforced by more than 70 schools, including the Isle of Wight college, one of whose students came top in the whole of the United Kingdom recently.

Our GCSE and A-level results and Office for Standards in Education reports have put some of the island's schools in the top 10 in the country, and I am pleased that the Gracious Speech promises to continue the educational reforms, for schools represent the real investment of our island in tomorrow's world.

The island has three prisons, and any comparison of my physique with that of Ronnie Barker in the TV series "Porridge" is purely accidental—although the steely-eyed glance of the prison warder named MacKay bears a remarkable resemblance to the new Deputy Chief Whip. The promised crackdown on juvenile crime and the minimum sentencing proposals are especially reassuring to my constituents.

My constituents appreciate that, under our stewardship of the economy, the island has built five new schools, a new magistrates court, a county court, and a new office building for the island's civil servants. We now have our own radio station, new mental health units and a stainless steel clad hospital which has provoked much controversy and hilarity. It has a front porch modelled on one of Madonna's bodices. Proposals contained in the Gracious Speech for care in old age will be welcome news to my retired constituents, who worry in their advancing years.

The island has the only district health authority that funds an asthma and allergy research clinic, so there too the Isle of Wight leads the world in trying to help Parliament find a cure to the so-called sneeze factor.

We have the first unitary authority in the country, and I consider it a personal success that we have the promise today that the law regarding parish councils is to be changed. We were the first county to transfer all our housing to two new housing associations; what a benefit that has been to the tenants.

The Romans called the island Vectis, and our bus company, Southern Vectis, has just celebrated 10 years' outstanding growth in the private sector since privatisation.

Living on an island, no speech of mine will be complete without mention of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. All the United Kingdom's inshore lifeboats are built on the island, and the brave men and women who man them are all trained there. How right the coxswain was, when challenged by a holidaymaker as to why taxpayers' money was not used to run the service, to reply, "Why God bless you, no Ma'am. You see, lifeboats is much too important a business to be left to Governments to run." We believe that, because there is not very much that cannot be run that little bit better by the enterprising spirit of our nation's people than by the cloying hand of Government bureaucracy.

It is a daunting task to represent so much beauty, talent, music, art and engineering. This brief exhortation on Britain's garden isle can do no justice to the real thing, so my message is, come and see it for yourselves, as our history shows that all are made welcome.

Let the last word on the Isle of Wight today go to that great parliamentarian of our time, George Thomas, now Lord Tonypandy. One day, he bumped into me in the Corridor of the House. I had the mayor of Medina borough with me as a guest. George Thomas said, in that lovely Welsh accent of his, "You're from the Isle of Wight. Well, you'll never go to heaven, you know." My guest looked shocked, and in truth, so did I. "No, you see, on the Isle of Wight, you are already living in paradise"—and so we are.

2.59 pm

Mr. Tony Blair (Sedgefield): Before turning to the Queen's Speech, it is customary to pay tribute to former Members of Parliament who have died in the past year. Today I pay tribute to both Sir David Lightbown and Terry Patchett. David Lightbown was one of the most colourful characters in this place and will be remembered by all. I have some special words to say about Terry Patchett. He and I came to the House in 1983 and he worked tirelessly for the mining communities of Yorkshire. Both men were dedicated workers on behalf of their constituents and they will be sorely missed by all hon. Members.

I turn now to the two speeches that preceded mine. I thought that the speech by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) was a model of its kind, being both witty and amusing. I hope that I will not embarrass him by reminding him of the letter that I sent him when he left to spend more time with his family—something that we devoutly desire on behalf of all Conservative Members after the election. He will recall that in my letter I said that I could think of no worthier motive for ending a ministerial career.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not be embarrassed if I remind him of his reply: he wrote back almost immediately to say courteously that he did not intend to retire from politics altogether. Indeed he did not, as before long he returned as Conservative party chairman—which, I hope that he will not mind my saying, is a rather curious way of insulting his family. I am sure that he found that the job was not easy, but at least he never resorted to the measures now in operation under the right hon. Member for Peterborough (Dr. Mawhinney).

I understand that the right hon. Gentleman recently wrote a letter asking for donations from people at the special hospital, Crowthorne, Buckinghamshire—otherwise known as Broadmoor. If I were truly unkind, I would say that perhaps we have reached the stage when only the criminally insane would give money to the Conservative party—but I will not do so. The right hon. Gentleman's speech was well received on both sides of the House, and I pay tribute to him.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field) on his speech. I cannot say that I have always agreed with his politics, but we do have one thing in common: this time last year, he and I had the identical aim, of getting rid of the Prime Minister. I am sorry to remind him of that—I thought that he skated over it somewhat in his speech. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight can be very proud of their speeches today.

Before turning to the Queen's Speech, I must refer to Northern Ireland, which was mentioned in it. We will continue our bipartisan support of the Government in their efforts to work for a comprehensive and balanced settlement, together with the Irish Government and the parties in Northern Ireland. We shall support the Bill on decommissioning. I add my call to those of others for Sinn Fein and the IRA to take the path of peace. Unless they do, the search for peace and reconciliation will continue without them. They should call a ceasefire immediately and, if the latest threats of a bombing campaign are true, the IRA must understand that neither the House nor any party in it will ever give in to terrorism or the threat of terrorism.

I think that everyone knows—perhaps even some Conservative Members—that we should not be debating a Loyal Address today; we should be having a general election. *[Interruption.]* I do not know why Conservative Members are not keen on that idea if they are so confident of their position. All the elements are present for an election: a Government who are no longer governing; the civil service in a state of suspended animation, waiting for some decision making to begin again; the parties geared up; and the country wanting to make a judgment. Every element is there, bar one—the election itself. That is absent for only one reason: the Conservatives dare not call a general election.

If the summer campaign had worked, the Conservatives would have called the election by now. If the tax-cutting Budget works in a few weeks, they will go then. If the next big, deceitful, negative advertising campaign—financed by secret sources—in January works, they will go then. If none of those strategies works, they will wait until May, when our ancient, decent British constitution draws a line and demands a verdict from the people.

How do the Conservatives seek re-election? By that brazen old Tory con trick—they pretend that they who have been in power for 17 years have absolutely no responsibility whatever for the state of the nation that they have governed. Indeed, they pretend that they are as appalled as the rest of us at what has happened. So they tell us, for example, that crime—especially violent crime—is terrible and that something must be done about it. They even tell us that the national health service has been swamped by bureaucracy and that that really must stop. It is a disgrace, they say, that so many of our children are so poorly educated. We must in time, they say, mount an economic recovery that is not knocked off course by economic mismanagement and mistaken public finances.

It is as if the Conservatives had just landed from Mars or as if they had been in exile for 17 years and had returned and discovered how shocking things really were. But who doubled crime to give us, over 17 years, the fastest growing crime rate in Europe? They did. Who undermined the national health service and smothered it with red tape? They did. Who made the economic mistakes of the late 80s and early 90s that now must be corrected? They did. Who gave us an education system in which half our 11-year-olds do not reach the right standards in English and maths? They did. *[Interruption.]* Oh, it is all our fault. They have been in government for more than 17 years, but it is all our fault.

If our society is torn and fractured—as it is—I ask who in part fractured it? They did. There are causes deeper than any Government in some of the serious social problems that we face, but Government cannot escape responsibility for society's fracture.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): What about the trade unions?

Mr. Blair: They blame it on the trade unions. Seventeen years in office and they never take responsibility for their mistakes.

When the Government cut out dole payments to 16 and 17-year-olds so that some were forced on to the streets, did that not contribute to the fracture of our society? When there are now, in our country today, 120,000

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homeless families, does that not contribute to a fractured society? When in the Budget the number of training places for the unemployed was slashed by 40,000, did that not contribute to a fractured society?

When that part of our society that can afford to takes private health care, sends its children to private schools and shuns public transport, because it can no longer tolerate the waiting times, the mixed quality and the degeneration of public transport, does that not contribute to the fracturing of our society? And when we know that after 17 years—after tax cuts followed by tax rises—the average family has seen its tax burden rise, but the top 1.5 per cent. of the population has had its tax burden slashed, does that not contribute to a fractured society? When the old-age pensioner sits in her flat this winter and pauses before lighting the fire because of VAT on her fuel bill, does that not contribute to the fractured society?

A fractured society indeed. But all the fine words of Ministers will not mend it. We will mend this fractured society when those who fractured it—those who said that there was no such thing as society—are no longer governing our society.

Mr. Jerry Hayes (Harlow): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way mid-soundbite. He was kind enough to visit my constituency by helicopter not long ago. Did he spend only 10 minutes there because the Labour party in Harlow, almost to a man, voted for clause IV and against new Labour, or was it because we have one of the highest spending, most incompetent Labour councils in the country? Will he come again?

Mr. Blair: I think that the people of Harlow will pass their verdict on the hon. Gentleman at the next election. They will do so precisely because of the bankruptcies and business failures that the Government have visited upon his constituents.

The Queen's Speech has not even been sold on the basis that it will help Britain. Indeed, it is the first Queen's Speech I can remember that has received more publicity for what has been left out of it than for what is in it. In the words of the Tory central office briefing, it was designed "to embarrass Labour". How pathetic. The greatest ambition left to the Government is to embarrass the Opposition. There is a grant-maintained proposal here, a grammar school there and some law and order measures here and there, but one measure will dominate the Government's legislative programme.

We welcome what has been announced already on gun control. But if we are banning the 160,000 handguns that are now lawfully held, what is the case for leaving the remaining 40,000 at large? If .22 calibre handguns can do damage similar to that which was done in Dunblane, let us have the courage of our convictions. Let the 80 per cent. solution become the 100 per cent. solution, and Parliament will have done the will of the people. Let there be a free vote so that this Parliament, freed from party advantage, can vote the way that it wants.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): If that is the position, why is the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) writing to his constituents as follows:

"We do not wish to ban all innocent members of the public from owning shotguns and participating in shooting sports"?

The hon. Gentleman continues:

"People such as yourself will still be able to own handguns but they must be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres."

Why is the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) saying that Labour's reaction on guns is hysterical and over the top?

Mr. Blair: The hon. Gentleman mentions my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton, North and for Hartlepool. I have just said that there should be a free vote so that Members can vote as they wish.

I believed that it might be possible simply to leave handguns in clubs. However, when I spoke to those who had examined the matter carefully, and when I considered the evidence in the Cullen report, I concluded—I believe that most people will—that the halfway house option was not the right way to leave the matter. If we want to take the bold and proper step to protect our people, we should have a total ban. If people think differently—there are some Conservative Back Benchers who think differently from those who occupy the Government Front Bench—that should be their right. Let us have a free vote, and let us determine the issue properly.

The Queen's Speech reflects a Government who see existing as all that they have left to do.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blair: Like the Government, it is born of drift. There is no leadership and no direction.

Mr. Marlow: I have a simple question for the right hon. Gentleman. I have listened to his speech from the beginning. When will he stop negative campaigning?

Mr. Blair: I do not know whether the Opposition or the Government were more worried about that question. It is a pity that the chairman of the Conservative party is not in the Chamber. It would have been interesting to see whether even he would blush at such a question from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blair: No. I shall make progress.

Mr. Duncan Smith *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. Is the Leader of the Opposition giving way?

Mr. Blair: I am not giving way, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: If that is the position, the hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

Mr. Blair: Drift means damage. It means also that the decisions that the country needs to be taken are not taken. The choices that it needs to make are not faced. Drift is not neutral. Drift holds the country back when it is urgent to move it forward. There is drift, as violent crime increases.

Where, in the Queen's Speech, are the Bills on stalking and a register of paedophiles—those Bills that were made so much of in the conference speeches of Conservative Members? Let me make them this offer now: produce those Bills on stalking and paedophiles, as Government Bills, and we will co-operate to take them through the House without delay. It could be done. The Conservatives should stop playing politics and point scoring. It could be done; let us do it, and do it without delay.

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): Will the right hon. Gentleman also be supporting our proposals for automatic minimum sentences for persistent offenders?

Mr. Blair: I gather that the hon. and learned Gentleman actually opposed them. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) has said that we will examine the proposals presented by the Home Secretary—but even the Home Secretary is now changing them. They go one way, then they go another.

Can the hon. and learned Gentleman explain to me why the Government cannot produce Bills on stalking and paedophiles now? It could be done; it could be done perfectly easily; it could be done without delay. But it is not being done, because the Government would rather play politics with the issues than get them through the House of Commons.

Whatever happened to the issue of beef in the Queen's Speech? We drift in that regard as well. A few months ago, the Prime Minister told us that the beef ban in Europe would be lifted by November. Well, we are a week away from November. There is not the slightest chance of the ban's being lifted by November. The cattle cull and the compensation scheme are in confusion; meanwhile, the only responsibility that the Government have rests on the shoulders of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in whom the National Farmers Union has just passed a vote of no confidence.

There is drift on beef, drift on crime and drift on Europe. Let no one pretend that the truce in the Conservative party will hold together. Everything is just being swept under the carpet. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps we can have an answer to this question. I have just read the interview that the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave "The World This Weekend" two weeks ago. He said that, if the economic conditions were right, he wanted to join the single currency. He said that the test was the national economic interest. We agree with that, but is that the Government's position? Is that the Prime Minister's position? The Chancellor says that there is no insuperable objection, constitutionally, to a single currency; the Secretary of State for Defence says that there is. What is the Government's position? We do not know: we never know. We do not know what their position is, because their divisions are so deep that they cannot make their mind up.

Drift has never been more in evidence, or more damaging, than in the national health service. We can bandy statistics for ever, although I do not believe that the massive rise in administration costs in the health service is in doubt any longer. There are 20,000 more senior managers, and 50,000 fewer nurses. But it is people's experience that counts. Let me tell two stories that I have heard within the last week just from people of my own acquaintance. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not like to hear about what is actually happening in the national health service.

One story concerns an injured little boy waiting hours in casualty before finally being seen in the early hours of the morning. There is, I am afraid, nothing unusual in that nowadays; the point is the scene in casualty that greeted his parents. Patients under the supposed community care programme were being abusive and sick. A woman waiting to give birth was screaming. People who should have been in beds were lying on trolleys.

The other story is that of a man injured playing football, and taken to hospital with a swollen leg. He waited for three hours, but the consultant was unable to see him. He was told to go home, and that the swelling would go down. It did not. By chance, a doctor friend of his looked in on him. He was rushed to hospital, and, four operations later, he is lucky to have kept his leg. That is the reality of the national health service Tory-style.

The Tories say, "Talk to national health service staff." We do. Those staff are wonderful—at times, they have the patience and commitment of saints—but they are being subjected to pressure that is intolerable and wrong. "Listen to the doctors," the Prime Minister said the other day. We do. According to the chairman of the consultants committee of the British Medical Association, the NHS— *[Interruption.]* The Tories always deride this as well. The Tories say, "Talk to the people in the national health service," but when we talk to them and give them the evidence, they ignore it. "Close to collapse," were the words that James Johnson, head of the consultants committee, used.

The national health service is being steadily and consistently undermined by the Government. One of the people I mentioned earlier said to me very simply, "If I had the money, you know, I'd go private." Unless change comes, that is what will undermine the national health service, and the only party capable of rebuilding the national health service is the party that gave birth to it.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Will the right hon. Gentleman give a guarantee to the House that he will match the commitment that has been made by right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to spend more in real terms on the national health service during the lifetime of the next Parliament?

Mr. Blair: Those commitments from the Government have been shown to be utterly worthless. *[Interruption.]* The previous Labour Government spent more on the national health service in real terms than the Conservatives, and if we speak to the people operating in the national health service—*[Interruption.]* If Conservative Members want to pit their commitment to the national health service against ours, let them call an election and let the people decide.

Another miracle that the Government claim in their record is on the economy. They claim that they have created an economic miracle. Again, of course, conveniently they make that claim just before the general election. My hon. Friends and I remember that they have always claimed these economic miracles just before the general election. Of course the economy is in better shape than it was four years ago, but who put it in the shape that it was in four years ago? Not even the Conservatives can keep the economy in recession for ever.

Yes, inflation and interest rates are lower, but they are lower the world over, and this Government are not running for re-election on the record of 12 months. They

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have been in power for 17 years, and during that time they have given us the most unstable economy the developed world over: we have growth rates below other European countries; in the world living standards league table, we have fallen from 13th to 18th in 17 years; investment, even now, is less than in any previous economic upswing; manufacturing investment was down in the past year; a million fewer jobs since the Prime Minister took office; and there are 900,000 long-term unemployed. That is not a record of which any Government should be proud.

What about the Government accounts? Any sign of a miracle there? Here is a staggering fact. Up to 1990, when the right hon. Gentleman became Prime Minister, all the Governments in the United Kingdom's history had borrowed a cumulative total of £190 billion. During his premiership, the Government have added more than £170 billion to the national debt. Given another six months in office, he will have increased the net amount of national debt by as much as all the previous Governments in the United Kingdom's history put together. And they call that a record of economic management of which they should be proud. Some £25 billion a year is spent in interest payments alone, and that is without North sea oil, £120 billion, and the asset sales, £80 billion. They have had chances denied to all other Governments and they have squandered the money. It has gone.

Where has that money gone? Welfare bills have doubled. One in five non-pensioner homes have no one working in them at all, and then, because our money and taxes are paying the costs of economic failure, we have the problems in our schools. More than 1 million children are in classes of more than 30. At GCSE level, the number of pupils getting three good passes is less than half the number in France and Germany. We have the lowest proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education or training of virtually all our main competitors. We are 42nd in the education league.

I shall tell the House the sort of Queen's Speech that I should like to see. I await the day when a Prime Minister comes to the Dispatch Box and says, "A Bill will be introduced that ends the chaos of the voucher scheme and provides for proper nursery education for all four-year-olds. It will be a Bill that phases out subsidies to private schools and uses the money to cut class sizes for all five, six and seven-year-olds. It will reform the way our school system works and the training of teachers; introduce new standards for school performance; tackle truancy and discipline and allow schools to take account of children's different abilities but will not return us to the iniquities of the old 11-plus. It will be a Bill that revolutionises skills training, ends the piecemeal schemes and broken promises and gives us the chance of that best educated work force in Europe that we need. It will end the Tory internal market in the national health service and return it to its rightful place as a proper public service." Those are the Bills that we could introduce.

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): Would the right hon. Gentleman care to give way on the question of the internal market?

Mr. Blair *indicated assent.*

The Prime Minister: I quote:

"The internal market has resulted in many hospitals improving outpatient facilities, improving comfort for patients, improving waiting times in clinics and . . . waiting lists. There is no doubt that that has happened."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 28 February 1996; Vol. 569, c. 1460.]

That is a quote from the Labour Front-Bench health spokesman, Lord Winston, whom the right hon. Gentleman recommended for the Lords.

Mr. Blair: I do not think that I have heard such a ridiculous intervention in all the time that I have been here. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman cannot even make up the intervention: he has to read it out. Lord Winston has vigorously attacked the Tories over the internal market. If the Prime Minister intends to quote figures about the national health service, he should quote the figure of £1.5 billion extra spent on bureaucracy because earlier this week the community health councils said that it was an illusion that that had brought the better services that he wants.

If we are to have the Bills that the country wants, why not one that not merely ends that Tory internal market but deals with some of the crime issues, bans the sales of combat knives, halves the time that persistent young offenders take to come to court and sets up in every community a proper, statutory responsibility for crime prevention to make our streets safe? The Prime Minister could introduce a Bill for a statutory minimum wage to tackle the worst abuses of poverty pay. He could introduce a Bill that allows the capital receipts tied up in council accounts to be used to build homes for homeless people.

There should be a Bill that has at its heart the belief that it is intolerable in any decent society that half a million young people have no job, no training and no prospect of a job or training and that we will levy the excess profits of the privatised utilities and start to put those people back to work. There should be a Bill that allows the people of Scotland and Wales the chance to determine their own governance and one that gives London, our capital city, its own government, so as to allow it to invigorate and innovate itself.

A real Queen's Speech would give us many more measures. It would present measures to replace the boom and bust of Tory years with stable growth during which living standards would rise for all our people and in which Britain was equipped for the challenges of the future.

The last hope of the Tories is a massive, collective attack of national amnesia. *[Interruption.]* If he is so confident about it, let him call the election and let us have it decided. As I say, their last hope is a massive, collective attack of national amnesia so that we forget the 22 tax rises, the VAT on fuel, black Wednesday, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, the doubling of crime and of debt, the poll tax, arms for Iraq, cash for questions, Scott, Nolan, the business failures, the negative equity, the job insecurity, the waste, the inefficiency and the incompetence of the most wasteful, inefficient and incompetent Government in living memory.

But people will not forget, because they know that enough is enough with these Tories. I say this to the Prime Minister: in his party conference speech, he claimed that the Prime Minister's job was taken. It was his, he said, and it could not be taken away from him. That is for the British people to decide. I do not take it for granted and nor should he—*[Interruption.]* Let the British people decide.

It is not a battle for a job. It is not about who sits in Downing street or who uses Chequers at the weekend. It should be a battle about a vision of this country's future, and this Queen's Speech shows that the Conservative party has no vision for this country's future. That is why the Queen's Speech to which we look forward, the people willing, is next year's Queen's Speech, under a new Labour Government, to build a new Britain.

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): The right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) has already generously paid tribute to the hon. Members who have died during the past year. We shall all miss David Lightbown and Terry Patchett. Perhaps on behalf of everyone in the House, I can not only say that, but thank them for their long service, both for their constituents and for their country, in this place.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field) on their excellent speeches proposing and seconding the Loyal Address. My right hon. Friend was the Secretary of State when I first joined the old Department of Health and Social Security. I learned speedily that he had both a generous disposition and a very precise mind. Over early morning interviews, often at short notice, on obscure but controversial social security matters, he was always especially generous and insisted that I took all of them. He was Secretary of State for six years before the sheer weight of work in that combined Department led to health and social security, rightly, becoming separate Departments.

More recently, my right hon. Friend joined me throughout the last general election campaign. His role was absolutely invaluable, but it did have one drawback: whenever we were together, people threw eggs at him. I had no idea how controversial he was. When he shouted, "Duck," I thought that it was a warning, but it was not—it was the type of egg. As I told the House, he had a very precise mind.

My right hon. Friend reminded us that he pioneered the practice of leaving to spend more time with his family. After the general election, I invited him to become chairman of the Conservative party. To avoid any dispute, I should like to make it clear that that was expressly not at the request of his family. He is a distinguished journalist and we cannot say that of many. These days, he is chairman of a newspaper group and he will know the old saying: "Never argue with a man who buys his ink by the gallon." I do not, and I congratulate him on his speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight also spoke extremely well. I was delighted—in some ways relieved—to see him in his place, as he has a poor reputation for time-keeping and tends to arrive for any function at the last moment. On one occasion, I am told, he left to join his wife on the Isle of Wight ferry as it left the dock. Breaking into a sprint, he leapt dramatically over open water and landed on the moving deck. As he did so, he turned around to see his wife on the quay. As he was late, she had got off. Undaunted, he leapt back ashore with the fastest recorded U-turn in political history.

Apart from his political career, my hon. Friend once owned a large share in one of Britain's largest funeral director companies. It is often said of politicians that they will always let you down in the end. In my hon. Friend's case, that might often have been literally true. Today, my hon. Friend let no one down, and I warmly congratulate him.

There were two light-hearted speeches to begin, and rather a brazen speech to follow. The leader of the Labour party sought to draw Britain's ills forward with sweeping generalisations about the state of our society.

Mr. Keith Mans (Wyre): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister: Of course, but a little later.

Of course I agree with the right hon. Member for Sedgefield that there are many problems to be solved. Some of them, concerned with education and crime, are dealt with specifically in this legislative programme. However, we must examine reality, not what the right hon. Gentleman had to say.

With more people finding work, regional differences in unemployment are declining. Strikes are at their lowest levels since records began. More young people than ever before are gaining qualifications in full-time education and training. More people than ever before own their homes and have a share in a capital-owning democracy. There is new hope and investment in inner cities. Charitable giving is the largest we have seen at any stage in our history. Voluntary work is at record levels, with more than half the population engaged in it. We have created one of the most mobile societies in Europe, giving people the opportunity to better themselves through their own efforts.

There is far more that is good in our society than is bad. We should be glad of that, not take every opportunity to run our society down—as the right hon. Gentleman does. Of course we face challenges, but our job as politicians is to find practical solutions, often to complex problems. To over-simplify matters, as the right hon. Gentleman did, is to deceive and not to engage with the real problems with which politicians have to deal.

Any politician should be cautious about cloaking himself in righteousness. I do not know how the right hon. Gentleman can disclaim, as he has just done, any responsibility by the Labour party for faults in this society when his Labour party has, over the years, consistently championed every fashionable, politically correct cause that has undermined our traditional way of life, and has opposed every measure that we have taken to correct the balance.

It was Labour that banned competitive sport in schools. It was Labour that undermined traditional approaches and sponsored every anti-establishment pressure group that it could possibly find. It was Labour that opposed measures to restore standards in schools through tests and league tables. It was Labour that opposed the freedom of grant-maintained schools and has opposed every measure that we put forward to tackle crime. Labour has also opposed common-sense measures to deal with benefit fraud. I do not think that I am inclined to accept sanctimonious lectures from the Leader of the Opposition.

There was much that the Labour leader did not get around to mentioning. The right hon. Gentleman did not mention the longest run of low inflation for a generation or that unemployment is at a five-and-a-half-year low. He did not mention that mortgages are at their lowest for 30 years. The right hon. Gentleman was not only selective

[The Prime Minister]

and wrong about our record, but equally evasive and misleading about his policies. There was no mention in the right hon. Gentleman's speech of taking child benefit away from parents of children aged between 16 and 18. There was no mention of the windfall tax that would jack up household bills and destroy the dividends of millions of people. There was no mention of the additional tax just for the privilege of living in Scotland—nothing about that, or about how the right hon. Gentleman's policies would destroy jobs.

When the Leader of the Opposition fleshes out his policies with detail, we might listen with some interest to the right hon. Gentleman's critique of our detailed policies.

Mr. Geoffrey Hoon (Ashfield): On the subject of consistency, does the Prime Minister recall supporting in 1990 the Government's White Paper on minimum determinate sentences, which stated that such an approach would result in more acquittals by juries, and in more guilty men and women going free? Is that not precisely Government policy now?

The Prime Minister: I shall come quite specifically to that point in a little while, and the hon. Gentleman will get his answer then.

The leader of the Labour party ignored the fact that our economy is now the most competitive in Europe, with exports at record levels, business investment rising and more inward investment than any other country in Europe. Last week, Vauxhall announced plans for a huge new investment at Ellesmere Port—200 new jobs. In August, it was Chiyoda Europe at Bexhill—600 jobs; in July, LG in Newport—6,000 jobs; Lite on Tech in Lanarkshire—1,000 jobs; and Hyundai in Dunfermline—2,000 jobs.

Mr. Gordon Brown (Dunfermline, East) *indicated assent.*

The Prime Minister: The shadow Chancellor nods his head in agreement. How lucky the right hon. Gentleman is that those business men listened to our record and not to his gloomy prognosis for our country. What we have seen—and what foreign businesses have noticed—is a complete transformation of this nation's economic prospects.

Mr. Mans: Would my right hon. Friend care to comment on a statement made by the right hon. Member for Sedgefield that the last Labour Government spent more in real terms on the national health service? I have checked with the House of Commons Library. At today's prices, in 1978-79 a total of £23.3 billion was spent on the NHS. In the last financial year, the present Government spent £39.7 billion. Will my right hon. Friend give the right hon. Member for Sedgefield the opportunity to correct that mistake?

The Prime Minister: That was not, of course, the only inaccuracy in the right hon. Gentleman's speech. If he would like to withdraw that statement, I shall give way to him so that he can do so immediately.

Well, there we are—the inaccuracy must lie on the record in the right hon. Gentleman's name. As I have said, it was not the only inaccuracy in the litany of misery with which he regaled the House.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): The Korean semiconductor jobs are very welcome in my constituency, but does the Prime Minister realise that they will be located just two fields away from where British semiconductor jobs were located two years ago? Can the Prime Minister explain why the British semiconductor jobs relocated to a country that has both the minimum wage and the social chapter?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the drift of investment, he will see that there is more coming here than to the rest of Europe combined. It is coming here because of our economic framework, our tax framework, the fact that we do not have a minimum wage, the fact that we do not have a social chapter and the fact that we have less expensive on-costs for employment than any other nation in Europe. If the hon. Gentleman talked to the other European Heads of Government, he would find that they know that and if they could get out of the position that they are in, many of them would wish to do so. The hon. Gentleman cannot argue with the inward investment figures that we have seen.

Our programme will build on the economic success and it will do so in a way that will widen both opportunity and choice.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

The Prime Minister: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a few moments.

Our programme will encourage personal responsibility. It will increase parental choice over schools, and also patients' choices from their doctors. It will give the police new powers to catch criminals and the courts new means to deal with them. It will reform civil law. It has measures to combat fraud in the social security system. It will protect our heritage, our environment and our rural communities. It will provide a legal framework for decommissioning weapons in Northern Ireland. By any yardstick, that is a meaty Queen's Speech, and we intend to carry the programme through in the period between now and the election.

In addition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will unveil his fourth Budget next month. It will be a prudent Budget: if we can safely cut taxes we will, but if we cannot we will not. I repeat—if we cannot, we will not. Either way, we have a responsibility to spend taxpayers' money wisely.

That is why we will act against benefit fraud. The measures that we have already taken will save £1.5 billion a year, but we intend to save more. Every bit of fraud robs the taxpayer and deprives the genuinely needy of help, and I am surprised that the Opposition Chief Whip scoffs at the thought of cracking down on benefit fraud. We will see where the Opposition are and how keen they are when we come to vote on the distinct measures to deal with the problems.

Dr. John Reid (Motherwell, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

The Prime Minister: In a moment—a queue is forming. I know that the Opposition have produced a long list of

interventions that they propose to put to me, as someone generously left them on the photocopier. If hon. Members could just shout out the numbers, it would make life much easier. The paper is headed, "Interventions on Major", and I can look forward to questions on Europe, the economy, education, beef, crime, health and other matters. I look forward to finding out whether hon. Members can remember them after the training that they have undoubtedly had from the right hon. Member for Sedgefield.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the questions were handed to the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Mr. Hughes: May I ask the Prime Minister a question of which I have not given him notice? It is a common allegation about the Tory party that it looks after its own first. The Prime Minister has the safest Tory seat in the country, with low unemployment and low crime. My seat has the lowest Tory vote in England, with high unemployment and high crime. Why did the Queen's speech say nothing about achieving a significant reduction in unemployment in areas such as mine?

On the day when a national commission of inquiry into the prevention of child abuse recommended that we need a national register of offenders against children, why did the Queen's Speech fail to mention the register of paedophiles, when all parties in the House would assist the Government in passing it quickly into legislation?

The Prime Minister: I will return to the hon. Gentleman's second point in a moment. On the first point, as the hon. Gentleman knows, unemployment has now been falling across every part of the United Kingdom throughout the past 30 months, and there is every indication that that will continue. A fall in unemployment is created by the right economic circumstances, a growing economy, low inflation and the lowest possible interest rates. It cannot be done simply by expenditure measures, as we have learnt often enough in the period since the second world war.

That is why I have said that the Budget will be prudent. It will be prudent to ensure continuing growth because in my judgment that is the best way to get the hon. Gentleman's constituents back to work. I wish to see that for social and other reasons, and we shall continue to follow policies which try to put as many people as possible back into proper employment. By proper employment I do not mean artificially created jobs, but genuine jobs with genuine prospects for a long-term future. That is the policy that we have been following, and I agree with the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey about the importance of that.

Before I was interrupted, I was dealing with benefit fraud. We propose to take further measures to deal with that. Those measures will include fines and in severe cases prison sentences for those who deceive in order to obtain benefits fraudulently. We intend to adopt new measures to detect fraud. If the Inland Revenue knows that someone is working, the benefit offices should know also if that person tries to sign on, and in future they will.

We want to ensure that local councils are cracking down hard on housing benefit fraud. Some do, but others are less successful. We intend to set up a fraud inspectorate to make sure that they are doing all they can and to impose financial sanctions if they are not.

We intend to reform the compensation recovery scheme. Millions of pounds are paid out to accident victims each year to cover them before compensation is paid. That is right and proper and no one objects to it. However, when a settlement is reached, it is also right that the benefit element should be repaid to the taxpayer, so we will make two important changes. The compensation that accident victims receive for pain and suffering will remain protected, but we shall make sure that the taxpayer does not lose by requiring a refund of benefits paid out for circumstances subsequently covered by the insurance compensation.

Our legislative programme will also ensure that rural communities share in the benefits of economic success. We intend to give more power to local parish councils to run their own crime prevention schemes or to set up community transport schemes—more responsibility and more power at the most local level.

We intend to help small village shops and post offices, which face difficulties as shopping patterns change. Our Bill will reduce their rates bill by at least 50 per cent. and give councils the discretion to waive up to the remaining 50 per cent.

Let me return to health. The right hon. Member for Sedgefield said a few minutes ago that he would like to see health at the centre of the general election campaign. At the last general election campaign, the Labour party put health, in the form of Jennifer's ear, right at the centre for three successive days, and we received the largest vote that any political party has ever received at a general election. In this legislative programme, we intend to take action to improve primary health care.

Mr. William O'Brien (Normanton): Will the Prime Minister consider the situation in which a hospital trust is penalised financially for treating too many patients? That happened to the Pinderfields hospital in my constituency. Will he ensure that that does not happen again?

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly examine that situation. I note that the hon. Gentleman supports trusts because they are treating more patients. I am delighted that he sees how successful they are.

The main contact with the health service is through the general practitioner. Over recent years, the service provided by GPs has already improved significantly in most parts of the country, not least thanks to the development of fundholding. The more we can improve the care given by the GP, the more we can relieve the pressure which otherwise would fall on hospitals.

It is far more convenient for patients if they can get their care locally instead of having to travel in some cases to distant hospitals. If patients need physiotherapy or chiropody, for example, why should not their GPs provide it if they wish to do so? If local communities can benefit from a local clinic offering cataract treatment, why should they not have it? I know of no good reason, and we propose to introduce legislation to make that possible.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I should like to make a little progress.

[The Prime Minister]

I believe that parents have a right to a bigger role in their children's education. Giving choice to parents is right in itself and it will help to raise standards.

Mr. David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside): What choice is there?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman had his way, there would be no choice whatever: no choice as to where children go to school, no choice as to what sort of school they go to, no choice as to whether parents could see the school's results and no choice as to how the tests would be carried out at that school. The hon. Gentleman would prefer education to be a secret garden for himself and the professionals, with no information for the parents.

We have provided greater information and greater resources. Our education Bill will raise standards by extending choice. Where parents want more selection, they will have the opportunity for more selection in the Bill. I make that point to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), the Liberal education spokesman, who clearly did not know it at lunchtime on television.

Where parents want more grammar schools, they will have more grammar schools, and where they want grant-maintained schools to expand, they will. It is called choice. We Conservatives believe in choice, and we intend to deliver it.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman must allow me to make some progress.

We intend to give schools new powers to improve discipline, by allowing new sanctions against unruly pupils and by encouraging parents to take more responsibility for their children's behaviour.

Mr. Blunkett *indicated dissent.*

The Prime Minister: I see that the hon. Gentleman opposes action to help with discipline in schools. I hope that the teachers' unions will note the position that he is taking.

For every pupil in the land, we now spend half as much again, over and above inflation, as in 1979. But spending alone does not deliver higher standards. Lambeth—a Labour education authority—spends more per secondary pupil than any other authority in the country, but it is in the bottom five for performance. Islington's performance is the worst in the country, although only a handful of authorities spend more per pupil. Buckinghamshire—a Tory authority—is one of the 10 best performing authorities, despite below average spending on pupils. So adequate resources are important, but they are not the only ingredient for good education.

Mr. Blunkett: Tell that to the parents.

The Prime Minister: Some of the parents have noted it for themselves. Some parents have moved their children from high-spending Islington schools to lower-spending others. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman speaks to parents in the Labour party before he walks into that again.

If education, education, education is a Labour passion, why does Labour not improve education at a local level now? The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) said that Labour controls the education authorities, so why are they not taking the action that they think necessary now? What action do they take? Absolutely none. Instead, we see parents moving their children out of education authorities such as Southwark and Islington and running away from inefficient and incompetent Labour education authorities. The hon. Gentleman is right about one thing: parents know. They know that in too many education authorities the only standards that Labour knows are low standards and double standards. If there are problems in society, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield might look at poorly performing Labour education authorities as one of the roots.

I come now to our proposals on law and order. The right hon. Member for Sedgefield had much to say about that. He seems to know everything about crime except how to reduce it. Labour demonstrates its commitment to action on crime just so long as that action is not something that the Conservative Government are proposing.

The right hon. Gentleman made an offer at the Dispatch Box which I take to be genuine. Both he and the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey spoke of the private Members' legislation on paedophiles and stalking.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: They are not private Members' Bills.

The Prime Minister: Will the hon. Gentleman let me continue? Both Bills are in the course of being drafted. Drafting approval was given some time ago. They have never been in the Queen's Speech. They were intended to be private Members' Bills because we judged that the House would pass them speedily. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member for Sedgefield today offered the House his unequivocal support for a speedy passage through the House for those Bills as Government Bills. The hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey, the Liberal spokesman, offered precisely the same deal. I accept that deal. We were determined to put the Bills through. We shall now get them through, and I hope that Opposition Members will facilitate their speedy passage.

If Opposition Members are concerned about crime, I hope that they will give us the same support on the other crime-tackling Bills in our programme. I hope that they will not eat up time on those two Bills to try to wreck the other Bills tackling crime that we have brought forward. I am prepared to accept that the right hon. Member for Sedgefield spoke in good faith. Since there is no dispute in the House as to the merits of the Bills on paedophiles and on stalking, let us bring them forward as soon as they are drafted and pass them speedily as Government Bills. I undertake that we shall do that.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I do not know whether the Prime Minister has ever tried to take a

private Member's Bill through the House. I am not sure that he has. Will he confirm that the first date on which either Bill could be considered—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has a perfect right to put a question. I know what hon. Members are all saying. Wait for the answer.

Mr. Beith: Will the Prime Minister confirm that, if the Bills were presented as private Member's Bills, those Ministers who have said in the past two days that that procedure would afford them a quicker passage were not telling the truth, and that only if Government time is available for those Bills will they be able to get through the House before the general election?

The Prime Minister: To be fair to the right hon. Gentleman, I do not think that he can have taken in what I just said. I said that, in view of the unequivocal offer of support from the Leader of the Opposition and the Opposition spokesman, we would bring the Bills forward as separate Government Bills. I shall rely on the Opposition retaining the pledges that they have given. If the measures had been in the crime Bill, which was another option, it would have taken a long time to get them through and they would no doubt have been under consistent attack, for I suspect that much of the crime Bill will be attacked by the Opposition. Now that will not happen on these measures, and I look to the right hon. Gentleman to sustain the support that the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) has offered to the House.

Mr. Blair: Let me respond to the Prime Minister and say that I am absolutely delighted that he intends to present Bills containing those measures. The offer that he has just accepted is the offer that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) made to the Home Secretary and which was rejected yesterday. Nevertheless, we are delighted: it shows the country what we can achieve even in opposition.

The Prime Minister: On certain matters we have always sought to accommodate the Opposition. We have sought, of course, to accommodate the Opposition in relation to delaying Lord Cullen's report. There are matters on which cross-party support is welcome and will be accepted. Now that we have had a clear statement on the Floor of the House, I am happy to accept it, and we will now go ahead.

Let me turn—

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I think that I have taken enough interventions. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Member must resume his seat and not talk across the Floor of the House.

The Prime Minister: I should like to make a little progress now. I have taken a number of interventions.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I should like to make a little progress. I have given way to Opposition Members on a number of occasions. I want to turn to other matters relating to crime.

I think that it is a matter of common consent across the House that criminal gangs respect no county or national borders. National and international crime requires a nationally organised system to combat it. So we intend to legislate for a national crime squad, bringing together the existing regional crime squads into a single body to attack serious crime. I believe that that also deserves strong support across the House.

I want now to turn to sentencing. If the public see a fraudster sentenced to five years in prison, they are rightly angry to see him released after serving about half his sentence. Sentences served should match more closely sentences passed. I am sure that the public agree with that, and we intend to provide for it. We also propose to change some of the sentences. We have already increased sentences for serious crimes such as drug trafficking and attempted rape. We will now go further and propose automatic life sentences for anyone convicted of a second serious violent or sexual offence. We intend also to introduce minimum sentences for serious offenders such as persistent house burglars and drug dealers.

We are also looking at new ways to prevent juvenile crime. We intend to publish a green paper setting out some new ideas for consultation within a very short time. Last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland set out the Government's proposals for firearms control, following Lord Cullen's inquiry into the tragedy of Dunblane. I know that there are differences in the House on the proposal, but I also know that the overwhelming belief is that the new legislation should be enacted as speedily as possible. That is why we have reached a collective view, as we were invited to do, and we intend to put it before the House in the usual way. The House will then make its judgment.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Under the Government's proposals, as many as 40,000 handguns would still be legally circulating in Britain. How on earth can the Prime Minister justify that in the aftermath of the Dunblane massacre?

The Prime Minister: We undertook a very careful examination of Lord Cullen's report and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we have gone farther than Lord Cullen recommended. I rather share the view of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who was quoted earlier, that many people

"will still be able to own handguns but they must be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres."

The hon. Gentleman took that view, and so, I believe, did the official Labour party until very shortly before the statement was made in the House. I believe that that is the right way to deal with it, but the House will be able to make its own judgment. We shall bring forward our proposals—*[Interruption.]* We shall bring forward a Bill in the usual way, as I said a moment ago. We have formed a judgment as to what is right, and we shall invite the House and the Conservative party to support that.

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) *rose—*

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) *rose—*

Mr. Blair *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I give way to the right hon. Member for Sedgefield.

Mr. Blair: I believe that the Prime Minister rightly changed his judgment earlier on a different matter. Will

[Mr. Blair]

he now reconsider his judgment on this matter and, on this aspect, about which he is right that there may be different views on both sides of the House, allow a free vote so that the House can make up its mind on that basis?

The Prime Minister: With respect to the right hon. Gentleman, we had already provided drafting advice for those Bills. We did not change our mind. I have accepted the right hon. Gentleman's word that he will facilitate the speedy passage of this measure through the House. That is obviously better than a private Member's Bill. It is not a change of mind. We have made our judgment on what we believe to be the right response to Lord Cullen, and I have just set it out.

We propose also to reform civil law.

Miss Hoey *rose—*

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

The Prime Minister: If hon. Members will forgive me, I wish to make progress.

Too many people in this country have found their right to justice too often barred by costly and lengthy procedures. If a pensioner is in dispute with a garage about a car repair bill, or a home owner with a builder, they should not expect a huge legal bill for resolving the matter. Our legal system should encourage such disputes to be resolved speedily. With that in mind, we intend to implement Lord Woolf's recommendations for a simplified set of rules in our civil courts—a system of fast-track procedures to encourage settlements and cut costs.

We also intend to act to preserve and improve physical heritage. We intend to introduce a Bill to allow lottery funds to be used to widen access to heritage in many ways. I will not now set them out to the House, but the objective is to ensure that more people can be enriched by enjoying our heritage.

We also propose to introduce measures to enact Lord Donaldson's report following the Braer incident some time ago. Our measures will create wider powers to inspect suspect ships, enforce exclusion zones around accident sites and make those responsible for accidents bear more of the cost.

I wish now briefly to turn to Northern Ireland. Earlier this year, the House passed legislation to allow elections in Northern Ireland as the basis for multi-party talks. That process brought great hope. No one, I think, imagined rapid breakthroughs. This is a democratic process, and I think that we all expected that it would grind along exceedingly slowly.

The IRA and Sinn Fein do not accept that democratic process. They are trying to impose their own terms on the talks. They have not been ready to renounce violence. That is plainly incompatible with joining the talks. They have excluded themselves by their return to violence: it is not us, not the British Government, not the Irish Government, not the other parties in Northern Ireland—it is their own fault that they are excluded from the talks, and no one else's. But the talks will continue without them.

The IRA and Sinn Fein should be under no illusion that they can join the process until they have demonstrated real commitment to democratic and non-violent methods. So even if a new ceasefire is declared, there will have to be more than soft words to convince the Government and, I believe, the House that it does not represent another tactical device, to be abandoned at any convenient moment.

For our part, we intend to go on improving the process of government in Northern Ireland. We will consult on how to develop the Northern Ireland Grand Committee to enable greater scrutiny of legislative proposals, Government policy and Ministers. We also intend to introduce a Bill to allow the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. To encourage the removal of those weapons from the streets, we will ask the House to agree that forensic evidence should not be sought from them.

But let me be clear: there can be no general amnesty for terrorist crimes and there will be none. I cannot look into the minds of the terrorists and predict what they will do, but I know that the road to a settlement will not be easy. We shall do all in our power to promote a lasting peace and to protect the community from their actions. That is our promise, and I both hope for and expect the House's full support in that endeavour.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down) *rose—*

The Prime Minister: If the hon. and learned Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way.

I should like to move towards a position where we can announce in future a two-year legislative programme and, so far as possible, publish draft Bills and consult on the second year's Bills before they are introduced.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister has indicated that he is not willing to give way. Hon. Members will please resume their seats.

The Prime Minister: That will take time to bring about, but I think that it is a worthwhile reform which will deliver better legislation. We have begun to move in that direction this year, with two draft Bills set out in the Gracious Speech. In future years, I anticipate steadily increasing the number of draft Bills brought before the House.

Our legislative programme is a clear and practical set of measures to promote our aim of wider opportunity for all. We believe in choice, in personal responsibility and in opportunity. That thread has run through the past 17 years of Conservative Government. It runs through the current legislative programme in front of us and it will run through our plans and our programmes for the next Parliament also. It is what our programme will achieve this year, and I commend it to the House.

4.11 pm

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Before observing the usual courtesies to those who proposed and seconded the Loyal Address—as I shall be delighted to do in a moment—I must welcome the Prime Minister's change of mind about the paedophiles register. It must be the fastest U-turn in history, executed even before the Queen's Speech debate has started. What a Government!

If the Prime Minister or any member of his Front Bench team had bothered to approach the Leader of the Opposition or me before the debate, he could have had what he has given way to today. However, he did not want to do that: he wanted to play politics, as he did in his speech. That is a pretty good example of why and how the Government have failed in all sorts of ways, which I shall touch upon later.

I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in paying tribute to those Members of Parliament who have died in the past year, and to the mover of the Loyal Address, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler)—who is probably, perhaps definitely, the last chairman of the Conservative party who is viewed with any kind of affection by his party. His speech showed why.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field), who gave a good speech, mentioned three of his predecessors who were Prime Ministers. Of course, they were all Liberals. The hon. Gentleman succeeded in mentioning five notable people from the Isle of Wight, all of whom were Liberals, and four of whom he spoke of in glowing terms. Therefore, he will understand why my party, both nationally and locally, is dedicated to working assiduously—leaving no stone unturned—to ensure that he has a long and happy retirement, and that the next parliamentary representative of the Isle of Wight is a Liberal Democrat.

Last year, the Prime Minister told us that the Queen's Speech was a

"common-sense, practical programme of traditional Conservative values".—[*Official Report*, 15 November 1995; Vol. 267, c. 28.]

The year since has hardly provided a ringing endorsement of that claim. Two members of the Prime Minister's party left to join the Liberal Democrats, arguing specifically that the Conservative party has lost touch with the British people's traditional values of decency and fairness.

In May, of course, the British people delivered their verdict on that Queen's Speech, on the Government and on that claim. They voted Conservative councillors out in their thousands, leaving the Prime Minister leading a tiny rump in local government and controlling just a handful of councils. The Conservative party has probably never controlled fewer local councils, and that is a fair indication of the mood of the nation.

Now, in this year's Queen's Speech, we see a programme for next year that reveals the Government in their tormented and twilight days. It is a ragbag of irrelevant measures. Of course, one or two measures will find wide support, including the paedophile register—on which the Prime Minister has now changed his mind; we are delighted about that—and the legislation that will be introduced to control marine pollution and for a national crime squad. That legislation will be brought back, and we will find it possible to support it.

But the programme is evidently—indeed, by the Government's own admission—driven more by what will wrong-foot the Opposition parties than by what is right for the country. Those are not my words, but the Prime Minister's in the Government's briefings in the past 24 hours. What an extraordinary admission. The Government are now acting more like an Opposition than a Government. They have changed their psychology entirely.

The British people are crying out for a message of hope and a strategy for Britain's long-term future, but what they have got is a tactical plan for short-term Tory survival. I have to tell the Prime Minister that it will not work, for two simple reasons—first, because people will not forgot the Government's failures, their bungles, incompetences and broken promises; secondly, because, do what they will, the Government cannot paper over their divisions, hide their sleaze or escape from their record.

The Prime Minister said that to say that was to criticise everything in Britain. What nonsense. He said that there was more good in our society than bad, but we were not criticising our society—we were criticising his Government, and in their record there is far more bad than good. It is not my party but the Tory party that has criticised society so frequently in the past.

Since 1979, the Government have passed 757 laws, yet they have completely failed to solve Britain's deep-rooted and endemic problems. Despite £130 billion from North sea oil and £80 billion from privatisation, since 1979 the British national debt—going back 300 years—has trebled under the Conservatives. It has doubled since the Prime Minister took office.

That £170 billion debt—the John Major debt—was accumulated in six years. The national debt has doubled since 1990, and now amounts to £7,500 of extra debt for every family in Britain. That debt is still increasing under his premiership, by £1,000 a second. We spend more paying the interest on the John Major debt than we spend annually on our police, our prisons and our universities all put together—just to pay the interest on the Prime Minister's debt. But the money from that extra borrowing has not been spent on preparing Britain for the future or improving the lot of ordinary people.

Despite that extraordinary level of borrowing, our national health service is facing a financial crisis. I use the word "crisis" advisedly, and it has been used by many who know the situation in the NHS well. It faces a financial crisis this winter. Beds are closing and waiting lists are lengthening again.

Education has been cut and cut in recent years, and is certain to be cut again to make room for tax cuts. Some 1.25 million children are in classes of more than 31, and that number has gone up by 10 per cent. in the past year alone. One in seven 21-year-olds in Britain now have trouble with basic reading and writing, and one in five have difficulty with basic mathematics. Britain has slipped to a position in the world education league table below China and Argentina, and just above Venezuela.

Hundreds of thousands of people remain trapped on welfare and out of work. Crime has doubled since 1979, and 1,000 homes a week are still being repossessed.

The Government's failures are not revealed merely in figures. The poll tax, rail privatisation, arms to Iraq, cash for questions and the Pergau dam, and much more, add up to a record of incompetence and underhandedness that is probably unparalleled in modern times. This year, we have had perhaps the most glaring example of all—the handling, or perhaps I should say bungling, of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis. Even if we suspend judgment on the mistakes made in containing the BSE epidemic since the mid-1980s, the past seven months have been an object lesson in dither, delay and scapegoatism. There has been blank incompetence.

[Mr. Paddy Ashdown]

Of course BSE was never going to be an easy problem to handle, but it did not have to be as we see it now. When the original bombshell broke on 20 March, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and I told the Government that their first proposals would be inadequate to deal with the crisis. We offered our party's support if the Prime Minister agreed to take decisive action. Instead, and since then, he and his Government have prevaricated. They have temporised, wavered at home and blustered abroad.

Had the Cabinet been in office in 1982, the task force would never have made it out of port, let alone reached the Falklands. The Government seem to believe that BSE stands for "blame somebody else". First, the House was told that it was the fault of Opposition parties. Then it was the fault of the media. Most bizarrely of all, the Secretary of State for Health said that it was the fault of consumers. Inevitably, when all the other so-called alibis had collapsed, the Prime Minister blamed BSE on his favourite scapegoat, which is Europe.

In May, after yet another confrontation with fellow Conservative Governments in France and Germany, the Prime Minister saved his failing Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and appeased his anti-European Conservative Back-Bench Members by declaring his ridiculous "beef war" on Europe. It all ended, as it was bound to, in humiliating retreat.

After the Florence summit in June, the Prime Minister tried to justify his belligerent tactics by claiming that the timetable for the relaxation of the export ban was exclusively in the Government's hands. To prove it, he promised to end the cull backlog and lift the export ban by the end of October. He has failed to deliver either measure. In fact, exactly the opposite has happened. The cull backlog, far from diminishing, has kept on growing, and is growing still. As winter approaches, farmers are left feeding cattle that they should have had compensation for weeks ago. Businesses throughout the industry are going under as a result.

Farmers are suffering terribly. But some people are doing very nicely, thank you, out of the chaos. The Government's decision to privatise the cull in the hands of a tiny cartel of large abattoir groups has meant excessive profits for them, on a scale that even the Government's auditors have declared unacceptable. Those firms have received an extra two months of an undeserved bonus, while farmers, caught in the cull shambles for weeks, have been forced to take a cut of 10 per cent. in compensation payments as a penalty for the Government's failure and incompetence.

Farmers know exactly where the blame lies. The day after they met the Prime Minister in Bournemouth, the National Farmers Union council passed an almost historic vote of no confidence in the Minister of Agriculture.

It is not quite too late to reverse the escalating crisis. First, there must be an agreed strategy to clear up the cull backlog fast, using emergency powers if necessary. Secondly, beef and dairy farmers need more help to see them through the winter and to cope with the consequences of the Government's failures. Thirdly, we need a step-by-step programme to establish BSE-free areas—starting in Northern Ireland and Scotland—and action to speed up BSE eradication where necessary, also on an area-by-area basis. Fourthly, we must set up an independent food safety commission, separate from the Ministry of Agriculture, to restore consumer confidence for the future.

It gives me no pleasure to say that our proposals are almost exactly the same as those that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall made the day after the crisis broke on 21 March, a full seven months ago. If they had been followed then, a great industry and tens of thousands of farmers would not have been brought to their knees by a Government whom they thought they could trust, and to whom they looked for help. That betrayal felt by farmers is, I believe, now widely felt by others across the nation.

The Government's failures in recent years have given rise to a national mood that is uncertain, unself-confident, even fearful. All the fixed points on which we thought that we could rely in the past now seem to have gone. The Government who ought to be fighting for the people are instead at war with themselves; the politicians who ought to be representing them are instead seen helping themselves. Politics, which used to give a lead and solid things for which to vote, has instead become a thing of soundbites, slickness and spin doctors.

The public are lied to about tax. They are kept in the dark about the true state of the economy. They are left out of the debate on their own future in Europe. They know perfectly well that there are tough decisions to be made, but no one will tell them what those decisions are; they know that there are big things to be done, but no one has a plan to do them. I believe that the public are now desperate for leadership, but the Government will not provide it, and it certainly is not provided in the programme for the next year.

That is the underlying condition that the Queen's Speech ought to address. It might start with the following truths. First, the state of our economy is now good and promising, but—

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ashdown: It is promising precisely because, for the past two years, the Government have followed the policies proposed by my party for the past 10. Let me tell the Prime Minister that, if he goes out into the streets of Britain, people will say, "Yes, the economy is recovering, but that is despite the Government, not because of them."

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Mr. Ashdown: Before the right hon. Gentleman intervenes, let me make myself clear.

Yes, the economy is promising—of course it is—but that is now being seriously threatened, because the Government's finances are absolutely awful. The national debt is twice what it was six years ago, and, at £27 billion, Government borrowing is twice what we were told it would be two years ago.

There is no room for tax cuts. The Chancellor would now be wise to heed the words of his colleague the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), who said recently:

"I do not believe that elections can be won by reducing income tax against a background of sacked teachers or closed hospital wards. To promise more would be incredible and wrong".

That is the background against which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are now considering tax cuts.

If the Chancellor does cut taxes this autumn, he will be doing so for purely political purposes, and the British people will see right through it. I must say to the Labour party that, if it cannot find the courage to oppose that, it will be colluding in it—and the consequence, I fear, will be another round of boom and bust, in which the Conservatives once again try to buy votes at the election and leave everyone else to pay the price in higher mortgages, lost jobs and broken businesses.

Mr. Nigel Forman (Carshalton and Wallington): At least twice in his speech, the right hon. Gentleman has made much of the size of the public debt. What proposals have he and his party to reduce that debt in the short term?

Mr. Ashdown: We would not cut taxes. Ours is the only party that voted against cutting taxes in the last Budget, and did so saying quite precisely that, if the Government then cut them, the consequence would be burgeoning public debt. We have been proved exactly right.

Secondly, our education system is now woefully underfunded. As a result, our children's future and our country's future are being blighted. Many things need to be done in education—raising standards, encouraging professionalism in teaching and providing high-quality early-years education for all—but none can be done without more money, and that must be found. If we will not face that, the rest is nothing more than hot air.

Mr. Redwood: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why, when the Liberals on Berkshire county council found £5 million that they knew nothing about in the accounts, they would not spend a single penny of it on additional teachers or in the classroom?

Mr. Ashdown: I have heard so many of those claims before, including claims against my own county council, all of which were based on complete falsities—and lies, frankly. I cannot answer the right hon. Gentleman's question, because I do not know the answer, but I can give him an undertaking—no doubt it is the same undertaking that he would have given when he was a Minister and was asked a similar question—that I will find out and send him an answer.

Thirdly, our health service is facing a crisis this winter. The effects are already evident in bed closures, axed services and growing waiting lists. We need an immediate year-long halt to national health service closures, until a full, independent audit of facilities and needs has been carried out. But under this Government, that will not happen. In the longer term, we need a strategy to cut unnecessary bureaucracy and concentrate on patient care—recruiting new staff, cutting waiting lists and putting as much emphasis on preventing illness as we currently do on treating it. But under this Government and their legislative programme, that will not happen.

Fourthly, our benefits system is failing. It traps people when it should be freeing them. It penalises work when it should be encouraging it. It requires fundamental reform, and that should have happened already, but under this Government that will not happen.

Fifthly, our political system is in a mess. It is out of date and out of touch. It has lost the confidence of the people it is supposed to serve. We must clean up the mess in our politics and bring our constitution and our political system up to date. But under this Government and this programme, that will not happen. It will not even be started.

Sixthly, we continue to pollute our atmosphere, to destroy our countryside, to clog up our roads in a way that everyone knows is unsustainable and that will damage the quality of our life—and, more important, the quality of life of our children. We cannot go on ducking this issue any longer, but under this Government and this programme, we will do just that.

Seventhly, perhaps the biggest decision of all confronting this country—on this perhaps the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and I will agree—is Europe and the single currency. I see several Conservative Members nodding their heads. Decisions will have to be taken on this, probably within weeks of the next election, but we are not to be allowed even to discuss it, because the Labour and Tory parties are so split that to do so would wreck them internally. That is a monstrous conspiracy against democracy and the people of this country. They have a right to hear this debate and to participate in it.

My party has no doubt that Britain must play a constructive part in the creation of an integrated, decentralised, democratic Europe, and we have no doubt that, if there is a single currency—I think there will be—and if a workable proposition for it is to be made—I think it will be—and if Britain can be a part of that single currency, it should be. But we also have no doubt that the British people have a right to a say in these decisions, and the right way to ensure that is through a referendum.

Those are the things that the Queen's Speech should be about, but it is not. I do not believe in the politics of opposition: of saying what is wrong with the Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "No?"] No, I do not, and we can prove it to the Government time and again. I do not believe in saying what is wrong with the Government but never saying what we would do instead, so we have produced an alternative Queen's Speech, in which are laid out the measures that we believe should have been included in this Queen's Speech.

I make no apologies for the non-parliamentary language in it. It is time we got rid of some of the arcane language of this place. Our alternative programme is written in plain English of the sort that ordinary people understand and want to hear from their Parliament.

I make no apologies, either, for the length of our alternative programme. We have done what the Prime Minister says he will do and made it a two-year programme, and if it means that there will have to be shorter summer holidays to get on with it, so be it. I make no apologies for that, either. I see that I have the ready and enthusiastic agreement of all my colleagues on this.

There is much to be done, and it is time to get started. It is time to get the country back on track, to get going again; but, of course, we all know that that will not happen, because the Prime Minister is determined to hang on. No one knows what he is hanging on for, but hanging on is what he is best at. That is what he is happiest doing and it is what he is for. It is what he says to himself in the

[Mr. Ashdown]

Downing street mirror every morning. He says, "Another success, John. Another day you have hung on. They have not got rid of you yet."

The problem is that we all have to hang on with him. The Tories will have to hang on before they can sort out their problems in opposition, and they will suffer. The economy will have to hang on while the Prime Minister piles on more debt to pay for tax cuts, and it will suffer. Our children will have to hang on in underfunded schools, and they will suffer. Europe will have to hang on while Britain decides what to do, and Britain will suffer. The elderly and the sick will have to hang on with a health service that can no longer cope, and they will suffer. The country will have to hang on with a tired, visionless, leaderless, toothless, purposeless, pointless Government, and the country will suffer.

It would be an act of kindness to them and to us now to put the Government out of their misery. The Prime Minister may rest assured that, over the next few weeks and months, we shall lose no opportunity and leave no stone unturned to make sure that that is exactly what happens. When it does, we can get down to starting to rebuild the country again.

4.35 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): The remarks by the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) about the Government, as he sees them, would be excellent if they were about many Liberal councils throughout the country. Many of them are examples of people who say one thing and do another, who sit on money instead of using it for the right purposes. Many of them use it on publicity, lawyers and campaigning, but will not spend it in the classroom and on the teachers. I know, because I suffer under such an education authority, and I heartily want to see the back of it: I want Conservatives who will spend money in the classrooms, on teachers and on the things that matter.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North–East): The right hon. Gentleman is obviously tryin to preach the virtues of consistency—that one should not do one thing and say another. How does he explain someone who sits in the Prime Minister's Cabinet and then stands against him for the leadership of his party?

Mr. Redwood: There was a contest, and it would have been unfortunate if there had been no candidates. I stepped in to help my right hon. Friend by offering him a candidate that he was able to beat.

The Gracious Speech rightly reminded us that big issues are coming up in Europe, which we need to settle with our partners on the continent. I welcome the tone and terms of the Speech on the European issue. It tells us that the Government wish to see a flexible, outward-looking, open Europe, which is a partnership of nations and not an over-governed, over-bureaucratised, over-taxed Europe of the kind that many socialists and some others on the continent would like to create.

I want to see the Government striding purposefully into the chambers of Europe to argue for a Europe that works, which has unemployment as its top issue and says that it must adopt policies that will get our young people and our older people back to work. We must start to reduce the crisis levels of unemployment that characterise the economies of Spain, France and Italy. Almost one person in four are out of work in Spain, and for Italy and France the figure is one in eight.

It is even worse for those who are young and have little training. In Spain, four young people in 10 are out of work. Why? It is because of the policies that are being pursued by many of the politicians on the continent. They would be well advised to see what Britain is doing, to see how, in the past three to four years, we have started an economic recovery.

We have allowed exchange rates to find their right levels; brought interest rates down; allowed the economy to expand; and resumed tax cutting after an unfortunate intervention of tax increase and recession. We are showing them that, if a Government tax less, spend less, regulate less and trust markets, companies, families and individuals, progress can be made, and the crisis of mass unemployment can be avoided.

I welcome two recent statements by leading Government figures. The first was that of the Foreign Secretary, who is now warning our partners in western Europe that the single currency scheme is becoming a cause of division between the partners. Recently, there has been a diplomatic scrap between Germany and Italy over whether Italy might be allowed into the single currency. More recently, there has been another sharp diplomatic exchange between Spain and Italy over whether Italy, and/or Spain or neither will be allowed into the single currency.

The very idea that is meant to unify the European Community is beginning to tear it apart. We all know that many countries will not be able to qualify. Britain can surely warn our partners how damaging such attempts will be, and ask them instead to develop a real agenda, based on the needs of the people of western Europe: an agenda for jobs and less government, that puts people's interests, not those of politicians, first.

The second statement that I warmly applaud is that of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning the Maastricht treaty. The United Kingdom rightly put requirements into the treaty as preconditions for anyone entering a single currency. I am delighted that my right hon. Friends are now saying that we should stick to those requirements.

At the time, Britain thought that they were the minimum requirements, and would have liked more. We agreed them with our partners. Surely it is now up to our partners to agree with us that they must stick to the treaty. Those things were well meant at the time, and anything less than those requirements would endanger not only the economies of western Europe, but the scheme itself, as it would call into question the legality of the single currency that they wished to introduce.

We know that most countries will not meet the requirement that they should have borrowed only 60 per cent. of their national income. Britain, France and Luxembourg are the only countries that are sure to meet that requirement. Why are the other countries kidding themselves that, somehow, the requirement is not in the treaty, or that it does not mean what it says in the treaty? Why are they not trying to meet that requirement? Of course, they cannot meet it, because the recession is still too deep on the continent, and their economies are not

growing quickly enough, so they are short of tax revenue and have too many people on benefit. They need to go for growth, and to start to bring their deficits down by encouraging economic prosperity. Their current policies stand in the way.

The Gracious Speech and the Prime Minister's remarks referred to the state of economy and to the forthcoming Budget. I welcome the comment that one of the Budget's priorities will be to continue to reduce new borrowing. At this stage in our economic recovery, it is most important that some of the benefits of that recovery, in the form of higher tax revenues, are used to reduce the new borrowing that we need to make, and the Government are right to wish to be prudent.

I trust that, when the Government consider their public spending plans, they will find that there is scope to get by next year with a smaller increase than the current plans propose. I hope that there will be scope for tax reduction—the Prime Minister left open that possibility—as well as a reduction in the amount of borrowing that we would otherwise have to make.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Do I take it that the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that borrowing is justified to give tax rebates to the public?

Mr. Redwood: I think that I said the opposite. I said that tax rebates should be balanced by reduced public spending plans, and that public spending should be reduced even more, so that it could contribute to lower borrowing. In addition, the economic recovery will contribute to lowering borrowing because, as our recovery continues, so more people go to work, pay taxes and no longer need benefits. That is the best possible way of reducing the deficit. We have been pursuing that policy in the past couple of years, and I look forward to more of the same.

In that connection, I should like to make a modest proposal to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I should like him to consider small businesses and their scope for creating more jobs. Many self-employed people find it difficult to take the step of employing the first employee in their growing business. Many decide to keep their business small. They do not want to face national insurance payments and paperwork and value added tax paperwork as they go through the VAT registration threshold and the pay-as-you-earn system on behalf of their employees.

There are about 3 million self-employed people in Britain. If we could persuade even 10 per cent. of them to take on their first employee, it would make a huge difference to the unemployment level.

I should like the Chancellor of the Exchequer to consider doubling the VAT threshold, so that small businesses could grow and take on that first employee without the hassle of all the VAT paperwork and expenditure. I should like him also to consider giving a national insurance holiday for a year or two for the first employee taken on by the entrepreneur running his own business, if that employee has been out of work for six months or more.

The tax costs would be modest. Some or many of the jobs generated would be additional, so there would be benefit savings. I have not conducted a detailed costing, but the scheme would be easily affordable within the sort of sums that I have put to the Chancellor concerning public expenditure savings compared with plans, and the general scope of the budget deficit and the budget judgment.

We heard a strange speech from the Leader of the Opposition. He told us that the Government are fracturing our country. He should know about fracturing, because his policies and attitudes are likely to fracture the Labour party. Here is a man who has no single political principle within him, who will change his views as often as the opinion polls and the spin doctors tell him to do so.

Here is a man who is trying to lead his party against its basic instincts. People join the Labour party because they want to tax the rich more and to give more benefits to less well-off people. The Labour party leader now asks us to believe that that is no longer his view—or, therefore, his party's. But could he deliver that, given the nature of the party that he tries to lead?

Mr. Bruce Grocott (The Wrekin): With the right hon. Gentleman making a virtue out of consistency, will he remind the House whether it is still his view of the Prime Minister and of the Government that the position is "No change, no chance"?

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Mr. Grocott: I will give the right hon. Gentleman a chance to think about that one, because he will need time to do so. Is that still his view, or has he changed to what Labour Members, who can spot his positioning on these issues, will regard as a position of "Next time may be my chance"?

Mr. Redwood: Oh, dear. I stand by what I said last summer. One of the things I said was that we had to reduce taxes, or we would not have a chance of winning the election. I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friends did reduce taxes in the last Budget, and I live in hope that they will do a bit more in the next Budget, so our chances have definitely improved. We have shown people again that Conservatives want to cut taxes, and that, whenever possible and whenever it is prudent to do so, they will cut taxes.

The right hon. Member for Sedgefield made a great deal about education. As the Prime Minister reminded us, the right hon. Gentleman says that he has three priorities: education, education and education. What is stopping him, therefore, from leading his party to success in education? He and his party control most of the important education authorities. He has many Labour governors running the schools. We have voted substantial sums of money to those local authorities.

If they wish to, those authorities can increase the amount of money going to schools out of those huge budgets, and get rid of the people whom their education spokesman says are bad teachers. I believe that he said that there are 15,000 bad teachers. That is more than I would venture, but, if that is Labour's view, why are Labour authorities employing most of those 15,000 bad teachers, and why do they not do something about it?

If the right hon. Member for Sedgefield believes that we need higher standards of reading, writing and arithmetic, why are Labour-controlled and dominated education authorities and their primary schools standing

[Mr. Redwood]

in the way of changing teaching methods, so that children can be taught to read, write and add up properly at an early age? Why did his party stand in the way of compulsory testing and the publication of results? The only way to make progress is for us to know how well or badly those children have done, and for the parents to know, so that they can make choices, influence the governing bodies and demand that action be taken in those schools.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear, there is a relationship between the amount of money spent on education and the results. The relationship is that, if we have a Labour authority, it spends more and does less well. I deduce from that not that we should take money away from Labour authorities, but that they have much to learn about how to run a decent school and a decent education authority.

If the Leader of the Opposition wants the nation to believe that he is a great leader who can deliver, I suggest that he starts right now—today—on education, with Labour-controlled education authorities. I offered the right hon. Gentleman that opportunity a little while ago, when I sent him a letter saying that I would like to write a letter jointly with him to education authorities in Labour-controlled areas. I set out the actions that I thought those authorities needed to take, to raise standards. The right hon. Gentleman did not even do me the courtesy of replying to my letter.

The House will be delighted to know that I boldly went ahead and sent such a letter over my own signature. I pointed out to Labour-controlled education authorities that their leader now says that he wants to raise standards. I offered them a series of proposals, and some of those authorities did me the courtesy of replying. I did not detect in those replies any inkling that those authorities had been under any influence from the Labour leader to raise their standards, or that there was an agreed agenda among Labour parliamentarians, councillors and candidates for raising standards. The right hon. Gentleman should look more carefully at putting his own house in order before lecturing the rest of us.

I understand that it is Labour policy now to demand a complete ban on handguns. When Labour submitted its evidence to the Cullen inquiry, why did that party go for a lesser ban than that which it is now recommending and which the Government are proposing? What changed? Could it be that the Leader of the Opposition is playing party politics? Could it be that he is showing that, if one leads by following opinion polls and focus groups that can quickly change their minds, one can be left stranded a few weeks or months later, when one thought there was firm ground. One can discover that action once thought bold is no longer bold by that test.

I grow a little tired of hearing that Labour is entirely united on the issue of Europe. I see a party in which dozens of right hon. and hon. Members would like to come out of the European Union altogether, and in which another group would like to plunge ever more deeply into a European Union, surrendering many of our powers of self-government.

I see around the shadow Cabinet table a huge divergence of views. Every time that I listen to or watch the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), I see a man who does not want a single currency unless hell freezes over first. Every time I watch the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown), I see a man who would like a single European currency tomorrow, preferably before he has any responsibility—which I think he will not get—for the British economy.

Between the two is this great leader who is not able to make up his mind whether he supports the Dunfermline view or the Livingston view—so he says one thing one day and something else another day. The Labour party is deeply divided over Europe, which is why Labour Members refuse to answer questions.

I have a piece of advice for the right hon. Member for Sedgefield. If he cannot make up his mind about a single European currency and wants to do so some time, never or later, why does he not the have the decency to do what the Conservative party is doing—offer the public the reassurance that, if a single currency were ever recommended, the people could decide first in a referendum? The right hon. Member for Sedgefield cannot even make up his mind whether that question would be tested in a referendum or a general election, or whether he could hold a referendum.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East is an ambitious man, who believes that he should be the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He must be the first example in history of a man coveting the office of Chancellor because he wants to give away all that office's powers, responsibilities and duties. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman believes that there is such a thing as a free lunch, and that it is his right to enjoy one every day at the Treasury, while economic decisions about our country are settled in Frankfurt.

Conservatives must campaign long and hard to make sure that the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East never has the opportunity of a free ride in government. We must put it to the British people that the Conservative vision of Europe is the right one. We must put it to the electorate that the Conservative approach to lower taxation and sensible controls on public spending is the right one. We must put it to the public that only a Conservative party and Government could possibly give the lead in Europe, to bring down unemployment, create more jobs, open up Europe to the east and west, and understand the dynamics of change that will lead to the mighty rise of Asia and the Americas over the next two or three decades.

We must not belong to a Europe that shuts itself off from the dynamism of the world economy. We must be strong players in a Europe that is open for business and free to trade with the five continents of the world. I beg to support the Loyal Address.

4.54 pm

Mr. Alfred Morris (Manchester, Wythenshawe): Whatever anyone may think of the Gracious Speech, it has scant relevance to the key issues now confronting the people of Manchester. As the House knows, I am in my 33rd year as a representative here of my native city; and I take this first opportunity in the new Session to draw attention to some of the most pressing issues facing us.

Saturday 15 June 1996 is a date that will long linger in the memories of Mancunians, and for all the wrong reasons. That was the day the IRA ripped the heart out

of our city. Hundreds of people were injured, many very seriously. They now face lifelong disability. Buildings were devastated, homes were lost and businesses, large and small, were dealt a crippling blow.

I vividly remember from my boyhood the effects of the Manchester blitz. The city's reaction to the outrage on 15 June has been as resilient as it was then. If the perpetrators expected anything less than resilience from Mancunians they know nothing, but nothing, of the kind of people we are. The whole city is committed, now as it was in December 1940, to ensuring that, out of adversity, a stronger and more vibrant Manchester will emerge: a city to rival any in Europe.

To capitalise on that commitment, Manchester and its region need quality access to global markets, fast and convenient transport links within the United Kingdom and quality public transport links for moving people within the region. For that to be achieved, we need and deserve ministerial help, and we need it urgently.

In Manchester airport, our city and the north-west, indeed the north of Britain, have a priceless asset. It is our gateway to the world: providing jobs, stimulating investment and promoting tourism. Air transport is a business of the future. To compete, particularly with the major cities in Europe, for inward investment, quality airport facilities are essential to capitalise on the jobs and economic benefits that global business decisions bring. But as of now, in flat contradiction of the statement on page 3 of the Queen's Speech about the Government's continuing support for competitiveness, we are prevented from competing as effectively as we are capable of doing.

Manchester airport, as the House is well aware, is in my constituency; and I have been involved in promoting its growth since the days when the terminal buildings consisted mainly of nissen huts. Now it is a north-west business that can genuinely be described as world class. That is not just an expression of local patriotism or even a statement of opinion. It is a fact, because Manchester airport was officially designated, earlier this year, the best airport in the world. That accolade was awarded by the International Air Transport Association following a survey of 40,000 world travellers. The House may wish to know that Gatwick and Heathrow were ranked 12th and 26th respectively.

Notwithstanding the restraints we want to see removed, the benefits Manchester airport already brings to the north-west are huge and quantifiable. But they can and will increase if quick and positive ministerial decisions are taken on its future. It is now more than 18 months since the public inquiry into the airport's proposed second runway ended and over three years since the planning application was submitted. The uncertainty that protracted planning decisions bring is in no one's best interests.

That is understood by Ministers as much as by the rest of us and I have no wish to understate the importance of their responsibilities, least of all their quasi-judicial role. But delay costs jobs and investment and must be kept to an irreducible minimum. Inevitably, major planning decisions take time and issues both for and against development must be thoroughly considered. But few right hon. and hon. Members will fail to understand the uncertainty now felt by my constituents in deciding their future, and by the airport company in making major investment decisions. It is a process without a clear end date, a process that prevents proper planning.

The airport's single runway is already full at peak periods. Traffic has been turned away, some to the congested airports of the south-east, some to European hub airports: Paris, Frankfurt and Amsterdam. That is bad for Manchester and the north-west and bad for Britain: yet it will go on and increase until the second runway is built. The economic benefits of the airport's expansion are enormous. More than 50,000 jobs in the north-west are now dependent directly or indirectly on Manchester airport. In less than 10 years, that can double to 100,000 through an expansion of the airport and the construction of a second runway. The airport company needs no reminding that expansion has environmental implications. Indeed, it has put forward an environmental package that our colleagues on the Select Committee on Transport have rightly described as a model for other airports to follow.

It is crucially important that a favourable decision about runway 2 is announced as soon as possible. Only if a positive decision about it is announced before the end of this year can the project be completed by the millennium. Thus I make this plea to the Ministers directly involved in making a decision that the people of the north-west—of all parties and of none—so anxiously await: "Please appreciate that we fully understand your responsibilities, but please do all you can to hasten a positive decision. If it cannot be announced before this debate concludes, then at least please let us know by when, at the latest, we can expect a decision; and meanwhile please join us in leaving no one in any doubt about what is at stake in terms of jobs and economic regeneration in the north-west."

Manchester airport's development is also being held back by the Government's anti-competitive aviation policy in inhibiting our ability to develop as a hub airport. Some international airlines are prevented from starting new services or increasing frequencies from Manchester because of outdated bureaucratic regulations. New services to Singapore, Egypt and Jamaica have been lost and investment by airlines at Manchester airport is prevented because of that bureaucracy. Maintaining artificial restrictions is preventing the creation of thousands of new jobs in an area of unacceptably high unemployment.

By allowing open skies policies from regional airports—which is what my very widely supported all-party early-day motion calls for—the Government could have an enormously positive impact on jobs, without any of the expenditure normally needed to secure overseas investment in our regions. Not to allow open skies policies restrains our potential. That is not only my view or that of Manchester airport. Chris Clifford, the regional director of the Confederation of British Industry in the north west, says:

"We support Manchester airport in urging the Government to speed up the open skies process. Regional competitiveness is the key to our long-term success. It would be most unfortunate if lack of action by the Government meant that the north west would lose out in creating so many jobs and generating such a high level of income."

Manchester also has ambitious plans to extend Metrolink, not only to the airport but to the development at Salford quays. Again, the decisions of a planning inquiry and a commitment of funds are delaying the implementation of that vital transport scheme. Investment is coming into Manchester and new infrastructure and new business are being developed. But if we are to go on

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regaining our place as one of Europe's major cities, the city of Manchester cannot do everything alone, no matter how much it may wish to do so.

We are one of Britain's great cities that deserves well of any Government. Whitehall's support is needed to repair the damage done by years of economic decline and by one split second of terrorist evil this summer. I am not asking the impossible of the Government, only that they should display the same level of foresight as those who, more than 60 years ago, defied conventional opinion by investing in an airport that became the world's best, and those who, by other brave initiatives, brought honour and renown to our city, the place where Rutherford split the atom, where Rolls met Royce and where the world's first computer was invented. Then we can look to the future with hope and confidence.

5.6 pm

Sir Giles Shaw (Pudsey): I am honoured to speak in the debate on the Queen's Speech. I believe that I have not spoken in a debate of this sort since 1988. I suspect that I shall never be able to do so again, so this is my valedictory utterance in respect of Queen's Speech debates.

I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Manchester, Wythenshawe (Mr. Morris) in his plea for decision making on strategic plans in the great and good city of Manchester. I note that the question of Salford quays is still outstanding. I well remember, when I was a Minister in the Department of the Environment in 1982, coming up to Salford to start the great development in the docks which might lead to the regeneration of that city and of the core within which the great city of Manchester sits. I am delighted that that has been successful. I join the right hon. Gentleman in putting pressure on my right hon. Friends in the Government to resolve the planning issues, in respect not only of Salford quays but of Manchester airport.

I might add, on behalf of the city of Leeds, that the urban development plan for that great city has now completed an inquiry involving three inspectors over 24 or 23 months. We have now been informed that no pronouncement will be made before approximately 1999, which is roughly five or five and a half years before the entire UDP expires. That is not a tolerable situation. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) will give a jab to the Department of the Environment in support of earlier decisions on crucial planning in big cities in the north of England.

Today, we heard a speech from the Leader of the Opposition with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has dealt impeccably. It is a bit odd that the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) seems to rely so heavily on what occurred in 1979, 1983 or 1987—all of which was the big grist to the Kinnock mill during the great election of 1992, which my right hon. and hon. Friends recall so well and which was disposed of by the most emphatic majority of which this party has ever heard.

It is a bit rich for the right hon. Member for Sedgefield to believe that he has only to roll forward the debates used in 1992. That is not the case. In the Queen's Speech we are talking about making significant further progress after a period of government in which there have been enormous changes, particularly in education—a matter to which the right hon. Member for Sedgefield rightly attaches enormous importance.

We have made enormous progress in issues relating to the health service and trade unions and on our relations within the European Community. I welcome the views expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham, who made clear his belief that we are on the right lines in relation to at least most of those issues.

However, we must take the point a little further. I recognise that in the lead-up to this debate and in recent weeks we have been dealing with violent events. The right hon. Member for Wythenshawe referred to the catastrophic incident involving the IRA in the centre of Manchester.

We must recognise our huge collective commitment and effort—I recognise that we have enjoyed full support from the Opposition—towards pinning back, step by step, day by day and week by week the threat of the IRA wherever it has occurred. In recent weeks, we have seen a substantial achievement in relation to two events in which a significant number of those who planned the destruction of mainland Britain have been put behind bars. We hope that, after the suitable forces of law have been followed, they will be behind bars for a considerable time.

That happened because, under the new security legislation, we have co-ordinated the work of the security services, particularly MI5, in support of work against terrorism on the mainland of the United Kingdom. We must be grateful for the dedication and skills of those people and for the way in which they have been able to co-ordinate their activity with the police. Some signs of improvement are already occurring and we wish them luck.

I hope that you will forgive me for referring to this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but in recent days, if not weeks, we have been subjected to considerable pressure over what the right hon. Member for Sedgefield called the fracturing of our society. I believe that that pressure has been brought about largely as a result of the admirable personal manifesto of Mrs. Lawrence, the widow of the headmaster who was, sadly, killed.

We have a great deal to consider in relation to the fracturing of our society. I do not for one minute discount the real anxiety felt about a number of things that have occurred over a large number of years and that are not easily attributable to any one series of political decisions by any one Government or party. They have come about through a series of changes, which have largely been brought about rationally, but which have certain irrational consequences.

For example, early in the 1970s it was believed that very large organisations were better than medium or small organisations. A great deal of pressure built up in relation to local authorities. It was felt that they should be larger, have more power and attract better quality councillors from industry or other professions. It was felt that they should be able to manage their large individual budgets better. On reflection, in many cases, particularly in areas such as those represented by the right hon. Member for Wythenshawe and myself, where huge cities emerged—to give them their full title, they were known as metropolitan city district councils—we took the word "local" out of local government.

My constituency of Pudsey is situated between two large metropolitan districts; Leeds, which it does not much care for, and Bradford, which it cares for even less. That has resulted in a feeling of alienation from what used to be the borough of Pudsey. It was founded by Queen Victoria only six months, or was it three, before her demise—the effort was obviously too great. People knew their councillors, who tended to come from families well represented on the Liberal, Labour or Conservative sides. Somehow, things got done. On the whole, the pavements were better looked after, the drains did not often bung up and one did not have to go to Leeds to get them unbunged. There was a degree of association between local decision making and the benefit to the customer, client or citizen. There was an element of pride in citizenship which is not evident today.

The proximity of decision making is an ingredient of which we see less nowadays. To some extent, the idea that big is beautiful is an ingredient in the fracturing of the relationship between citizen and Government. It will not surprise colleagues in the House to learn that I am a believer in the view that small is beautiful—at 5 ft 3½ in, I have no choice. There is an argument that local authority decision making should be brought closer to people and not further away. The right hon. Member for Sedgefield wants to take it further away with regional governance, for God's sake, when we have enough to do with the existing metropolitan districts and cities.

If we are to take a serious look at where we are in society we must start, as we always should, with the family unit. That is the core of what we represent, what we believe and the way in which we have been trained. It is the core in which our loves, aspirations, ambitions and anguishes are contained. If we are to believe that the family is the core of, let us say, the being in the United Kingdom, we must stop using politically correct terms. If a family is fractured, that link in the chain is fractured. A family should be solidly woven together, whether by the orthodoxy of marriage or under a determined contract between two people to remain living together. Any other alternative must be regarded as abnormal or subnormal.

It is not for me to determine how any other arrangement in the family unit should be described. When marriages are fractured with the frequency that we see now—one in three or one in four—it is not surprising that the traditional virtue of discipline within the family is diluted to the point of indistinction. That is the case in most of the families today where awkwardness emerges.

If family discipline is diluted, what can we do to restore discipline to the upbringing of children? That is a matter that the state cannot reasonably undertake. Of course we are right to say that there is a huge burden on education. There is a particularly huge burden on primary or nursery education because discipline must start there or it cannot be developed later when proper disciplinary systems are applied by academic pressures.

This is a difficult issue. When some families behave in a way that is contrary to discipline, nothing happens in the home. In fact, I suspect—I do not have the figures before me—that a great many of the problem children emerge, sadly, from fractured families and from homes within which there is no semblance of discipline or in which there are activities that positively encourage undisciplined acts.

The family unit strikes me as the core of the argument, but how we turn it into the core of the solution, given the stage that we have reached, I frankly know not. However, policies to strengthen the family must be right, regardless of whether they relate to the ownership and development of assets, property and capital or whether they involve having benefits dependent on the family being a solid unit. That is all well and good, but to develop other, fractured forms of family or families unlikely to last a proper generation, or half a generation, is problematic.

In many parts of Britain—I see that hon. Members from the north-east, as well as from the north-west, are present—the terraced houses that long contained the fabric of working Britain in the urban areas, of which I and many others are so proud, have disappeared. They have been replaced with tower blocks; they have been stood on their heads. Was that an exercise in social cohesion, in family values, in child protection and in creating families who would live one with another and offer help and succour when needed? That is clearly not the case. It was an architectural debacle of mega-proportions—and we are reaping the whirlwind.

The terraced house brought more than proximity: it provided a place for the extended family. Aunts, sisters and grandparents were around. With the mobile markets that we have created, and of which I am extremely proud, people are not confined to, say, Wesley terrace, Pudsey. They can move, and expect to move, elsewhere for fame and fortune. However, without the support of the individual family, there is always a greater risk when problems occur. Equally, without grandparental support, discipline in the family is unnecessarily and unwisely disturbed. That is another element in the mix.

There is one more related theme—I make no apology for raising this—in that our institutions have been fragmented during the past 20 to 25 years. I suspect that all of us, when we became Members of Parliament, determined at the outset that the institution of the monarchy would never really shift and thought that those who preached republicanism were a bit like those in the Referendum party today. That may be a rash statement, but those people were outside the pale of normal political discussion.

However, pressure was building up in the fourth estate—the media—for the monarchy to behave a bit more popularly, to become more exposed to the reality of life and not to remain unseen behind closed doors; and so it happened. A series of events through which we all lived undermined, perhaps, the sanctity of the monarchy; it certainly weakened that institution.

We cannot discuss the family and the fracturing of our society without considering the role models to which society can aspire and from which it can derive a sense of well-being and commitment. I believe—perhaps merely because I am reaching the age at which I should be leaving the House—that the monarchy is a valued institution for that reason alone.

A related problem concerns the press and privacy and what is known in the newspapers as the public interest. What on earth does that mean? When the right hon. Member for Wythenshawe and I were on the Privileges Committee, we ground through the case in which the editor of *The Sunday Times* said that he had been obliged, in the public interest, to employ the subterfuge of using journalists disguised as business men to obtain evidence,

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because he was unable to obtain it by the orthodox route of examining the questions of the six hon. Members whose names he had been given.

What did "the public interest" mean in that case? If there is a place for such fine newspapers—let there be a place—the public interest should be something in which we have a role, and somebody should define it. Those who offend against the public interest should be treated appropriately and should not simply be reported to the Press Complaints Commission, whose toothlessness is evident for all to see. Our great newspapers get away with paying no value added tax. I wonder what the Chancellor might do on 28 November as, perhaps, a final gesture to my anxiety on such matters.

Let us close that chapter and make a final point. Of course we have problems that reflect a fracturing in our society. Hon. Members of all parties would agree about many of the causes, and perhaps we could offer a collective solution. It is up to the House, as I trust it always will be, to deal with such issues on a rational and considered basis. We should not jump at one, two or three solutions; if the issues are important to us all, we should collectively examine the matter and reach a decision that can be carried unanimously by the House. That is a joyful thought on which to cease.

5.26 pm

Mr. Roy Hughes (Newport, East): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman. He talked about valedictory remarks, and I was sorry to hear that, because I appreciate the valuable contribution that he has made to the affairs of the House and as a member of the Government. I did not entirely agree with his analysis of what has brought about the evils in our society. I certainly agreed with him about the family unit, which should be the basis of our society. We are suffering greatly as a result of its breakdown. I should like to remind the hon. Gentleman, however, that successive Conservative Chancellors of the Exchequer have done nothing to help the two-parent family unit; on the contrary, they have tended to discriminate against it.

I have spoken many times in the debate on the Queen's Speech. This year, the speech was truncated because Father Time is at last catching up with the Government. There is much speculation that 1 May will be the date of the next general election, and even on that date the Government will be just about going to the wire, fulfilling the full five-year term.

Over the past 17 years, we have witnessed the collapse of the post-war political consensus in Britain. It is as if the British people had opted for a huge polarisation of income and wealth. There has been a vast increase in insecurity; people are unwilling to walk the streets at night because they are afraid of being mugged by an underclass that has multiplied as a result of Government policy. We may read about such events, but it touches us most when they happen in our own village, town or city—in our own backyard.

A couple of days ago I received a letter on community safety from Mr. Sandy Blair, the chief executive of Newport county borough council. The letter, dated 17 October, said:

"You will know that there has been mounting concern over antisocial behaviour throughout many parts of your constituency in recent years.

As a consequence, the Council has taken considerable effort to protect and improve residents' peaceful enjoyment of their homes. In particular, it has taken action to evict offending tenants, intensify other estate management and has introduced an estate's warden scheme.

Notwithstanding these steps, all undertaken in close cooperation with the Police, residents continue to experience problems, particularly as a result of boisterous youngsters, many of whom appear to be under the influence of alcohol.

Residents on the Pont Faen estate have now nearly reached breaking point, many fearful of going out at night and experiencing vandalism in their own gardens.

They presented the enclosed petition to Councillor George Bucklow in the presence of Police representatives at our Liswerry Neighbourhood Committee on Friday, 4 October.

The Council has been asked to pass it on to you by the residents of Pont Faen for your consideration and have specifically asked that you raise their concerns with the Home Secretary."

I shall willingly pass the petition to the Home Secretary.

The youngsters causing all the mayhem are most likely unemployed; some may be still at school; and they will often be from broken homes or one-parent families. It is time that the Government recognised that something must be done. It is time the nettle was grasped. But there is no indication in the Queen's Speech of such action.

By contrast, the shadow Chancellor is determined to tackle the problem head on. He says that the bill for youth unemployment, crime and social decay is reckoned to be no less than £10 billion. That is the cost to us all, and it is too high. Labour's plans to deal with that problem are at the core of its economic policies. The shadow Chancellor's pledge to the British people is that 250,000 under-25-year-olds will be taken off benefit and put into work. That would be most welcome. The finance will come from a windfall levy on the unfair profits of the privatised utilities.

The need to tackle youth unemployment is urgent and it is appropriate that the money needed to facilitate the action should come from the privatised utilities. Apart from their excess profits, executive pay packages rose three times faster than average earnings last year. Consider, for example, Mr. Keith Henry, chairman of National Power. An article on page 2 of yesterday's edition of *The Daily Telegraph* says that his

"salary package rose by 74 per cent. to £782,555.

Appointed on a basic salary of £325,000 in February 1995 with no previous experience of the industry, he has received a performance-related bonus of £110,000, benefits worth £12,855 and pension contributions of £334,000 in the past year."

That could be described as some lovely gravy. Much of the excess profit floating about in the privatised public utilities can be put to better use. Tackling youth unemployment is very much a case in point.

The Gracious Speech gives insufficient attention to the vexed question of unemployment. The Government seem to treat it, as in pre-Keynsian days, as a cyclical act of God. We need to change the climate of economic thought and ideas.

During the recess, I visited several highly efficient enterprises in my constituency. One factor that they all had in common was that there was hardly a worker in sight. The creed is to cut costs through education, training and investment, raising the output of those in employment in the process. We should be increasingly concerned about the number of people finding suitable employment.

The Government's main aim has been a low rate of inflation. I trust that the next Labour Government will be at least equally concerned about a high level of employment. To achieve that, we shall need a general bias in favour of lower interest rates. We shall therefore need to assess carefully the European implications of such policies. Would lower interest rates find favour with the independent central bank proposed by the luminaries of the European Union?

I make no apologies to the House for spending so much of my speech on the subject of unemployment. It receives little attention in the Gracious Speech, but for me it is very important.

We should be concerned about unemployment not just among young people but among older workers. We are throwing people out of work at the age of 45 or even younger. They could be reliant for 40 years or more on Government support. As a nation, we cannot afford such age discrimination. Our population is getting older. Fifteen years from now, for the first time, Britain's over-50 population will be larger than the 15-to-44 age group. The state will not be able to keep up with the cost of age discrimination. There should have been proposals in the Gracious Speech to tackle the issue. However, I am glad to say that a future Labour Government plan to make age discrimination in employment illegal. Such a measure is long overdue.

Finally, I should like to refer briefly to the missing jobless. Figures compiled by the House of Commons Library show that, across Britain, 573,000 people are missing from the official register. In consequence, the unemployment totals are bogus. Huge numbers of people are without work, even though they have disappeared from the dole. That is merely an attempt by the Government to conceal the truth about persistent long-term unemployment.

There is no recognition in the Gracious Speech of the evils of unemployment and the damage that it has done to British society. There is an urgent need to get rid of this Government of sleaze and greed. They will make way for a Labour Government under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair). That Government, I know, will build a juster, fairer, and more prosperous Britain.

5.39 pm

Sir David Knox (Staffordshire, Moorlands): It is always a pleasure for me to follow the hon. Member for Newport, East (Mr. Hughes). This is not the first time that it has happened. As he knows, I share his concern about unemployment, although our solutions may be rather different on occasions.

I should like to thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me at this early stage in the new Session of Parliament. I have been fortunate enough to catch the Speaker's eye on the first day of most of the Sessions in the 26 years during which I have had the privilege of being a Member of the House. However, this occasion will be the last, as I shall retire at the general election.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), who entered the House on the same day as me, and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field) on their excellent and amusing speeches in moving and seconding the Loyal Address. Both of them obviously have great affection for their constituencies, which is only right because it is on our constituencies and constituents that we depend for our position in the House. I know that that affection is reciprocated by the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, whose constituency is very near mine, and I am sure that that is also true of the regard in which his constituents hold my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight. I am afraid that I do not know this at first hand, because I have never visited his constituency, although he extended an invitation this afternoon to all of us to do so. When I retire from the House, I might well take up the invitation.

The Session ahead will of necessity be rather shorter than usual because of the general election. Consequently, the legislative programme is lighter than normal, but it should be possible to get it all on the statute book by spring, when I expect that the country will go to the polls.

I warmly welcome the proposed health care Bill, which will offer family doctors the opportunity to set up super-surgeries offering much wider facilities. In recent years, there has been a considerable extension in the services provided in many doctors' surgeries and the Bill will enable those doctors who wish further to extend their services to do so and to provide facilities which were previously provided by cottage hospitals.

Although I have some doubts about the introduction of yet another education Bill at this stage, I believe that the proposals to deal with unruly pupils are overdue. It is unfortunately the case that one badly behaved pupil can adversely affect the education of two dozen or more well-behaved ones, and this is just not acceptable. Although I hope that the new powers will be used with restraint, I believe that they will be a welcome addition to head teachers' capacity to take appropriate action.

Following the Dunblane shooting and the Cullen report, new firearms legislation is imperative, and there will be an understandable temptation in the House to rush it through quickly. Although there will be time constraints in the new Session of Parliament, I hope that the House will scrutinise the legislation carefully. All too often, hastily introduced and ill-considered legislation which has been introduced after a disaster has failed to achieve its objectives, and sometimes has even been counter-productive. The control of firearms is much too serious a matter for mistakes to be made.

In addition to the Bills outlined in the Gracious Speech, the Finance Bill will be introduced to implement the proposals in next month's Budget. I do not think that the measures in the Budget will have much effect on the economy before the election, because there is a time lag between the introduction of economic measures and their becoming effective, but the Budget will be important as a sign of things to come under the next Conservative Government and perhaps in terms of the reaction of the main Opposition parties.

Unless all previous experience goes by the board, the state of the economy will be the main determinant of the outcome of the election and on that score there is little doubt that the Conservative party deserves to win. Much of the credit for that is due to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Since he became Chancellor more than three years ago, British economic policy has been conducted with great skill, and the economy has been neither over nor under-stimulated.

[Sir David Knox]

In the run-up to a general election, there is a great temptation, to which many Chancellors have yielded, to stoke up rapid expansion and then, once the election is over, to slam on the brakes. My right hon. and learned Friend has resisted that temptation and pursued a steady course of controlled, sustainable expansion. As a result, all the economic indicators are pointing in the right direction—a combination of circumstances which is unique in the post-war period. There is steady economic growth. Living standards are rising. The public sector borrowing requirement is falling, although perhaps not quite so quickly as we might like. Unemployment is steadily declining. The balance of payments is healthier than at any time in the past decade, and inflation is lower than it has been for 35 years.

It is obviously very much in the interests of the country that this highly successful economic policy should continue. It is therefore important that the Chancellor should continue with his prudent management of the economy, and that he should dismiss silly suggestions of substantial tax cuts in his Budget—not that I think he intends to do anything else.

Substantial tax cuts would impress no one. They would annoy a lot of people and they would almost certainly have an adverse effect on sterling. In any case, the Government have significant public expenditure obligations. In addition, the people of this country undoubtedly want to see additional spending on health and education. There is therefore no way of imposing substantial cuts in public spending, which means that there is no room for substantial tax cuts. I hope that it will be possible to effect some reduction in taxation, but this must not be at the expense of essential public services or at the risk of upsetting the balance of the economy and promoting an unhealthy economic boom. I have no doubt that my right hon. and learned Friend will refuse to be diverted from the path of economic prudence, and that he will continue to manage the economy with the skill that he has exercised since he became Chancellor of the Exchequer three and a half years ago.

There is no doubt in my mind that the most important issue that faces Britain is our relationship with Europe. I mentioned earlier that I was nearing the end of my time in parliament and, although it was near the beginning and a long time ago, the high point of my career was when the House voted in favour of the principle of British membership of the European Community on 28 October 1971. Of course, since then other occasions relating to Britain and Europe have given me great pleasure—such as the Second and Third Readings of the European Communities Bill in 1972, the Bill to introduce direct elections to the European Parliament in the late 1970s, the Bill to enact the European Single Act in the mid-1980s, and the Bill to enact the Maastricht treaty in the first Session of this Parliament.

Not surprisingly, I am very distressed about much of the negative argument and misrepresentation about Europe today in Britain. The negative argument, which receives a disproportionate amount of publicity, particularly in the Murdoch and Black newspapers, does this country no favours and undermines our influence, both in Europe and in the wider world.

That misrepresentation about Europe is a disgrace to those who indulge in it. We are constantly told by people who were not even at primary school when we joined the European Community in 1973, far less when we first applied to join in 1961, that the organisation that we joined was only something to do with free trade and that it had nothing to do with politics. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When we first applied to join the European Community, in 1961, Harold Macmillan, who was then Prime Minister, said in his statement to the House:

"This is a political as well as an economic issue. Although the Treaty of Rome is concerned with economic matters it has an important political objective, namely, to promote unity and stability in Europe".—[*Official Report*, 31 July 1961; Vol. 645, c. 928.]

The political implications of our membership were again made clear during the period leading up to our entry into the European Community in 1973. Indeed, much of the debate in Committee during the passage of European Communities Act 1972 was about the political implications of our membership. When it came to the referendum, in 1975, the political implications were again to the fore, especially in the literature distributed by the "no" campaign.

So let us hear less from those Europhobes who are trying to rewrite history to support their case. Some of us were around at the time, and we remember.

The European Community was not just about free trade when we first applied to join, it was not just about free trade when we joined and it should not just be about free trade today. The European Union has a political as well as an economic dimension. How it should develop was not spelt out in the treaty of Rome, and it need not be spelt out today. There is no hurry. It should be allowed to evolve and its institutions allowed to develop to meet the needs and demands of the Union.

That process should not be forced, nor should it be held back. At this stage, no one knows what the eventual outcome should be. It is for this reason that I greatly regret the debate for and against federalism, or, for that matter for or against any other constitutional arrangements. It is premature. It would be much more sensible to allow the institutions in the European Union to evolve in an atmosphere free of dogmatism. I always understood that that was the Tory approach to matters of this nature.

Before I conclude, I wish to say a word about European monetary union and a single currency, which I believe will be with us sooner rather than later. Moreover, I hope that we shall be able to join at the beginning, although—I emphasise this—whether we join should depend on the economic and financial circumstances at the time and the exact nature of the arrangements.

In my view, there are many powerful arguments why membership would be in Britain's interest. First, transaction costs of exchanging currencies in the European Union would be eliminated and transmission costs would be greatly reduced.

Sir Michael Spicer (South Worcestershire): Will my hon. Friend give us an idea of how much he believes those transaction costs are? Would they not be less than 0.5 per cent. of manufacturing costs?

Sir David Knox: I will not attempt to estimate something like that, because my hon. Friend would probably agree that exact estimates of that nature are not really possible, but even if the figure is 0.5 per cent., as my hon. Friend suggested, I should have thought that that was a fairly significant amount.

The second reason why I believe that there is a strong argument in favour of British membership of a single currency is that exchange rate fluctuations would be eliminated within the union, with consequent advantages to exporters and importers.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir David Knox: No. I am not giving way a second time.

Thirdly, a single currency would facilitate the working of the single market and would result in an increase in trade in goods and services. Indeed, a single market needs a single currency to ensure that countries can no longer cheat by devaluing their currencies, and the inability to devalue would have the added advantage of imposing a powerful discipline on Government borrowing, on inflation and on the protection of the value of savings and pensions.

Fourthly, a single currency would be much stronger than any of the separate currencies, and that includes the deutschmark. As a result, the real economy would be much less affected by international currency speculation than it is now.

Fifthly, if we do not join a single currency but others do, the euro is likely to be one of the strongest currencies in the world, and this would mean that sterling would be even more vulnerable to speculation than it is at present.

Sixthly, if Britain stayed out of the single currency, it would be extremely difficult to maintain London as the leading financial centre in Europe.

These are the main reasons why I believe that British participation in the single currency is in principle desirable, although of course the decision whether we join must depend on the circumstances prevailing at the time.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir David Knox: No. I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

No matter what view one takes on this issue, it is imperative that Britain should play a full part in the negotiations in the European Union that are under way at present, without laying down any preconditions. Only by doing so can we influence the decisions that are taken.

Inside or outside, the single currency will affect Britain, and only if we are involved in the negotiations, and if we have not committed ourselves not to join, can we maximise our influence and so ensure that British interests are fully protected.

A decision now that we would not join a single currency during the next Parliament would negate our influence. In such circumstances, our partners in the European Union would pay no attention to the views and interests of a declared non-player. Far too often, Britain has opted out of negotiations about new developments in the European Union, only to have to live with consequences which did not especially suit us.

I am very pleased that we are not making that mistake concerning the negotiations relating to the single currency. That is why I strongly support the decision of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and of the Government, not to rule out our membership at this stage.

5.56 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Sir D. Knox), especially the last five or six minutes of his peroration on European development and the single European currency, because much in the views that he expressed accords with mine. If I remember, I will try to mention those in my closing remarks.

I chose to seek your eye on the first day of the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I want to mention several issues, and after today we are locked into different themes.

First, as a trustee and director of the Lucy Faithful Foundation, I wanted to pass comment on the paedophile register. Now, because the Prime Minister has graciously agreed with the invitation from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) to include that measure in Government business, I must simply record my delight at that news and my wish that we follow it carefully, but thoroughly, through into effective legislation.

Secondly, I am disappointed that it appears that the stalking legislation is being consigned to private Members' business. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I am sorry; in that case I am doubly delighted. If I keep this up, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will be carried away with ecstasy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, dear."] Non-narcotic ecstasy, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I consider both those measures thoroughly enforceable, and I am delighted that they will be passed in Government time.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Devlin) referred to one measure that I consider to be unenforceable. He commented on reports of my remarks on gun control. His raising of the matter with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition would have been justified if those reports were true, but they were not. Therefore, not for the first time—at least in my memory—the hon. Gentleman has misled the House, knowingly or unknowingly. I am glad to tell the House what I have said about those issues.

First, I prefer to register my huge distress and my grief at the incidents at Hungerford and Dunblane. As a result of Hungerford, I acted as Whip during the Committee stage of the firearms legislation that was introduced immediately following that dreadful incident. I was on the Front Bench when the Government introduced 67 additional clauses during the Bill's final stages. I have followed those issues with some interest and diligence over the years, and the events at Dunblane distressed me every bit as much as everyone else.

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) has estimated that 250,000 handguns are held illegally in this country, and some well-informed commentators say that the figure is twice as high. Whatever the figure, an awful lot of handguns are held illegally in this country. If legislation were the solution, illegally held handguns would not be on the streets.

No mention has been made to date of any increase in police provision or resources to implement whatever changes in law are finally proposed. In those circumstances, any newly introduced legislation would be quite unenforceable. If Parliament wishes to ban handguns, it will do so. It has the power; it simply needs

[Mr. Frank Cook]

the will to exercise it. However, we cannot let that happen in the belief that legislation alone will prevent another Hungerford or Dunblane, as patently it will not. All sorts of agencies have distorted my words, and I thank the hon. Member for Stockton, South for giving me the opportunity to set the record straight today.

Ironically, my third point relates also to forms of gun control. I am rapporteur of the Defence and Security Committee of the North Atlantic Assembly and, in that capacity, I must write a report about "Partnership for Peace" and its progress. Paragraph 2 of the Gracious Speech states:

"My Government will continue to play a major role in NATO's adaptation and in decisions on its enlargement, and to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security".

There is much to be said about that issue, but I shall try to be brief.

As a means of joint consultation, "Partnership for Peace" was plucked out of the air ostensibly to ensure that nations aspiring to join NATO remained patient until their admission. There are 27 signatory nations to date—I understand that Switzerland is close to reaching a decision to join. Of those 27 nations, 11 wish to be members of the North Atlantic Alliance and the others have expressed no preference. The question must be: what happens to "Partnership for Peace" when those 11 countries are accepted or rejected? In terms of European stability and collective security, we must consider the issues very carefully.

The North Atlantic Alliance commits every member to fighting on behalf of another member that is attacked. Any nation that joins the alliance should accept that responsibility and that liability. "Partnership for Peace" seeks to upgrade the abilities and resources of other nations to bring them up to scratch. However, what will happen to nations that are not accepted as members? Of the 27 signatory nations, 16 nations are not interested. Those nations can collectively perform a function and play a role in working towards European stability. Those 16 countries could provide a haven for the 11 nations that might not be allowed to join, enabling them to make a positive and a constructive contribution.

The remaining partnership framework could then be developed and matured to form a lasting organisation, standing in parallel with the North Atlantic Alliance. The alliance would retain responsibility for article V activities—in other words, the defensive military side—and the partnership would add to consideration of and co-operation on non-article V exchanges. If that is to be achieved, it is crucial that Russia remains within the embrace of the partnership framework. That means that we must improve our dialogue with Russia and raise it to levels never before seen. We must give Russia a new role and a new, co-operative vision. If we are successful in that endeavour, we could move towards our ultimate goal.

Everyone on the continent—except the British—views the prospect of the enlargement of NATO and the development of "Partnership for Peace" as a means of securing a surer, clearer and more lasting European integration. We are not talking simply about military capacity, strike capability, troop deployment or standardisation of equipment; we are talking about essentially political and economic rather than military matters. The military side provides the security to allow the political exchanges and the economic exercise to take place.

At this point, my thoughts gel with the views expressed by the hon. Member for Moorlands. This summer, as rapporteur of the Defence and Security Committee, I visited the United States on a military tour. The tour included the marine base at Quantico, the naval base at Norfolk, Virginia, airborne forces at Fort Bragg at Fayettesville in North Carolina, the Nellis air force base at Las Vegas and the naval base at Corunna, San Diego.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): It was a good trip.

Mr. Cook: It would have been a good trip, had it not been so disquieting, and I shall tell the House why.

I saw evidence—many of our briefings were classified—of a strike capability that was so awesome that one could multiply it by 100 and still not reflect it truly. It was enormous. As we already know, the United States of America has a deliberate policy that will facilitate its ability to conduct a major conflict in central Europe, a major conflict in the Pacific and two or three minor skirmishes simultaneously. That is how it arms itself. It made me stop and think just what we are clowning about at in Europe. Not only is our national budget about 1 per cent. of America's, and not only do we spend half as much in percentage terms on research and development as the USA, but we Europeans argue among ourselves.

I have to put my point as coldly as this: if we do not get our European act together, if we do not concentrate on properly equipping our service personnel, male and female, and if we do not train them adequately, we will be left so far behind that ultimately we will have to become a member or a satellite state of the European Union for defence purposes. All the nonsense that we have heard in the past 12 months about sovereignty, when Frankfurt has determined the level of our pound, is so much hot air. I appeal to hon. Members to take my thoughts seriously. I have thought carefully before putting them on the record, and, for the moment, I rest.

6.12 pm

Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson (New Forest): It is now 32 years since I first spoke in a debate on the Loyal Address, after being elected for West Lewisham in 1964. Normally, one would have expected to wait a respectable time after joining the House before opening one's mouth publicly, because in those days new boys were seen but not heard. However, since I had just come from the British Iron and Steel Federation and the Labour Government had put plans to nationalise steel in the Gracious Speech, I was prevailed on to speak rather sooner than I had expected—in fact, a few days after the general election. I see other hon. Members who entered the House then in their places.

During my time in the House, I have contributed to a number of debates on the Loyal Address and I am both surprised and delighted to see the change that has happened in the Labour party. In the Gracious Speech of 1964, we were still in the land of the commanding heights of the economy being captured by the Labour party, and nationalisation, clause IV and all the other trappings of socialism were on the banner. Now, as I come to the end of my parliamentary career with a few months left to go, I can

safely say that in my time here I have seen the disappearance of socialism altogether from the Labour party. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps it is just the Leader of the Opposition who holds that view.

Last year, in a similar debate, I described the Leader of the Opposition as the first Young Conservative leader of the Labour party. The Prime Minister, during our party conference, suggested that the Leader of the Opposition was a Conservative. It is clear that he wants to be a Conservative, because he realises that socialism will not get him and his party elected to government. I just wonder, however, having listened to one or two of the speeches from colleagues—indeed, old friends—on the Opposition Benches, whether the Leader of the Opposition represents all their views.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). I especially note the remarks that he made about the Hungerford tragedy, which took place in my late brother's constituency. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that legislation alone will not stop another tragedy taking place in a school or anywhere else. Sadly, maniacs can enact their evil upon us in other ways. They might not use a handgun or a shotgun, but they might pour potassium cyanide into a reservoir and no one form of legislation will be a guarantee against such actions. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me, as I agree with the Government, that we have to react strongly to what happened in Dunblane. I believe that the proposals in the Gracious Speech will be a sensible way forward.

The Gracious Speech covers several important issues. Many are, of course, domestic issues, and I will come to those in a moment. Her Majesty, when she began her speech this morning, referred to the imminent visit—I think it will be in February—of the President of Israel, Mr. Weizman. The Gracious Speech said:

"Support will continue for the search for a durable peace in the Middle East."

Some 48 years ago, I left Palestine as a young soldier at the end of the British mandate in May 1948. We left a troubled country behind us at the beginning of the first of a number of major wars in that part of the world. With hindsight, one can question whether the boundaries were right at the time, but in those 48 years attempts have been made to find solutions and sadly, more often than not, they have ended in further conflict.

We are now in a new situation. I add my praise for what Mr. Shimon Peres has tried to do, for the peace initiative and for the Oslo agreement, but I am concerned by what is now happening in that part of the world. The problem is not just a matter of burrowing a tunnel under the Al-Aksa mosque; it is more fundamental: if one wishes to establish peace there, it is essential that the Israelis recognise that the Palestinians will be in a better frame of mind to come to the peace table permanently if their condition of life is improved.

It is in our Government's interest, and that of all the Governments of the world, to ensure that we do something positive to allow the new, embryonic Palestinian entity to have the physical and economic support to change from being the under-privileged underdogs—without jobs or anything to eat, permanently on strike and always turning to terror—into a group of people who recognise the current opportunity for some autonomy in Gaza and the west bank.

Mr. Connarty: I am heartened by the hon. Gentleman's comments. As someone who visited Palestine during the intifada and the peace negotiations—I was also in Gaza city as an observer at the elections—I fully concur with his comments. Does he agree that, if most of the people in Gaza do not have the ability to participate in the economic life of Israel, unrest is fomented and a minority—just a minority—use it to justify terrorism and violence?

Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. We are talking of the recruiting sergeant for Hamas and all the other fundamentalist religious groups in the area. We must seek to improve the standard of life for the Palestinian. If that is done, Mr. Arafat and other Palestinian leaders will be able to sell the concept of peace in the area far more easily than if the Palestinian people are constantly under curfew and face all the disadvantages to which I referred.

I hope that, when Mr. Weizman comes to the United Kingdom early next year, those in government and all others he meets will encourage him to move in the direction that I outlined. It is not merely a matter of insisting on security, because security will itself grow from a higher standard of living for Palestinian people.

Much of the Queen's Speech is devoted to important social issues. Europe still rests high on the agenda in the run-up to the general election. I do not have the same enthusiasm as my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Sir D. Knox), but I listened to him with great interest. If we are to make a decision about a single currency, I hope that it will be made, as my hon. Friend suggested, on economic and not political grounds. If the economics are wrong, the single currency will be wrong for everyone.

The concept of belonging to a single currency in the belief that it will never come under pressure is likely to prove a disaster. The exchange rate mechanism was a classic example of believing that, by locking currencies together, we would somehow create a situation in which we could grow together and move away from the problem of speculation, for example. The trouble is that money is a commodity just as much as a bar of chocolate. People will buy it and sell it. As Mr. George Soros proved to us at the time of the ERM collapse, some individuals are prepared to go the full distance and speculate against a currency in the belief that it will either fall or rise.

I do not believe that we shall be any safer in a single currency. The problem that we shall be faced with in that position will be something that affects every nation in the European group. I am less than enthusiastic about a single currency. That is apart from the problems, to which some of us referred in the past, of loss of sovereignty and of control moving away from this country to a central bank, perhaps in Frankfurt.

I am happy with the words that appear on page 1 of the Queen's Speech. The passage reads:

"In the European Union, my Government will work for an outcome to the Intergovernmental Conference which supports an outward-looking, economically liberal and flexible Union based on a partnership of nations."

I am happy to live with that. However, as some hon. Members may know, I have a home in France where I spend some time during the summer recess. I talk to my French neighbours and it seems that they envy us our freedom to manage our own affairs. They are finding that the Maastricht criteria are destroying jobs in France. They find also that the artificially high rate of the franc fort, the strong

[Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson]

franc, has created massive unemployment. As we have read recently in newspapers, that has led to strikes and unrest throughout France.

I do not think that there is one answer. We must approach these matters on the basis of what is economically possible for our country. If we can satisfy ourselves on that score, we do not have much to fear.

That leads on directly to the economy. The Government have made it clear over the past 17 years that firm control of the economy is necessary. When I first came to this place in the autumn of 1964, the Labour party came to power, and within a few weeks we were in the middle of a major sterling crisis. I remember the late Harold Wilson explaining to the House that, although Britain's basic economy was strong, we were faced with a narrow crisis of confidence, as I think he called it. The gnomes of Zurich and others were referred to by some hon. Members and by others outside the House.

Confidence is a precious commodity, and it is currently enjoyed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government. There is confidence in economic matters. Our currency is strong, inflation is low, unemployment is falling and we are growing strongly. I am especially delighted by a passage that appears on page 3 of the Queen's Speech about

"creating the strongest industrial economy in Western Europe in the medium term and doubling living standards over the next twenty-five years."

Good intentions are not enough, as the Labour Government discovered in 1964, but we have achieved a great deal. Against that background, we must take tough decisions from time to time.

Over 17 years, we have seen something of boom and slump. Some of us can remember the stock market crash of October 1987. Some of us can remember also the Government's natural reaction—it was the reaction of parties throughout the House, which felt that we did not want to return to the 1929 to 1931 period—to take off the brakes to try to create more credit to ensure that we would not fall into a deep slump. That was done without realising, perhaps, that the economy was stronger than we had imagined and that it was not necessary to take such action, which led to boom and bust, inflation and other problems that had to be solved. I believe that the Government's economic policy has proved to be entirely correct. The economy is strong, and that will count in a big way on polling day in the next general election.

I move on to two smaller matters. First, again on page 3 of the Queen's Speech, we are told:

"Legislation will be brought forward to strengthen the powers to protect the United Kingdom coastline from pollution from merchant shipping."

Like everyone else, I enjoyed the speeches of the mover and seconder of the Loyal Address, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field). My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight has the pleasure of representing the constituency that is bang opposite mine. The southern frontier of my constituency is the north shore of the Solent. The northern frontier of the Isle of Wight is the south shore of the Solent. I was interested to learn that my hon. Friend's constituency has more electors than any other—about 100,000.

The new forest—this is one sadness of mine in leaving the constituency—will be cut in half, thanks to the boundary commissioners, forming two of the smallest constituencies. That means that two of the smallest will face the largest. I wish my successors every possible good fortune, but an added sadness is that, for the first time in our history, the perambulation of the Crown lands of the new forest will be split into two constituencies. I fear that that may lead to problems.

As I have said, I am happy about the proposal to strengthen powers to protect the United Kingdom from pollution from merchant shipping. The Solent, the waterway between the Isle of Wight and my constituency, and the area around Spithead and the entrance to Southampton water, is extremely widely used. I used to represent the whole area, including the refinery, when I was first the Member for New Forest. That has now changed. The Esso refinery at Fawley is the largest refinery in Britain and the sixth largest in the world. Shipping movements there require extremely large tankers to discharge contents and smaller tankers to take away products to other parts of the country.

We have been fortunate because we have never had a really serious accident. I pay warm tribute to those who operate on the waterside, to those who operate within the refinery shipping division and to the local authorities for taking such action as they can to ensure that an accident does not happen.

I am delighted to think, however, that the Gracious Speech may produce something more concrete for us. I am 100 per cent. behind the view that the legislation on marine pollution must be toughened up—especially in relation to an area which, among other things, has a double tide, which means that the effects of a major spillage travel backwards and forwards twice as often as along other parts of the coastline.

Finally, let me say a word about the future. It is not likely to include me, because I shall not be here, but in a few months we shall hear another Gracious Speech. Personally, I am confident that it will be promoted by the Conservative party. We have seen the transformation of which I spoke earlier—involving, for instance, a Conservative leader of the Labour party—and Labour is clearly less frightening to the public than some of its forebears. Nevertheless, as a supporter of the kit-car replica industry, an enthusiast who finds the use of such products a pleasant hobby, I know that the industry is based on the manufacture of cars that look very much like expensive Porsches and Ferraris but probably end up with small Ford engines. Although such a car may give its owner great pleasure, it is never quite as good as—or, indeed, designed to be as good as—the genuine article.

I just wonder whether, when the election takes place and the electorate look at the past 17 years and at what we are planning for the next few months, they will not ask themselves, "Why have a replica Conservative party when you can have the genuine article?" Why have a party that has dropped socialism because it realises that it cannot be elected with socialism, when many good, honest members of that party remain but are required to keep their mouths shut? Would it not be better for the electorate to support a Tory party that they understand—a party with clear policies and a clear plan for the future, as set out in the Gracious Speech? Would it not be better, in the words of the soft drink commercial, to drink the real thing rather than the replica?

6.32 pm

Mr. Bruce Grocott (The Wrekin): One of the unusual characteristics of the debate has been the number of hon. Members who have announced that this is to be their last Parliament, and that only a few weeks remain until they leave the House. The four who come into that category are in the happy position of having been able to announce a decision that they have made for themselves. I look forward to a day, some time between now and next May, when a large number of others will join them in retirement, most of them involuntarily and most, of course, on the Conservative Benches. Indeed, I expect that to happen.

Perhaps hon. Members mellow as the years go by, but one of the pleasures of listening to some of the speeches was the fact that I could agree with a fair deal of what was said, particularly the comments of the hon. Member for New Forest (Sir P. McNair-Wilson) about the middle east and the need for us to recognise that the Palestinians must see concrete results from the peace process. I can only say amen to that.

Those of us who are present this evening are probably quite an unusual group, in that we are discussing the Queen's Speech. I do not expect the traffic to be stopped anywhere in the United Kingdom by throngs of people wanting to examine its finer points, and I sense no frisson of excitement across the nation among those who have heard what the Government have in store for us. There are several reasons why that would never have been the case.

For one thing, this is not really a proper Queen's Speech at all. It contains a programme not for a Government who seriously contemplate being in office not just for a full year—that is certainly not possible—but for a moment longer than a point that they vainly hope will arrive: the point at which they can call a general election that they have a chance of winning. We all know perfectly well that what happens to the Queen's Speech will be determined by the opinion polls, and by when the Prime Minister judges that he can call an election that he stands a chance of winning.

One of the many odd characteristics of the Prime Minister's position is that we have been told by all the briefing that we had from the Tory party conference, and by all the spin doctors of whom we keep being reminded, how anxious the Prime Minister is to get to the hustings, get back on to the soap box and go and meet the people. We have been told how he loves elections, campaigning and electioneering. Strangely, although the Prime Minister allegedly loves all those things, he seems desperately anxious to avoid actually pressing the button—for he, of course, is the only person who can ensure that an election will take place.

I appeal to the Prime Minister: if his enthusiasm for elections matches his enthusiasm for Chelsea football club, why does he not announce the election that the country needs so badly? Until he at least has the nerve to face the public, we shall all be in limbo for what could be a prolonged period.

This is an unusual Queen's Speech debate in another respect—and I have attended a number of such debates over the years. The only concrete guarantees of legislation that have resulted from today's debate have been the consequence of an initiative from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. The only certainty about the Queen's Speech—the only thing that we know will happen—is that two Bills will become law, both pressed by private Members and repeatedly asked for by the Labour party. One will establish a register of paedophiles; the other will deal with the menace of stalking.

Those proposals were not to be contained in the Queen's Speech. They were to be left to the accidents of private Members' legislation. Thanks to my right hon. Friend's initiative, however, they are to go on to the statute book. This must be the first occasion on which a Leader of the Opposition has announced legislation, or guaranteed its passage, during a debate on a Queen's Speech promoted by the other party.

Let me now spend some moments doing what has been done by one or two Members who are retiring—although it is emphatically not my intention to retire, provided that the people of The Wrekin do the same by me as they have at the two most recent general elections—and take a little trip down memory lane. If the current Parliament endures until the last reasonable date—local election day, 1 May next year—it will be exactly 18 years since the Government came to power, which, as many of us will remember, they did on local election day in 1979. I vividly remember, perhaps as well as anyone else here, the day after that election, or around that time, when the then Prime Minister, now Lady Thatcher, stood on the steps of 10 Downing street and quoted St Francis of Assisi.

Mr. Frank Cook: Misquoted.

Mr. Grocott: Misquoted.

I was feeling particularly depressed at the time, because I felt—I believe that my feeling has been vindicated—that our country and our people were in for a pretty bad time. I had an additional personal reason for feeling unhappy about life, because I had lost my seat. But I thought how inappropriate it was for the most combative Prime Minister in the most aggressive Administration—followed by one of the most divisive series of Governments under two Prime Ministers—to quote St Francis of Assisi to begin with. Is it not a complete political irony that at the end, when the Government totter towards their conclusion, all the debates in society should be about a fractured society, a society more divided than it has ever been? That is the legacy of 18 years of Tory government which started with a quote from St Francis of Assisi.

In this trip down memory lane, can any Conservative Member seriously believe—I appeal particularly to those who are retiring and view these matters with more detachment nowadays—that, in the 1960s and 1970s Britain, our country, was anything other than a more peaceful and less divided country? It was certainly a country with much less crime—let us agree on that. It was a much safer country in which to live. There was much less violent crime. It was a time when young people could leave school knowing that they had jobs. That, more than anything else, is the contract that the Conservative Government will be held responsible for having shattered.

In the 1960s and 1970s—as the Prime Minister should know well, as we are nearly contemporaries and he was trying to make his way in the 1960s, just as I was—a young person who worked at school did so on the basis of a contract: knowing that, if he or she worked hard and did well, there would be a job at the end of it when they left school. Likewise, when they left school, they also knew that, if they got a job and worked hard, if they

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completed an apprenticeship, training or whatever, they had a guarantee on which it was possible to build a family and a life. They knew that they had the kind of security that would enable them to get a mortgage or pay a rent, to make provision for a family, to bring up children. That was the contract that existed, which this Government have destroyed, and that, as well as many other reasons, is why the Government should go.

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): I wanted to say, before the hon. Gentleman moved on to the employment aspect, that most modern countries have experienced the same increase in crime over the past two or three decades as this country—regrettably—but he has now gone on to criticise the Government for their employment policy. What would he say to the Governments of France and Spain, for example, which until recently were socialist Governments, whose unemployment problem, particularly their youth employment problem, is far larger than ours?

Mr. Grocott: Why does the hon. Gentleman need to go through the complexities of making comparisons between Britain and other countries, when all he needs to do is make the comparison between Britain under a Labour Government and Britain under a Tory Government? He has only to look at the record, particularly on jobs, under Labour Governments of the 1960s and 1970s. People had jobs and security. There was a predictability to people's lives. Any honest trip down memory lane will show what I am saying to be true, so I shall not labour it any further.

I now refer to two areas that particularly affect my constituency but which were omitted from the Queen's Speech. The first is the health service.

We in the Labour party have often been accused of scaremongering about the health service. We have often used the phrase "privatisation of the health service" and we have been told repeatedly by Ministers—from the party which, let us remember, opposed the very creation of the national health service—that we are scaremongering when we talk about privatisation. But there is one area of the health service that is in practice being privatised—the vital service of dentistry. I will explain to the House what is happening in my constituency, although it is true of many other constituencies. I have heard the matter raised many times, and my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), who is present in the Chamber, has raised it before at Question Time.

A report from Shropshire health authority about the availability of national health service dental services states:

"Increasing numbers of enquiries were received by the Health Authority from patients seeking dental care. The help desk is currently dealing with up to 150 enquiries per week. Patients with acute pain are directed to those few dentists willing to see them or to Community Dental Service clinics, patients who do not have urgent need of treatment are advised of dentists who have indicated that they are still able to accept new patients in varying categories. In many instances patients are having to travel considerable distances to obtain care."

The health authority knows that. The community health council knows that, and I know that, as do the parish councils and the district councils, but there has been no response whatever from the Government. The figures are appalling.

According to a Wrekin council report dated 30 September this year, there are now 45 dentists operating in The Wrekin, in 19 practices. Only three of those practices are accepting national health service patients at present. Over the years, as hon. Members will know if they are honest, practices have been actively trying to de-register patients who are currently in receipt of national health service treatment. If that is not creeping privatisation, I do not know what is.

I have made endless attempts to try to get Ministers to try to take action, and I get all sorts of reassuring noises from them. In a letter dated 17 September 1996, the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), Under-Secretary of State for Health, said:

"I would like to reassure you . . . that the Government is committed to an accessible and effective NHS dental service for all who wish to make use of it."

They might be committed to it, but they are the Government and it is not happening. That key issue was missed out of the Queen's Speech, despite all the references to the health service.

The second issue, which I shall deal with briefly—again, it is a constituency issue—relates to law and order. The Government's record on this, for all sorts of reasons, is in tatters. There were other omissions from the Queen's Speech, but I am delighted that there will be a Government Bill for a register of paedophiles. I am also delighted that the proposed legislation on stalking will be a Government Bill. I am, however, very sorry that the Government will not allow a free vote on the crucial issue of hand guns.

One policy for which the Home Secretary has consistently argued—it is a classic case of his making a statement at a Tory party conference and then not following through the consequences—is to increase the number of people whom he thinks it right to imprison. Whatever the merits or otherwise of that argument, if one is in favour of it, one should at least provide the accommodation.

Like most of my constituents, I was stunned to discover within the past two or three days that the Home Office plans to build a new prison at Donnington Wood in my constituency, close to housing and very close to a primary school. It is a totally unacceptable location. It obviously has not been thought through properly. The only consolation—at this stage it is important—is that the Director General of the Prison Service, Mr. Richard Tilt, has stated that there will be no question of any decision being made until there has been the fullest consultation with elected representatives and local residents.

I can tell him in advance that the consultation will reveal overwhelming opposition to his proposal. Once again, it is an example of a Home Secretary making a broad policy decision and leaving it to others to implement, without any clear strategy as to where all the new prisons that he is planning will be located.

Having checked with the Library, I find that the bad news for the House is that the last possible date for the next election is not 1 May next year, but 22 May, which is seven months from now. That is even longer than some of us feared, and the starting button might not even be pushed until the very last possible date. Seven months is far too long to conduct a general election campaign, particularly from a Government who cannot possibly fight on their record. They would not dare do that. Likewise,

they cannot credibly say that they have a list of proposals that desperately need to be enacted, because the obvious rejoinder is, "If they desperately need to be carried, why on earth didn't you do so in the course of the last 18 wasted years?" Election day cannot come soon enough, and I suspect that this tired Queen's Speech is recognition of the fact that the Government have run out of steam, and in their heart of hearts they want to see the day come soon as well.

6.48 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (South Worcestershire): One reason why the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott) may have lost his seat in 1979 was that, far from the country being at peace with itself, it was on the brink of almost catastrophic civil strife. The pastoral view of the past that he is trying to put before the House is utter tripe and nonsense.

I am very glad to follow my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest (Sir P. McNair-Wilson), who happens to be my mother's Member of Parliament, and I wish to put it on record that she—like, I am sure, everyone else—thinks that he is a most magnificent Member of Parliament, and she keeps on reminding him what a model Member of Parliament should be.

I wish to focus on two references in the Gracious Speech. First, it states:

"My Government will promote the further global liberalisation of trade, in particular at the Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation, and will continue to work for transatlantic free trade in this context."

Secondly, it states:

"Fiscal policy will continue to be set to bring the public sector borrowing requirement back towards balance over the medium term. My Government will reduce further the share of national income taken by the public sector."

First, let me address the excellent sentiments on free trade and an outward-looking liberal Europe—liberal in the 19th-century commercial sense. Sir James Goldsmith will not like that.

One of my reasons why I find it hard to come to terms with Sir James Goldsmith's ideas are his views on protectionism. Conversely, I suppose, it was the attack in my book, "Challenge of the East," on his protectionist views and his associated federalist European views, at least when he writes in French, which has presumably prompted him to do me the honour of putting up a candidate against me.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): That will hurt.

Sir Michael Spicer: I do not think that it will hurt much, because so far most of the people who have approached me would have voted Liberal or Labour, so it is splitting the dustbin vote, which is no bad thing. I voted 37 times against the Maastricht treaty and over recent years I have voted for a referendum every time I had the opportunity to do so.

I should like to deal with Sir James Goldsmith's arguments at face value. In particular, he argues that the combination of cheap labour and ready access to capital makes it impossible to trade on open terms with the emerging countries of the far east. That argument recurs and emerges in all parts of the House.

Sir James argues as a result of that thesis that we must build a massive wall around ourselves and that, in the case of Europe, that should be accompanied by a common European currency involving rigidly managed exchange rates. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. Dykes) nods. He obviously agrees and will perhaps join in the debate in a moment. Since, in Sir James Goldsmith's view, the far east is not the only enemy—the United States being the other one—he believes that for good measure Europe should have a single foreign policy and, to go with it, a single defence policy.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said that he was horrified on a visit to the United States to see what a successful defence industry that country has. I do not share his conclusions on that. If our greatest ally is effective in NATO in providing for its own defence needs and, in combination, for ours, that is good and not bad. One of my worries about the implication drawn by the hon. Member for Stockton, North and Sir James Goldsmith—that we should try to set up some sort of European army, is that a paper army—for political reasons does not make military sense. The sensible solution is genuine bilateral co-operation between countries that have something to offer each other within the alliance.

I was pleased to see that the Defence Research Administration at Malvern in my constituency does a great deal of genuine bilateral work with the French. That makes enormous sense and it is highly significant, because to a large extent DRA Malvern is involved with air defence, that a British flight of aircraft flew down the Champs Elysees on Bastille day. The idea that we can somehow throw over our alliance with the United States or that we should be concerned about the strength of the American defence force, as the hon. Member for Stockton, North was, is alarming. It is one of the disturbing features in the whole European debate.

I shall now return to the issue of protectionism. Leaving aside the fact that exports from the west to the east have risen in recent years much faster than in the other direction, that 90 per cent. of western investment is within western countries and that our consumers benefit enormously from competitive eastern imports, it is plain that shutting out China would be potentially catastrophic to world peace.

I understand that, at the turn of the century, China will be importing an amount of oil equivalent to the entire North sea production at its peak, and that will have to be paid for in some way. Therefore, the idea of shutting out China as a country with which we should trade is potentially extremely dangerous and could result in China either doing dirty deals with, for example, the Iraqis and the Iranians, perhaps by selling them nuclear weaponry in return for oil, or engaging in some sort of military adventure on its borders to try to create lebensraum on which to try to feed itself. The only alternative is to trade with China.

Leaving even that aside, and the fact that the third world needs to export to survive and that Britain needs free trade to flourish, let us take the protectionist argument head on. The question is, how can countries of Europe make themselves more competitive in the face of massive competition from America and the far east? The answer is the opposite of building walls around ourselves. The tide of economics will cause the first breach in the wall and will sweep it away. That happened to Soviet protectionism, and once it collapsed it left an economic

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wasteland. The same would happen to us if we were to build trade walls around ourselves only to have them breached by the force of economic circumstances.

What is more, the World Trade Organisation exists to make sure that there shall not be a wall around Europe. Far from building walls, we should break down existing trade barriers and face the challenge head on on the open seas where British traders fare best. That has two consequences in the context of Europe.

First, we need to reverse the process by which costs to industry are increasing day by day because industry has to pay for more non-productive administrative burdens that have been created by further centralisation and standardisation in Europe. Far from further economic integration in Europe being the answer, European nations must be allowed to benefit from the ancient and well tested laws of comparative advantage. From an economic point of view alone, we must reverse the process of European federalisation.

That is partly a process of saying no to further efforts in the direction of further federalisation—for example, at next month's conference which begins in Dublin—although as the third report of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs which was published in July made plain, that will be easier said than done.

Secondly, we must clearly abandon any attempt to join a single currency; this requires the re-election of a Conservative Government, who will never join a single currency, not least because they would not wish to activate the referendum that they have promised and which Labour has not.

Thirdly, we must renegotiate the position in the European Union to ensure that our laws, not those of the European Court of Justice, are sovereign. That means dealing with such complicated, but important, issues as "direct applicability", the acquis communautaire, the court's ability to make laws and the sovereign status of those laws.

Once we have re-established that Britain is in charge of her affairs in Europe in terms of protectionism, the question is what should be done next. The simple answer, in terms of the challenge of the east, is that Britain should radically slow down and, I hope, reduce the increasing burdens on her commerce and industry. The average tax take by the so-called tiger countries of the east is around 15 per cent. of gross domestic product. Here the latest comparable figure is 42 per cent. That is the real burden on industry, not labour costs, which in most manufacturing industries have fallen to between 5 and 10 per cent. of total costs.

In Britain, the problems of the explosive demands on state expenditure, which lie at the root of the problem, have been addressed by the Government much earlier than they have in other European countries. For instance, since we took office, the proportion of properly funded occupational pension schemes has risen from 40 per cent. to some 65 per cent. of total pensions. Despite that, the absolute figure for state pensions has risen from around £9 billion a year when we took office to more than £30 billion a year, much faster than the inflation rate.

Throughout the west, as the population grows older and as the demands for pensions, health care and social services explode, the national debt-to-GDP ratio is in danger of spiralling completely out of control. A recent study by the American Congress has suggested that, with present policies, the debt to GDP ratio in the United States will rise from the present level of 3 per cent. to around 300 per cent. in 20 or 30 years' time.

To fund such a level, it would be necessary to take three times everyone's income every year in tax. In the United States, the calculation assumes a dependency population in 20 years' time of around 36 per cent. In Britain, the dependency population at that time will be around 50 per cent, rising from the present level of about 20 per cent., so only half the population will be working to support the rest.

As we approach the turn of the century, that is the true measure of the challenge facing any western Government. It is clearly one that no socialist or liberal Government have the historical or philosophical wherewithal to deal with. The Queen's Speech makes the commitment to reduce further the debt ratio. That must be welcomed, but one must question whether, if there were ever a Liberal or Labour Queen's Speech, that would even be a possibility.

Our relations with Europe and how we pay for the welfare state while reducing taxes are the great problems of our generation.

Mr. David Nicholson: Would my hon. Friend care to link those two themes, because, in the past 17 years, the Government have taken measures to curb the cost of pensions and to encourage people to have occupational and private pensions, whereas European countries have not? If we were to go into European monetary union, there is a fear, which I think my hon. Friend knows more about than I do, that we would have to share the burden of those countries in paying for their old people?

Sir Michael Spicer: If one accepts that we would be part of a single currency, coincidentally there would have to be a large public sector budget for various purposes such as supporting poorer countries that would not be able to cope with the single currency's demands. The argument would arise that, under a single currency and under a federal state of Europe, which would go together, in a fair and free market, pensions, for instance, should be comparably funded throughout the European Union.

In those circumstances, it is probable that German taxpayers, who would effectively rule the roost, as there would be as many of them as Frenchmen and British people put together, would argue that there should be fairness in this, and that a budget should be created so that there was an even playing field and so that the Germans did not pay a disproportionate amount of taxes. In those circumstances, British taxpayers, despite the fact that they already had good occupational pensions, would have to transfer funds into a European budget. At least that is a strong possibility and it must be considered before we even deign to think about going into a single currency.

Neither of the twin problems of our relationship with Europe and of how we deal with the welfare state—my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) is right to say that they are linked—will be dealt with by the Labour and Liberal parties. Neither party could ever bring itself to accept, for instance, that welfare support should be given not, as some universal right, but from the basis of need. That means that the Labour party, if it ever came into office, would never be able to produce arithmetic in which the sums added up.

In his speech, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) criticised the Government for still having a large public sector debt. He did not seem to create much excitement on the Labour Benches, but the implication was that the Labour party would do something about the debt.

At the same time, the Labour party says that it will not raise taxes. In his speech, the Leader of the Opposition made commitments towards greater expenditure. It is true that that is what Labour stands for. It stands for spending money at the centre. That is what it is all about. Labour Members looked very glum, during their leader's speech, and I do not blame them. If I were a Labour Member, I would look extremely glum because it has lost direction on these matters. If I were in the Labour party, I would be seriously alarmed that my leader had talked about financial probity and had denied that the Labour party was going to spend more.

Labour Members know that that is what they are in business for—to spend public money. If they were serious about bringing down public sector debt in the context that I have been discussing, they would have to raise taxes substantially. There can be no question about that. The idea that Labour can somehow run an economy with low taxes is meaningless, stupid and is not believed even by Labour Members. That is why, in Britain's interests, the Queen's Speech must be the harbinger of another Conservative Government.

7.8 pm

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I reject the attack of the hon. Member for South Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) on my party, but I am always glad to follow him, and I watch with a sense of wonder his European campaign. The best that I can say is that he has a beautiful constituency, a fine cricket team and a lovely county ground.

I support my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in his approach to handguns. I looked in the Gracious Speech for the signing of the social chapter and for the minimum wage. I also wanted my county of Flintshire and my country of Wales to be exempt from the nursery voucher scheme, but that was not to be.

Today, thousands of beef farmers from all Britain, Wales and the Clywd hills in my constituency came to the House. This afternoon, Mr. Terrig Morgan and Mr. Idris Jones of Pwll farm, Treuddyn, and Mr. Kevin Owen and Mr. George Jones of Trimley hall, Llanfynydd, told me of the crisis in the beef industry. They made persuasive points, and I will briefly describe their difficulties.

The price of clean beef has collapsed in recent months, and the farmers urge the Government to implement a temporary guaranteed price system to help to restore market confidence. Also, a severe problem exists in relation to the slaughter of casualty stock under the 30-month scheme, which leads to animal distress and welfare problems. Mr. Morgan told me that, a week ago, one of his milking cows, a Friesian, did the splits in the milking parlour. The vet said that the beast had to be put down, but Mr. Morgan had a problem getting the cow off his premises and to the slaughterer, and in completing the appropriate form and obtaining compensation.

My constituents also told me that there is an immense backlog with the 30-month scheme, with some local farmers having failed to dispose of one animal since the scheme's implementation. That backlog must be cleared as quickly as possible, and compensation must return to the original rate of one ecu, or 83.3p, per kilo live weight. Beef farmers in my constituency are in desperate trouble. I ask the Government to help them as winter approaches.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), in proposing the Loyal Address, made a charming, humorous and well-judged speech, and the seconder is a doughty defender of the Isle of Wight. I enjoyed the vigour, elan, panache and dynamism shown in the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair). I was watching the faces of members of the Treasury Bench as my right hon. Friend spoke, and I saw fear, unease, indignation, fascination and even detestation. I knew from their expressions that my right hon. Friend was doing a good job.

One should never underestimate the present Prime Minister. He is a survivor, a determined counter-puncher, a steely performer and a true professional—as one would expect of a British Prime Minister. However, the right hon. Gentleman's speech was sheer electioneering, and did not carry an atom of conviction. It will not be well received in the country.

From my 26 years' in the House, I think that this year's Queen's Speech is opportunistic, short-term and shallow. I thought of Mohammed Ali in his latter years—lying on the ropes, ducking and weaving, fighting for only half a minute and being exhausted for the rest of the round. Likewise pugilistically, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition reminded me of the young Mohammed Ali. He floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee. He puts fear into the hearts of Government Members. Not for long will the members of the Treasury Bench remain there, and they know it—my right hon. Friend will see to that.

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Greg Knight): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jones: No. I have been here 26 years and know when not to give way and to whom to give way—I pay a compliment to the Minister. He will have his turn.

Mr. Mackinlay: When he is in opposition.

Mr. Jones: Yes, in opposition.

I was about to say, when I was so inconsiderately interrupted, that I enjoyed the speech of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). What a speech. It was saturnine, self-contained and almost stealthy. I remember the right hon. Gentleman as a courteous Secretary of State for Wales whom I found most accessible, if rather bureaucratic. He was certainly detached. He had never stayed in Wales until his appointment to that great office.

He is now a man transformed. Last year, with his breathtaking dare, the right hon. Gentleman electrified the political scene and nearly electrocuted his leader. Today he looks fit, lean and relaxed, yet hungry. He senses the decay among the members of the Cabinet that he once graced. For the right hon. Gentleman, the Back Benches are, like Guinness, good for you. I see the right hon. Member for Wokingham as a more certain, younger, focused challenger—certainly more so than was the right

[Mr. Jones]

hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine). I see the right hon. Gentleman as a dark-suited, sharp-suited Demosthenes, and he was electioneering as well.

There has been a Conservative Administration since 1979, which is a whole generation and an era in British politics. Those Administrations have enjoyed £120 billion of North sea oil revenues and £80 billion privatisation revenue from the sale of the former public utilities—the family silver, as the former Harold Macmillan once said. Where has that £200 billion gone? It has gone not to Wales or my constituency but elsewhere. It has been wasted, squandered and misapplied. Our nation is in dire need of investment.

Those Conservative Administrations have also overseen the erosion of our manufacturing base. We have no coal industry or shipbuilding industry left to speak of, and the steel industry has been slimmed down. The manufacturing base has all but disappeared. All we have left is the engineering and aerospace industries, and what remains of steelmaking.

Sir Keith Joseph, once head of the Department of Trade and Industry, and Sir Geoffrey Howe, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, were powerful and committed Cabinet Ministers who implemented the policies that denuded Britain of her manufacturing base, to which no thought is given in the Queen's Speech. At least 2 million prime manufacturing jobs have simply disappeared within a few years, and those terrible twins of the economy of the early 1980s, Sir Keith and Sir Geoffrey, allowed that to happen, encouraged by their Prime Minister.

In order to slot this Gracious Speech into the context of nearly 18 years of Conservative government, I also emphasise the auction and surrender of our public utilities—the scandal of our political times. Once the people of my nation owned the Welsh water authority and the thousands of acres of beautiful land therein, but now those acres, that industry, that utility, are in the hands of shareholders, and it is the City of London which decides what shall be in that industry. Once the British people owned the electricity and gas industries, but not now, and I regret that. The wealth of the nation has been squandered—£80 billion for the public utilities.

But, above all, a great social divide has opened up. Socially and economically, there is a chasm between those who are reasonably well off and well off and those who have very little. There is a chasm between the classes which is as obvious and as massive as those permanent, massive and so very obvious earthworks by King Offa and King Wat in my constituency. That great divide is the consequence of nearly 18 years of one-party rule.

What we could have done with those massive revenues that have been squandered. How we could have changed the future of our nation. Instead, the achievement of an era of one-party rule is an underclass, with all the unjust consequences. I have in mind those huge, aging council estates. They are sorry sights, but they are home to millions of our fellow citizens. On those estates there is unemployment, burglary, graffiti, vandalism, drug abuse, car theft, fear, distress, intimidation, poverty and hopelessness. No one can deny those facts. They are the consequence of all the years of these Conservative Administrations. Yet still, the Queen's speech does not address those problems.

It is a scar on our society that there many people have no sense of hope and no future. Our fellow citizens have no hope, and it is this Government who have brought our nation so low. That has to be said before we usher out this dying Government. I regret the poverty, the hopelessness, and the scarring legacies of four Conservative Administrations.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members of all parties, I hold my constituency surgeries conscientiously. They are the best contribution that any hon. Member can make for his people. But those encounters with my constituents are disturbing and worrying. I see the problems of some of the British underclass, and it is right that their dilemma should be spelled out here, in the mother of Parliaments.

I measure the disasters of Thatcherism at my surgeries. I measure the inability of a British Cabinet to comfort, aid, restore and give hope to my constituents and my fellow citizens throughout the nation. There is no hope and no comfort for them in the Gracious Speech. There are no real or lasting jobs. School leavers know that they have no prospect of a real job, particularly those with few academic qualifications.

I wanted today's Queen's Speech to tackle the great divide between the better-off and the have-nots. I wanted to see the beginning of the reconciliation of our people in order to end that divide. It is not good for any of the people of Britain, particularly the rich, for there to be so great a contrast between those who are poor and those who are prosperous. There will be trouble if that chasm remains. I would be the first to say that to end that chasm is a mighty challenge to any Government, but the fact that that chasm has become so great is the responsibility of Conservative Administrations.

To illustrate my concern, I quote from an article in *The Sunday Times* a week or so ago. It is a review of a book about the poor in Britain, aptly entitled "A Journey to the Edge". Between 8 million and 12 million of our fellow citizens have no great future and no hope for the future. The oil revenues and the privatisation moneys were not devoted to their future; to enhancing the lives of the jobless, the homeless, those who have disabilities, those stricken by poverty or those who are cold, alone or ill.

This substantial review, headed "Always with us", is by Sean O'Brien, a poet, who says:

> "As he goes, introduced by a network of contacts . . . he invites people to talk—thieves in Brixton, Somalis in Liverpool, junkies in Glasgow, mental health workers in Barrow-in-Furness, teenagers in Bradford and Salford, kneecapped Belfast joyriders, a hardworking counsellor in the ravaged west end of Newcastle."

He continues:

> "Most people are familiar with a lawless housing estate, with aimless teenage glueys on the street, with the unemployed children of the unemployed as they drift away from recognisable society. Originality is hardly the point, though. The sheer extent of civil catastrophe and human waste revealed here threatens to beggar belief."

It is a sobering review. It goes on:

> "Without a radical transformation of the workings of the state and parliament towards the achievement of the common good we shall soon have not merely two nations but a degree of social disorder which many would have supposed impossible."

Maybe, maybe not, but there is a grave problem. There is a divide which the Gracious Speech does not address, and the Cabinet does not acknowledge its responsibility for the problem that faces an incoming Government.

Those on the Treasury Bench were once described by Mr. Macmillan as "extinct volcanoes". I would say that those on this Treasury Bench have had their day, and must go at the earliest possible moment. The Queen's Speech was truly an electioneering speech, and we should have a general election as soon as possible.

7.29 pm

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones). I can scarcely agree with a word he said, except for his comments about the wonderful county of Worcestershire. I have had the pleasure of seeing him there and, occasionally, watching cricket with him on the beautiful ground there. I know that there are values behind all that—

Mr. Barry Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman remember that Graeme Hick hit 180 peerless runs that day?

Mr. Greenway: I do remember that, and I will always treasure it. *[Interruption.]* It was against Glamorgan.

The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside was a Member of the House in 1979, when people could not bury their dead, when there was rubbish in the streets and huge discontent. At that time, I was teaching in east London and people would point out to me the mountains of rubbish. The medical officer said that the rubbish must be cleared, and I went to the union on behalf of the people and said, "The medical officer said that the rubbish must be cleared, because of rats and mice and because people's health is in danger." The unions said, "We are the judge of that. We are socialists. We are the Labour party. We are trade unionists. We do not believe that that rubbish should be cleared, and it will not be."

Let us get things into perspective. We must remember events such as that. That is the Labour party in power. I have seen too much of the Labour party's disastrous behaviour.

I am afraid that I must pursue the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside critically for a little longer. He said that the speech by the Leader of the Opposition concerned Conservative Members. He cannot have been aware of the expression on his own face and on the faces of most of his colleagues during the speech. The expressions were a study in disbelief and, at times, deep disagreement. Judging by their reactions, Labour Members obviously felt that it was a vacuous speech with no content. It was a shameful speech, unworthy of the occasion.

I was glad about one thing. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister shamed the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal Democrats into supporting the stalking and paedophile legislation. We now know that we shall have proper co-operation in getting those two Bills through the House.

I will tell the House why I am keen to have that legislation on the statute book. A few months ago, a Labour council located a paedophile opposite a primary school in Ealing. All the parents were up in arms. It was known that the paedophile had been put there by a Labour council—*[Interruption.]* It is true. It took some doing to resolve the situation, but the paedophile is now gone. That was—

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No, I will not.

The Labour council did not take appropriate care. Even when the situation was drawn to its attention, it was not prepared to address the problem properly.

I must declare my great support for the stalking legislation. My constituent, Frances Lawrence, has been stalked, which has been very distressing for her and her friends. I hope and believe that that Bill will stop such distress, for her and others. I welcome the Home Secretary's decision to establish a good citizenship award in the name of Philip Lawrence. That is a fine and fitting memorial to someone who, as a judge at the Old Bailey said last week, was a good man. I cannot say how much those words helped me and Frances and all those who were connected with him.

It was disgraceful that the Leader of the Opposition could not address the question of expenditure on the national health service by the last Labour Government. By today's figures, the last Labour Government spent £23 billion on the NHS, while we spend £39 billion. That speaks for itself. One of the reasons why the speech was so poor is that the right hon. Gentleman went all over the shop in order to avoid answering the question whether any Labour Government, should we have one—God help us—would increase expenditure on the NHS. He could not say, and would not say. We know very well that they would not.

I first met the now hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) in 1968. It was a pleasure to meet him, and it has been a pleasure to know him since then. We met at a meeting of students who were concerned at huge cuts in the NHS by the Labour Government of the time. Jack was the president of the National Union of Students and was speaking at the meeting. The then Labour Member for Rugby was seeking to defend the Government, who were in an impossible situation. They were running down expenditure on the NHS and reducing the number of doctors, nurses and so on.

That is the record of the Labour party in office, and it is no good pretending that that record does not exist. The Labour party today likes to pretend that it has no history. It tries to pretend that it does not have a disgraceful record in local and national Government of letting down the people of this country by hiking up their taxes and wasting their efforts to produce wealth. People both inside and outside the House should start thinking about that.

I can give a serious and modern example of the damage caused by the Labour party in power. A few weeks ago, I was sad to have to say goodbye to the last worker at Lyons Tetley in Greenford in my constituency. The factory was closed and about 2,500 jobs were lost. They were lost because of the actions of Ealing's Labour council, which hoisted up the rates—*[Interruption.]* Oh, yes. In 1987, rates went up by 57 per cent. and 65 per cent., which meant an increase in the price of everything produced by Lyons Tetley, including Ready Brek, coffee and so on. The local people had all had their rates put up, so they had less money with which to buy more expensive goods. They had a double whammy from Labour.

Over the years, that has meant that the production costs of Lyons Tetley at Greenford have been greater than those in Lyons Tetley factories in other parts of the country. As a result, production has been transferred to places such as Cleveland, where production costs are lower. That is what happens. That loss of jobs is due directly to a Labour administration on Ealing council.

[Mr. Greenway]

The Labour party talks about its great concern for the NHS, but Ealing's Labour council put up the rates on Ealing hospital by about £500,000 a year. Let us have an end to the silly complacent grinning that we get from Labour people today. There is a great deal to be concerned about historically. I have many friends in the Labour party, but I am sorry to say that there is no conviction in my mind that today's Labour party, from the Leader of the Opposition downwards, has the ability to run better Administrations than it did in the past.

I could mention many other instances of my experience of the Labour party running education. I worked for 23 years as a teacher for London county council and for the Inner London education authority, and I was on the receiving end all those years.

I greatly welcome the promise of a Bill on discipline in schools and related matters. I am concerned that the Opposition, from the Leader of the Opposition downwards, do not recognise their failure in local government to provide a proper education for children that would enhance their life chances. It is a terribly serious matter that children have so little opportunity in Islington, where there has been a Labour administration, with the exception of the period from 1967 to 1970, for 60 or 70 years. Labour must take responsibility. Labour councillors—and no one else—have direct responsibility for the schools.

It is shocking to think that, at Highbury Grove school, which was run so well for so many years by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Sir R. Boyson) and the opening of which I can remember, there was a children's strike the other day and matters got seriously out of hand. It is serious when the Leader of the Opposition will not send his son to a school in Islington but sends him eight miles across London to the London Oratory school—a grant-maintained school, such as he would deny to everyone else.

Until members of the Labour party hold up the mirror to themselves and give up the complacent self-satisfaction about politics—and about education in particular—that derives from their lead in the opinion polls, and until they begin to think about policy and about what they need to achieve in local government, they will have no credibility.

In 1979, one in eight of our population went into higher education; now it is one in three. People say that the education system is failing our children, but I do not call that failure. GCSE results were better this year than they have ever been. I say that as one who marked examination papers for 25 years, and who has seen some papers this year. I have seen what the children are doing, and they and the teachers should be congratulated instead of being run down all the time by Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

A-level results are also better than ever. If they were not, children would not be qualifying for the university places that they are achieving. The basic attainment of children, with certain sad exceptions—anyone who had taught for some time would have to be realistic about that—is better than it has ever been, and that is a matter for congratulation and thanksgiving.

Mr. Connarty: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No.

That has not been happening in this debate.

Mr. Connarty: Why not?

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman has intervened on other speakers, and I want to make my points. Perhaps I shall give way to him a little later.

I am concerned about the need to address a problem that has persisted throughout my lifetime, and that existed well before: some call it evil, but, whatever we call the manifestations of bad behaviour, we have to work towards tackling such problems all the time. I can remember boys in winklepickers and drainpipe trousers and girls in equivalent dress; then there were teddy boys and girls, mods and rockers, children who behaved violently with bicycle chains, and so on.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North and I were in east London once, at the Oxford university settlement at Bethnal Green, when a whole battalion of young men on motorbikes, carrying bicycle chains, came to that establishment to cause trouble. We went out and dealt with them ourselves—just the two of us. We said, "You just get away. Leave here."

Mr. Mackinlay: Shoo.

Mr. Greenway: Nothing as pathetic as that. That would not have had any authority. The hon. Gentleman does not realise that there are proper ways of dealing with such situations, which need not be as absurd as he pretends. We certainly addressed the problem, and there was no question of violence against us.

The violence meted out to Philip Lawrence on 8 December last year was a different matter. It is a matter for concern that such a thing could happen. Some schools have, for the moment, lost the will to give children proper religious or moral education. The cost of that failure is high: the death of a good man—as the judge said in the Old Bailey on Thursday—and an inspirational teacher.

To think that a boy of 15 could, in front of his gang, plunge a knife into the heart of a headmaster—perhaps it was for kicks, but I do not know his motivation—is beyond my imagination. I was sad to see that young man standing in the dock. Two lives were devastated by that wicked action. A stroke of evil must have passed through him when he murdered Philip Lawrence. From his demeanour, I believe that he was not aware that it was wrong. Why were not his values such that he knew that it would be wrong to violate another human being, because each human being is made in the image of God, and that life is sacred?

It may be because our religious education has become so watered down. I was shocked when the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority said that it was having difficulty in formulating what might be proper moral or religious education. It is so simple. The ten commandments, consisting of about 144 words, say it all. Throughout my time in teaching, I made sure that the children I taught knew what the ten commandments were—quite a few could recite them—what they meant and why it was right to live by them.

There can be no end of punishments—people can be whipped or have their heads chopped off—after committing a crime, but that will not stop the crime being committed. To stop criminality, people must have the

right heart and the right belief, and the knowledge of right and wrong. We have to start that process from the cradle, and take it through primary school and the rest of education.

Mr. Connarty : I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I know that, like me, he gave long service in the teaching profession. Does he accept that the process of educating a child centres on the teacher's relationship with that child, the head teacher in the school and the ethos that he generates? It has very little to do with the political hue of the local authority or of the Government. What happens in the school and in the wider community are most important. Everything that the hon. Gentleman has said contradicts the theme of the Queen's Speech, which is to hit criminals harder, rather than to develop an educational relationship which teaches people not to become criminals.

Mr. Greenway: Of course we have to hit criminals hard. Punishment is part of the system when people stray. I am saying that we must also make a fundamental effort to educate people in such a way that they have a will to live properly in their relationships with one another. Of course schools are run by heads and teachers, but, unless they are grant-maintained or independent, those schools are run in conjunction with, and under the leadership of, the local authority.

I have sought to avoid controversial matters while speaking of Philip Lawrence, because we all want to be bipartisan on that issue, but some local authorities, such as the old Inner London education authority, have said that a particular boy or girl should not be pressed in the classroom because they are orphaned or because they have language problems. That denies those children the education they need. That is the problem with the Labour party in local education authorities, as I have found. I must speak as I find.

Returning to the murder of Philip Lawrence, I very much hope that we shall all support Frances Lawrence's efforts in producing her interesting and important seven-point manifesto. She accepts that the manifesto is a matter for debate, but we must keep trying. Society or the world will never reach the point of everything being good and satisfactory. Man is fallen and we have to keep striving to raise ourselves. We can never be satisfied.

To say that any Government have not brought the moral standards in education to a level at which we can forget about the issue is to misunderstand the problem of educating people. The situation is never static. It is a dynamic process, and we have to keep striving.

7.52 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate being called to follow the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) in this debate on the Gracious Speech. I was interested to hear his comments on the ten commandments. Archbishop Usher has had a bad press recently. On one occasion, Samuel Rutherford of Anwoth asked him how many commandments there were. He replied, "Eleven." Rutherford was rather shocked by that and asked what the 11th was. "That you love one another," the Archbishop replied. Perhaps that is what is missing most in the world, but the ten commandments epitomise how love should be worked out in relationships.

I shall not follow the hon. Member for Ealing, North on that any further, except to make an observation on safety in schools. Someone said to me not long ago that it was amazing that there was more security around the education board offices than around schools. Perhaps we should take some of that protection away from our boards, authorities and local councils and give it to the children.

During the Gracious Speech, I thought for a moment of another Queen. My memory was refreshed by the comments of the hon. Member for Pudsey (Sir G. Shaw) on the granting of a charter by Queen Victoria. I noticed that the section read by Her Majesty on Northern Ireland was at the end of the part of the Gracious Speech dealing with foreign affairs. Putting it there may have been justified, because the last sentence of that paragraph says that the Government

"will maintain close and friendly relations with the Republic of Ireland."

I think that Queen Victoria would not have been amused by that and I am not sure that Her Gracious Majesty is amused to think that Northern Ireland might be construed by some to be part of a foreign territory. This is not the first time that that has happened, and I ask that the thoughts of people in Northern Ireland might be borne in mind.

I welcome some of the Prime Minister's comments this afternoon. Unfortunately, the Gracious Speech says that the Government

"stand ready to introduce legislation to provide for the decommissioning of firearms, ammunition and explosives in Northern Ireland."

Why do they stand ready? Should not the provisions be before the House, ready to give a lead to those seeking to go forward on decommissioning—or are there some difficulties? Why will that legislation deal only with Northern Ireland and not extend to Great Britain when there is a debate on the control of legally held firearms? The majority of people in the United Kingdom have suffered more from illegally held firearms, explosives and other devices than from legally held weapons. It is important to keep a balance at a time when emotions run high.

I welcome the announcement this afternoon that the House will work together on Bills to deal with paedophiles and stalkers. I was amazed to read in the press that the measures were not to be included in the Queen's Speech, because the number of people who have suffered through child abuse and misuse is far greater than the number of children murdered by gunmen. It is important to keep the right balance on that. I assure the Government of my party's support on those issues.

I welcome the Government's commitment

"to improve and develop primary health care services."

I support that commitment, because primary health care is traditionally the doorkeeper to the whole of health care in this country and I believe that more can be done. However, I have a difficulty. There are no research and development facilities to promote primary health care in Northern Ireland. The research and development budget in clinical fellowships has been cut by one third, from £450,000 per year to £300,000 per year. One such fellowship, which has not been renewed, promised well in the general practitioner and primary area. I trust that the Northern Ireland Office will reconsider the issue.

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

I welcome the fact that, in future, the practice of publishing Bills as drafts for consultation may become more widespread. At times we rush into Bills without proper consideration and I welcome the fact that one of the Bills mentioned in the Gracious Speech deals with voluntary identity documents. I cannot for the life of me understand the furore that has arisen in some parts or the claim that identity cards would infringe liberties. We live in a world in which most of us have identity documents of some sort. I speak from personal experience of the governance of elections to Parliament in Northern Ireland. A social security payment book does not guarantee identity. It merely tells the presiding officer that the person carrying the book with that name claims to be that person. It does not identify the person. I would welcome a move to provide documents that clearly depict the person.

I welcome the commitment to

"fight against terrorism, organised crime and drug misuse and trafficking".

I was not fascinated but amazed to read the puerile argument that the non-legalisation of drugs leads to the abuse of them and deaths. It was said that tobacco and alcohol misuse cause more deaths and have more health hazards attached to them than illegal drugs. If the facts that are now known about tobacco had been known when it was introduced for general usage, would the House ever have legalised it? When we look at the history of medicine, we see that drugs such as opium ultimately have been banned for medical purposes because they had injurious effects. I wonder whether those who suggest that soft drugs should be legalised are aware of the damage that can ensue once an appetite is developed. I believe that the danger signals should be retained to guide people away from using such drugs. I look forward to a greater intensity of effort to deal with drugs in our society.

Although there are other matters which I should like to develop, I close with one to which the Prime Minister alluded—the concept of a further ceasefire. When the first ceasefire was agreed, some of us were prepared to give it a welcome and watch to see what would happen, but, knowing with whom we were dealing, we had our doubts. I drew some criticism when, in a media interview, having been asked my view, I said that I was reminded of an incident in the Napoleonic wars under the command of Wellington and Nelson. A surrendering Spanish commander held out his hand to Nelson, but Nelson did not reach for it. The Spanish man said, "Will you not shake the hand of a defeated foe and be a friend?" The answer was, "Yes, I will gladly do so, but first your sword."

The Government gave Sinn Fein-IRA an opportunity to prove its credentials. I hope that we shall not be treated to a lecture in the media by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), who unfortunately is not present. He used the dictionary to tell us all that "cease" meant that the conflict was over. He finished a string of words with the word "finito". At that very time, safe houses were being used in London to plan further devastation. It seems to me that, if people are treading the way of peace and we are considering stricter controls on legal firearms, the time has come for the Government to say, "Weapons first, and then we are ready to discuss peace."

8.4 pm

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). He may recall my telling him a few days ago how pleased I was to hear at the Conservative party conference at Bournemouth my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister say specifically that he did not believe that Northern Ireland would ever leave the United Kingdom and that he did not wish it to do so. In my conversation with the hon. Member for Belfast, South, he said that he thought that that had been said by British Prime Ministers and Ministers on one or two previous occasions. That is possible, but all too often we hear that measly, politically correct expression, "Of course, if Northern Ireland wanted to leave the United Kingdom, we would not want to stand in its way." It was good to hear—I know that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me—the positive statement that the Conservative party and, I hope, other parties, want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom and we shall defend it for as long as we are here with strength in our bodies.

I wish to comment on various proposals in the Gracious Speech which I support, but several speeches in the debate so far—naturally at this stage of the Parliament—have engaged in party political analysis of recent and not-so-recent history. Perhaps I might contribute briefly to that analysis. The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), who has now left, spoke passionately and sincerely, because he is a sincere man, about the record of the Conservative Government. He will recall that I intervened in the speech of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott) to point out that we should not compare Britain now with Britain 20 or 30 years ago because many things had changed. We should compare Britain with like countries today. In that respect, there is no doubt that, in the past 17 years, and certainly in the past four years, the British economy has gradually, with some areas of difficulty, become stronger and is in a better position than any other economy in western Europe. That affects employment. We on the Government Benches must stress that.

There is no point in harking back to a possible golden age in the 1960s and 1970s. Those days have gone for most modern countries. The speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) was interesting and prophetic in that respect. He referred to the modern international economy. I regret that those days are past.

The interesting thing about the debate is the contrast between the wishes and the passion of the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside and the emptiness of the speech made by the Leader of the Opposition, who failed to produce policies or proposals to deal with any of the recognised problems. We do not deny that those problems exist, but we believe that we have the best policies for them. We do not hear from the leadership of the Labour party any solutions. What was particularly regrettable, indeed stomach-churning, about the speech of the Leader of the Opposition was his great onslaught on the national health service and the Government's stewardship of it. He cited some particular examples. I am sure that, when his speech is reported, people will worry that the national health service is in decay. We refute that from the experience of our own constituencies.

I serve on the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration—the ombudsman—who acts as the health service commissioner. From time to time, we have cases before us—we had a couple last week—in which things have gone wrong in hospitals and in the NHS generally. Those matters have to be dealt with, but to extrapolate from particular examples where things have gone wrong a health service that is in deep decline and decay is damning for all who work in the health service and for the conduct of politics.

Mr. Connarty: I do not happen to agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments although I am a member of the same Committee. Was it not said to us last week that, if Queen's university hospital in Nottingham ran the same level of service for the rest of the year, it would be £9 million in deficit at the end of the year, and that it is obliged to cut the number of patients that it treats?

Mr. Nicholson: I know that some hospitals and trusts will face budgetary difficulties at the end of this financial year. They should plan for those matters. I hope that, when the House debates health, it will address those issues.

I welcome the proposals to introduce in the next few months measures to help rural areas. I especially welcome the report, which I believe to be correct, on the front page of today's *Times* that the Government propose to help village shops by de-rating them. I know that such measures will be welcomed in my constituency.

I also welcome the report that the Government may give rural parishes powers to raise money for special constables. That possibility should be considered carefully, and I would like to see the details, but I want to encourage the use of special parish constables in rural areas. I also support proposals to give parishes greater powers to be consulted in the planning process.

In any discussion of, or reference to, rural affairs, one cannot ignore the scourge of bovine spongiform encephalopathy. As was said, today there was a heavy lobby by members of the NFU in England and Wales. I hope that speedy measures will be taken to tackle the specific grievance that those farmers brought to us today. I hope that the cut in compensation can be rectified, linked to the introduction of a registration scheme, because it is not the farmers' fault that very many animals have not been slaughtered under the 30-month scheme. I hope that we can successfully prosecute the 30-month cull in the next few weeks and, if necessary, use open-air incineration if that is the only way of getting rid of carcases rapidly enough.

I point out to the Ministry of Agriculture that the past six months has not been that Ministry's finest hour. Now that the House has returned, Conservative Members, facing farming communities where jobs and livelihoods are at stake, will expect a much better performance by the Ministry of Agriculture and the various agencies working with it. Otherwise, we shall look closely at some of the jobs and livelihoods at the top of MAFF.

There are two other culprits in that matter of BSE. One, as I said in previous debates, is the European Community, in the way in which it has handled our trade. Tonight we had some debate on Europe—for example, from my hon. Friends the Members for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Sir D. Knox) and for South Worcestershire, on slightly different sides of the argument.

I assure the House that my constituents, like constituents in all rural areas, have become extraordinarily resentful of the way in which Europe has treated the beef industry. Active party workers who were previously supporters of Europe because they thought that it was the right thing to do, supporters of Europe and even of European integration, have become very Euro-critical, as I am—critical of what the common market and the European Community do. We must resolve the many problems that confront the European Community before we even look at the various far-fetched measures of political and economic integration that some of our partners talk about.

The other culprits in the BSE scandal are some of the large quasi-monopolies. I now believe that the March BSE scare was unnecessary, because hundreds of thousands of families in this country have not altered their habit of eating beef, and many of them, especially in rural areas, have eaten more beef since March than before. Nevertheless, seven months after the scare, the large quasi-monopolies continue to ban British beef from their counters and use Argentine beef. When customers go to a McDonald's restaurants and say that they would like to eat British beef, they are told that they cannot because it is company policy to ban it.

I am informed by the NFU that some brewing companies and restaurant companies such as Trust House Forte, Whitbread, Bass and Beefeater also ban British beef. If those companies want the assistance of Conservative Members in lobbying for a stable or lower rate of alcohol duty in the Budget, they should make a contribution to production and employment in this country by changing their policy on British beef. I hope that that point will be heard and I hope that, as we meet representatives of those companies, it will be fiercely argued by my hon. Friends.

I listened to the passionate speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) about the murder of the headmaster Philip Lawrence. I agree with my hon. Friend that the role of imparting morals in schools is extremely important. When I was at school, the man who had the greatest effect on my religious and moral development was my chemistry master. I fear that he must be dead now. His name was Harry King. He was a splendid figure. I was completely hopeless at chemistry—my fault, not his—but he had the greatest effect on my development as a person, and I will always be grateful for that. Teachers play an important role in children's moral development.

In several recent episodes, teachers have told the local education authority or the governors that they must exclude certain disruptive pupils from the school because they make life a purgatory for other pupils. I sympathise with those demands, and I do not see why disruptive pupils should be rewarded by having vast sums of money spent on them when eventually they are excluded. I am glad that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment called for an urgent report on the recent episode in Yorkshire, and I hope that the Education Select Committee, of which I am a member, will consider that subject as a matter of urgency.

I have mentioned one aspect of law and order, the murder of Philip Lawrence. I was tempted to point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North that the murderer of Philip Lawrence was not suffering from a momentary lapse of moral concentration; he was a

[Mr. Nicholson]

hardened criminal from, alas, a fairly criminal family, with a long criminal history. That, I fear, is the sort of evil that we must deal with.

Another aspect of the moral debate that Mrs. Lawrence's initiative has produced is the Catholic bishops' recent statement. I am not a Roman Catholic and this is not a Roman Catholic country, but Catholic social philosophy has historically influenced the political thought of the centre right in Europe, and I would not repudiate that influence. As we see from some of the measures now prevailing in western Europe, the legislative and administrative results of that influence are not always necessarily right, but the influence of that thought is often for the good of society and of politics.

I saw the reference by the Catholic bishops to the desirability of employers paying a just wage. They said that there might have to be a minimum wage if that does not happen. At the Employment Select Committee last week, I put a line of questioning to the Confederation of British Industry witnesses and the Trades Union Congress witnesses on that subject. I am opposed to a rigid statutory minimum wage as proposed by the Labour party, especially if it should resemble the figures that were being spoken about of £4.20 or £4.50. No one can doubt that such a figure would destroy very many jobs—the Labour leadership has admitted as much in one of its more relaxed moments. I believe that employers who pay substantially below a certain level—for example, £2.50 an hour—should be asked why that is so. They should provide reasons for their actions—special factors might need to be considered—and perhaps face legal sanctions if their responses prove unsatisfactory. That is one way in which the Government could respond to the Catholic bishops' initiative. Therefore, I welcome their proposal.

I support measures that will ensure more certainty in minimum sentencing, as proposed in the crime Bill. However, we must monitor the work of the courts on a constituency-by-constituency basis and examine the effectiveness of the operations of the Crown Prosecution Service, magistrates and the more superior courts. There have been many dreadful examples in recent years of that aspect of the administration of justice failing to work effectively, and I shall give one or two from my constituency.

There has been much debate about gun laws and, regrettably, the Government are proposing very draconian measures on gun ownership. Hon. Members may recall that, when we debated legislation to strengthen sanctions for carrying knives earlier this year, I tried to amend that legislation but fell foul of the rules of the House. There is no point in introducing draconian penalties, banning advertising and so on when someone who carries a knife in order to commit a mugging or a burglary or who intends to join his gang at the pub and possibly become involved in an affray with another gang does not run the risk of being prosecuted and sentenced if he is caught in possession of that weapon.

In England—the situation is different in Scotland—we do not have effective stop and search powers. Unfortunately, I was not in the Chamber when the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said that there is no point passing amazingly draconian laws on firearms if they cannot be enforced effectively.

I shall provide an example from my constituency. A year ago this autumn, firearms were stolen from a house in Rowbarton in the north of Taunton and a group of four youths terrorised the neighbourhood during the night. Shots were fired, one of which penetrated the wall of a house—fortunately no one was injured—cars were wrecked and much concern was caused in the neighbourhood. Some 200 or 300 people attended a meeting the following week at which I and other authorities—the police, probation service, social services and the housing authority—discussed the problem, which concerned private landlords and so on, and explored ways in which it could be solved.

The matter eventually came to trial at Exeter Crown court and the four youths received probationary sentences. We lodged an appeal—which enjoyed cross-party support in Taunton—with the Attorney-General against those sentences. I am sorry to say that nothing could be done to strengthen them. A representative of the Crown Prosecution Service wrote to me and explained that the case had proceeded:

"on the basis of the pleas offered by the defendants".

It said that the decision was taken on the basis of those offences which the prosecution was able to prove. While it was clear that some, if not all, of the defendants had been firing the weapons into the street at houses and parked motor vehicles—with the exception of one youth who admitted firing at a wall—it was not possible to prove who had fired the shots into the street. Due to insufficient evidence, the CPS decided to proceed with the less serious offences which do not allow appeals to strengthen the sentence.

The outcome of that episode has caused great frustration in the community. A senior member of the police force—I am not at liberty to disclose his identity—wrote to me pointing out that the four youths were in possession of property known to be stolen in a burglary. He continued:

"The Greenway Road case amounted to firearms and ammunition, including a very high-powered rifle which, thankfully, jammed and was discovered in that state when the Firearms Team eventually forced an entry into the particular room".

The officer explained that one of the youths has

"a very extensive criminal record, including an earlier offence of possessing a firearm whilst committing a Schedule One offence. He also has convictions for robbery and burglary. It is not unreasonable for the public to be concerned that, whilst at large, he is likely to commit serious offences, particularly as he is also known to have a history of illegal use of drugs."

He concluded:

"Whilst I can understand the desire of the Courts"—

he referred to other cases where charges were allowed to lie on the file or were withdrawn—

"to dispose of offenders as cost-effectively as possible and to minimise protracted Not Guilty hearings . . . it could be in the public interest to pursue the Not Guilty trial so that the Judges can award appropriate sentences."

It is pointless for the House constantly to pass laws about sentencing, without regard to other aspects, but I pay tribute to the present Home Secretary who has greatly strengthened the courts' facility to find people guilty and has reduced the tricks—such as the right of silence—employed by the guilty to evade conviction.

While paying due concern to strengthening sentencing, we must examine carefully the operations of the courts and of magistrates. That matter is of particular concern in

Taunton, where my constituents were plagued by beggars during the summer. They adopted an aggressive attitude to members of the public, frightening shoppers who would not give them money. Public drinking is another problem. I have corresponded with the Home Office about the usefulness of the standard byelaw preventing drinking in public places. I have received a helpful reply and I hope that we can deal with the problems in Taunton. I understand that there are proposals in the crimes Bill to strengthen powers to confiscate alcohol. I hope that those measures will proceed satisfactorily and will be administered effectively by magistrates and by the Crown Prosecution Service.

Ministers say, "The powers are there," but they are not effective unless the police are prepared to use them, certain of the backing of the CPS and the courts. Those matters concerned my constituents during the summer. While I appreciate that they are not as grave as the awful murder of Philip Lawrence and other incidents that we have discussed, they prove that we must view law and order enforcement in the round. I hope that the debates that we shall have in the next few weeks will provide an opportunity to do that.

I support the Queen's Speech, as it contains a number of meaty measures—several of which I have referred to—that will build upon the legislation that my right hon. Friends have implemented in recent years to help this country tackle the problems of the 1990s. I remind hon. Members that, alas, those problems are different from—and, in the case of drugs, more severe than—those of the 1960s or the 1970s.

8.28 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I shall follow the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) and mention two of subjects that he touched on. At the start of his speech he mentioned BSE. Any hon. Member like myself, with some farmland in the constituency, will recognise the problems. I met the local National Farmers Union a few weeks ago and the farmers are greatly concerned. They stressed to me the problem of the reduction of the compensation level; the problem of casually fallen stock; the question of the delays in the 30-month cull, and the problems that will be caused if it is extended indefinitely, especially for winter feeding. Those problems need to be resolved as speedily as possible.

The second issue was mentioned by the hon. Member for Taunton at the end of his speech—the problem of drinking in public. I wish to emphasise a slightly different point. It is common in my constituency, and probably in many others, for people, when they move from one pub to another, to take their glasses and bottles and to deposit them anywhere en route when they have finished drinking. On the following day, especially on Saturday and Sunday, someone could open a shop selling the glasses that have been abandoned around the town. The glasses get broken and are dangerous.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) knows the issues of Northern Ireland well, but it is not a subject on which I speak—not because I am not concerned, but because I know that the problems are complex and I do not pretend to know the answer. As someone who has visited Manchester and seen the devastation wreaked on the city centre by one bomb—it is a miracle that nobody was killed—I must tell Sinn Fein that it will never get a solution through violence and it needs to return to a ceasefire as soon as possible. I hope to see a peaceful solution to the problem of Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

Like the hon. Member for Belfast, South, I welcome the move to draft Bills, because they will give us the opportunity to consider ideas before legislating. I hope that that will prevent some of the errors that appear in legislation and that we will not fall into the traps that we have in the past by legislating too hastily.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the draft Bill on identity cards. I have no strong views one way or another, but I remember that in the 1950s the Conservatives said that they would abolish that piece of socialism and that we should all burn our identity cards. Because the Tories said that we should destroy them, I kept mine and I have still got it. It is my first link with Burnley because it was issued to me at the start of the war when I was an evacuee in Burnley, my mother's home town. I will not throw it away now, and I still remember the number—it is my national health number—NFAU 198/5.

Several Conservative Members have referred to the single currency, but they did not all express the same view. My constituency is heavily dependent on manufacturing industry and it has one of the highest levels of manufacturing employment—more than 50 per cent. of the work force is employed in the manufacturing sector. Nearly all industries are now linked with Europe—they sell parts to Europe or import bits. The aerospace industry and the motor car industry depend on their links with Europe. The point was made to me time after time during the summer recess by local managers that, if Britain does not enter the single currency, industries will still have to deal with the single currency. If my local industries have to deal in the euro and fix prices at the start of the year and Britain is not in the single currency, what will happen to the pound? They believe that jobs could be put in jeopardy if we are not part of the single currency from the start.

In the Gracious Speech, we heard that legislation on education will be introduced. I hope that the Government do not believe that the expansion of the assisted places scheme, the establishment of new grammar schools or the extension of selection will solve any of the current problems in education. Some parents in my constituency still have not resolved the problem of secondary school places for their children. Five parents are still keeping their children away from the school that has been offered to them and are organising their education among themselves. The Government's proposal will not solve any problems. It will create more problems and give the elite better opportunities and the mass of the children in our constituencies a worse education. That is the wrong direction for education.

Nursery vouchers are another issue that we must think about again. Westminster and Wandsworth, two of the pilot Conservative authorities, are not enthusiastic about the voucher scheme. My constituency has a high provision of nursery places and we are worried about what will happen to the three-year-olds who have nursery places. Will the nursery voucher scheme for four-year-olds cream money away from local education authorities? We believe that opportunities for the children of Lancashire and Burnley will be reduced by the voucher scheme. It is time that all children had the opportunity of nursery education without the nonsense of the voucher system.

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

The Queen's Speech mentioned the national health service and I wait to see what the provisions on primary care will mean. I hope that they will not mean the creeping and crawling extension of privatisation and the commercialisation of health care provision. I am worried about the dental service provision and, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott) said, I have raised that issue several times in the House. I met the East Lancashire health authority on Friday to discuss that issue.

The position is changing all the time, but currently only one dental practice in Burnley is willing to take new national health service patients. One problem is that, if the dentists go over to the private schemes provided by BUPA or Denplan, they get the same remuneration for half the number of patients as they get from the national health service. We must address that issue. Incidentally, I do not know whether it is good for people to be dentists, because they are supposed to have one of the highest suicide levels. It is time that we had a dental service available to everyone, everywhere, instead of the gradual reduction that we see now.

Crime is another issue addressed in the Queen's Speech and more legislation is proposed. When I became an election agent in Burnley in 1964, crime was not an issue that was raised by people, but it is now at the top of the agenda. That is a sad reflection on 17, nearly 18, years of Tory rule and on the development of society during that period. I do not blame everything on the Conservative party, although it has some responsibility for the changes.

So many people are now afraid to leave their homes or to go down to the town centre. People feel imprisoned in their homes and that is a sad reflection on society in 1996. Burnley is not unique and the problem is not confined to council estates. It is found everywhere. Whenever I go to a meeting, I find nobody who does not know someone who has been a victim of crime, whether among friends or families, neighbours or workmates. It did not use to be like that and we must all tackle the problem.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has changed direction on a stalking Bill and a paedophile register. The country will welcome that change of view in the knowledge that the Government will take action. If, however, the Government had supported the Stalking Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson), she would have been prepared to amend it to meet the Government's requirements. That could have been done a few months ago, and my hon. Friend's Bill could have been an Act by now. That is a failure for which the Government are responsible.

When we debated the Queen's Speech in November 1995, we knew that it contained two proposed Bills on housing matters. One of the issues was homelessness. Changes in legislative provision will be introduced speedily, but adequate preparation for them has not been made. Those who will implement the changes still do not know how they will make them work.

Regardless of politics, almost everyone involved in housing, such as local authorities and housing associations, and especially all those concerned with homelessness, believes that the new, incoming legislation will create more problems than it will solve. It is seen as bad legislation but it is recognised that it is on the statute book. Those who are involved say to the Government, "Give us the detail of how the new legislation will work. We suggest that implementation be delayed for a few months to ensure that the changeover takes place a little more smoothly."

In my constituency there are pre-first world war terrace houses. The loss of mandatory grants will cause major problems when implementation takes place next year.

The Government have failed to address the real housing problem. More houses should be built for rent. Sadly the Government are not doing that, but they should be given that there is a major housing problem throughout the country. It is incredible that fewer than 2,000 council houses were built last year. We want to see houses built of good quality. We should not engage in a game where properties are built purely for the sake of numbers. We all have some degree of guilt for what was done in the 1960s. We are now demolishing some of the housing tragedies of that time. Some of the housing then built was worse than that which it replaced.

We are told in the Queen's Speech that there is to be a state visit to Pakistan and India next year. I am sure that there will be many celebrations in this country in mid-August next year, given the 50 years of independence of Pakistan and India. The greatest thing that could be done to make the celebrations truly great events would be to bring to an end what people in India and Pakistan regard as unfinished business, and that is Kashmir. I believe that the Government could do more to try to make both Pakistan and India—perhaps India is most at fault—come together to end the problem so as to let the people of Kashmir determine which way they want to go in future. It would be tremendous if, during the 50th year of independence, the people of Kashmir were allowed self-determination.

An issue that is not taken up by the Queen's Speech, but which should be, was the subject of an article in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* on 18 October. The article states:

"Sixty percent of households in Burnley claim some kind of state benefit with the average amount being £32."

That is per week. The article continues:

"People living in a third of Burnley properties claim housing and council tax benefits . . . A quarter of Burnley households contain only pensioners, with 45 percent of the elderly suffering long-term illness. In the Brunshaw area of town 23.8 percent of the residents suffer from long-term illness."

It tells us:

"the average hourly rate of pay in Burnley is £3.48, compared to the National 1993 New Earnings Survey of £7.83. Burnley's annual average gross income, excluding all benefits, is £7,085 and in Asian households only £5,870 before benefits."

It is clear that some households will not be in receipt of average pay, but at the same time we are told in the Queen's Speech that the Government will seek to double living standards over the next 25 years. That is the Government's target. Many of my constituents have grave doubts about seeing such an improvement. There is real poverty in areas such as the one that I represent. We need a national minimum wage and we need a change of government. There is a need also for positive policies. The Government have failed, and it is time for them to go.

8.44 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): Eighteen wasted years must be the verdict of my constituents on the Tory Government's period in office. Thank goodness that the Queen's Speech is the last one produced by a Conservative Government that we shall hear for a long time.

The Government appear to be bereft of any policies apart from their obsession with law and order. That is highly ironic given the Conservative Government's record on that subject. Once upon a time, people believed that the Tory party was the party of law and order, but that is no longer a credible claim for them to make.

The Government express their concern about the apparent sad state of society and the family in the United Kingdom. They refer to the violence in our midst and the weakening of the family, but they conveniently forget, or ignore, that this very situation is the end product of 17 years of Tory rule. The Tories cannot blame the Labour Government for the mess that they themselves have created.

Why is it that, seven months after the Dunblane tragedy, the Government still cannot unanimously decide what their policy is to be on the vital issue of gun control? Contrast that with the situation in Australia, where, only three weeks after a crazed gunman slaughtered people in Tasmania, the new Government, and a Conservative one at that, introduced extremely tough anti-gun legislation. Does not the Prime Minister realise that the great British public, by an overwhelming majority, do not see the need for any ordinary citizen legally to possess a handgun of any kind? The public want a total ban on the possession of handguns. If the Government will not introduce such a ban, I sincerely hope that the incoming Labour Government will. I shall certainly vote for a total ban on handguns as soon as the opportunity arises.

I welcome the Prime Minister's partial U-turn on stalking, but why have the Government not made it clear exactly what they intend doing about stalkers? What has been trailed so far does not deal with the problem. This terrifying practice should be made a criminal offence and stalkers should be treated accordingly as criminals who deserve to be locked away.

I welcome also the Prime Minister's complete U-turn on proposals for a national paedophile register and, I hope, the prosecution of sex tourists. Such measures command widespread public support and there are no valid reasons why they cannot be introduced. I understand that in New Zealand a register is available for sale in shops, and sex tourists can legally be prosecuted under recent legislation. Perhaps Ministers should visit New Zealand. They might learn something useful, such as how to introduce legislation.

Some years ago, legislation was introduced which permitted the confiscation of the ill-gotten assets of convicted drug dealers. It was widely welcomed at the time but hardly anything has been heard of it since. Perhaps we could be told how much or, perhaps more appropriately, how little has been confiscated from such people. There has been so little publicity that one suspects that drug dealers are free to continue making fortunes out of their trade in human misery with no real attempt being made to hit them where it hurts.

Apart from handguns perhaps the main cause of violence on our streets and in our society generally is the widespread and free availability of combat-type knives. You may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that about four years ago I brandished a Rambo-type knife with an eight or 10-inch blade with a serrated edge in the Chamber, to make the point that action needed to be taken to deal with the stabbings and slashings that were far too prevalent in Scotland at that time. Something was done and the situation improved for a time, but it is deteriorating again.

I can understand any Government's difficulties in dealing with certain types of knife and introducing legislation dealing with domestic knives, knives used for catering and butchery and knives that anglers are allowed to use. I cannot understand, however, or accept the Government's attitude towards combat weapons. Legally, they can be bought by anyone over the age of 16, either via mail order or over the counter in shops. What serious checks are made? Next to none. The knife that I produced in the House had been bought by a 15-year-old, and no questions were asked.

This week, the Scottish *Daily Record*—which I congratulate on its campaign against weapons over a long period—sent a reporter to a shop in Glasgow, where he bought four Rambo-type knives, some of which had blades 15 inches long. He was able to do so with no difficulty: he could just walk in from the street and buy four killer knives. Such knives serve no useful purpose in society—they are purely for killing and maiming—but the merchants of menace who profit from the sale of weapons of that kind will stop doing so only when it is made illegal.

I see no valid reason why we cannot ban the sale of combat weapons either by mail order or over the counter, not only in the back streets but in the main streets. So many are in circulation that it is surely in the best interests of society to make it illegal to sell them, and to stop their circulation. The sooner the House legislates, the better.

As for international matters, I am disappointed that the Queen's Speech made no mention of the need for the United Kingdom Government to take a lead in the ever-increasing international campaign to secure a worldwide ban on the manufacture, sale, transfer and use of anti-personnel land mines. Only last month, at the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference—attended by approximately 120 nations—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Dame J. Knight), the well-respected chairman of the IPU British group, the right hon. Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery) and I all spoke in favour of such a ban. The United Kingdom delegation of Back-Bench Members of Parliament was at the forefront of recent attempts to persuade the IPU to adopt such a resolution. Previous attempts had all failed, but last month we succeeded to such an extent that the draft resolution was carried without a vote.

When we consider that it is estimated that more than 100 million land mines are scattered in 62 countries throughout the world, and that approximately 2,500 innocent men, women and children are victims every month—nearly 100 each day—or, to put it another way, that every 15 minutes a human being is being blown up by an anti-personnel mine, we realise that, in the name of humanity, the situation cannot be allowed to continue and must be ended as soon as possible.

I will not go into graphic detail about the horrific injuries—apart from death—that those barbaric weapons inflict on the human body; but I earnestly appeal to the

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Government to support the IPU conference decision, and to do all in their power to achieve its aims. They can set an example by imposing a ban on the manufacture and sale of such weapons in this country now, rather than waiting until thousands more people are maimed or killed.

The Government intend to continue their overseas aid programme for the poorest countries, but here again their record could and should be much better. Despite all our problems at home, we must recognise the need to tackle poverty, disease and famine in the world's poorest nations. I understand that the Government are in favour of a mid-week lottery. I do not personally favour that, although I am not against one lottery week. Two lotteries will encourage people to spend more than they can afford, and will lead to an increase in social and family problems. If there is to be a second lottery, however, and if income continues to grow, perhaps consideration could be given to making occasional contributions to certain charities for worthwhile overseas projects of a humanitarian nature.

It seems to have escaped the notice of many—especially members of the Government—that 1996 is the United Nations Year for the Eradication of Poverty, and that last Thursday, 17 October, was the international day commemorating the event. Little or no heed has been paid to that. Indeed, far from poverty being eradicated, the problem has become more acute, both at home and abroad.

In my Adjournment debate at the end of the Scottish Grand Committee meeting in Dumfries on 5 July, which the Prime Minister attended, I dealt with the subject in some detail, especially in regard to Scotland and to Glasgow in particular. Sadly, the position is still no better. The Glasgow travel-to-work area has 55,000 people unemployed; the figure has remained fairly constant, at around 60,000, for several years. The majority of those people are long-term unemployed, and that is one of the main causes of poverty.

Giving people proper jobs provides the best pathway out of poverty. That is why we need to introduce a national minimum wage, and to sign the social chapter. I honestly believe that that will do more to take people out of the poverty trap than anything since the £6 pay policy initiated by Jack Jones when he was general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union in the mid-1970s, and introduced by the last Labour Government. We need something that will lift people out of poverty in our towns and cities.

As we are in the run-up to the general election, I hoped to see in the Gracious Speech a glimmer of hope and some compassion for the disadvantaged and less fortunate in our country; but no, there was nothing to give hope to our old-age pensioners, many of whom cannot live and die in decency and dignity. There was nothing to give hope to the sick, poor or unemployed, nothing about restoring benefits to 16 and 17-year-old people who cannot find employment, and nothing that would do anything to alleviate the poverty that so many people must endure. In fact, it is rather the reverse; the policies outlined in the Speech will worsen the position.

My present constituency is a very mixed one in the east end of Glasgow. It has some quite prosperous areas with few problems, but it also contains some areas with unacceptably high levels of unemployment and deprivation. As a result of parliamentary boundary changes, however, it will be greatly altered after the general election. I shall lose 50 per cent. of my existing seat—the outer areas, which will merge with most of what was the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Provan (Mr. Wray) to make a new seat called Baillieston. I wish my hon. Friend well in his new constituency.

The 50 per cent. that I shall retain consists of the inner-city areas of the east end of Glasgow—Shettleston, Tollcross, Parkhead, Dalmarnock and part of Bridgeton. The areas that I shall gain include the rest of Bridgeton, Calton in the east end—including the famous Glasgow "Barras"—and, across the River Clyde, the south-side areas of Gorbals, Govanhill, Hutchesontown and Oatlands, all of which are currently in the central constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson). Sadly, his constituency has disappeared. I hope that he will eventually find another to represent: he deserves to do so.

The present Shettleston constituency has 13 blocks of multi-storey flats. The new constituency will have 25 such blocks—certainly the highest number in a Scottish constituency, perhaps even in the United Kingdom. It will also have a large number of pensioners, people who cannot find employment no matter how hard they try because no jobs are available for them, and houses that desperately need to be treated for dampness and other defects—defects that Glasgow city council cannot tackle because of Government cuts in its finances. It is difficult to obtain up-to-date and accurate statistics relating to the new constituencies; perhaps Ministers will look into that, and see what can be found out about the composition of new constituencies, especially where there are substantial boundary changes.

My constituency also contains many hundreds of acres of derelict land which desperately needs to be cleaned up and built on to provide jobs for construction workers—thousands of whom are unemployed—and to provide decent homes for people and infrastructure for industry and commerce. That in turn will create more jobs, benefiting the city's economy and linking the east end with the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy). Between us we have more than 1,000 acres of derelict land in our constituencies, which could be put to good use in creating employment and prosperity for the city.

Glasgow faces tremendous economic problems, which have been made worse by the underfunding of the recent local government reorganisation. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities estimates a shortfall of £205 million, much of which has impacted on Glasgow, and despite the best efforts of the city council, the Glasgow Development Agency, Scottish Homes and the Greater Glasgow health board, the city cannot hope to solve its problems without additional help from central Government. Such support would benefit the whole of Scotland.

There are many more jobs in Glasgow for people who live outside the city and travel into it to work than there are for its own citizens who live in the city and pay council tax to it. I appeal to Scottish Office Ministers to put an end to their anti-Glasgow bias and sit down with all the relevant organisations to consider what they can do to help the city. Support for campaigns like the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations' "Build a new house"

campaign will help the Government to achieve their aim of reducing public expenditure. However, it will not do so not by cutting people's benefits nor by removing their entitlement to benefit; it will do so by putting people back to work and by putting more money into local circulation, which in turn will generate further benefits to everyone, the Exchequer included.

The Tory Government, of course, will not do that, but they are, however, on their last legs. There are only 190 days left until 1 May. The people of Britain are keenly looking forward to the new Labour Government when they awake on Friday 2 May.

8.59 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I would have liked more Conservative Members of Parliament, whose cages I could rattle, to be present apart from those three sitting on the Treasury Bench, who I understand have to remain rather mute. Their attitude is disappointing and I therefore hope that my hon. Friends will bear with me. Despite the fact that this is the last Queen's Speech written by the Tories, there are not many of their ranks here to support or defend it. As a matter of courtesy, I told the hon. Members for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) and for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson), before they left the Chamber, that I would refer to their remarks. The hon. Member for Ealing, North said that he had a constituency commitment.

Much has been said about the impending general election. One of the constitutional perversities that exists, which needs to be remedied by the next Labour Government, is the right of a Prime Minister to choose the date of a general election. It really is time we modernised our Parliament and had fixed four-year terms of Parliament, so that all parties would know the date of the general election. I hope that that modest constitutional reform will be implemented by an incoming Labour Government. It is long overdue.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North referred to Philip Lawrence and his very brave widow. I would like to associate myself with the tributes that have been paid to that brave head teacher and, of course, to the great courage and serenity of his widow and family, which have moved us all. I make that clear, because the hon. Gentleman is a friend of that family and I fully understand how he has been considerably moved on a personal level quite apart from being their Member of Parliament. I wanted to make that clear because I shall go on to criticise much else of what he said.

I found it breathtaking, if not amusing, that the hon. Gentleman should make absurd comments about my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. During discussions across the Floor of the House it was the Prime Minister who changed his mind and decided that the paedophile register would be introduced through a Government Bill. The truth is that, during the past 48 hours, Conservative Members of Parliament could not believe the crass stupidity and the poor politics of the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister in suggesting that the paedophile register should be introduced by way of a private Member's Bill. They were—to use the vernacular—gobsmacked. I have no doubt that the hon. Member for Ealing, North, and many others, were on the telephone to their Whips, saying, "Look, you have to do something about this. This is absolutely absurd."

It is also a gross impertinence to Back Benchers, who have few rights in the House and few opportunities to pass legislation. Again, I look forward to the next Labour Government redressing that situation. We want more rights and opportunities for Back Benchers, not fewer. It was a gross impertinence for the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to suggest that such an important measure should be introduced by way of a private Member's Bill, which should, of course, be reserved for matters that are traditionally introduced by private Members.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North also went on to suggest that employment had been lost in his constituency because of the decisions of Ealing Labour-controlled council. If he were in his place, I would remind him that, when he was elected in 1979, having defeated a very good Member of Parliament, Bill Molloy, he did so, with many other Tory Members elected on that day, under the banner "Britain under Labour isn't working". We always remember that Saatchi and Saatchi poster. If it were replicated in the Chamber and brought to a scale comparable with the unemployment that has been orchestrated by Tory Government policies since 1979, it would go through the doors, down the Central Lobby, along St. Stephen's Hall and would have to curl around Westminster Hall, and there would not be enough space to demonstrate the scale of unemployment and the accompanying human misery that have been the consequence of Tory Government policies.

In 1979, Britain was working. People had jobs, job security and prospects of careers, and there was hope, particularly for young people. That is not a feature of employment today, nor has it been for many years under the stewardship of Margaret Thatcher and the current Prime Minister.

We were treated to the spectre of the hon. Member for Ealing, North shooing away people with winklepickers in the 1950s. Things have moved on. This man represents the people of Ealing, North and he is referring to his experiences of the 1950s and pretending that there is some comparison with the social problems of today. Things have demonstrably moved on and there is a much graver situation in our towns and cities. No hon. Member, whether he is left or right, has a magic wand to remedy the situation.

Since 1979, a selfish society has been created. There has been greater emphasis, I think throughout the Thatcher years, on avarice, on getting rich quick and on not having regard for our responsibilities to our neighbours. That has certainly contributed to the growth in violence and in crime which the Government and the Home Secretary seem unable to abate.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) made some interesting comments. I hope that his hon. Friends and my colleagues will look at *Hansard* tomorrow. He referred to the document that was recently issued by the Roman Catholic archbishops and generously acknowledged that the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church had been very much a feature of, an influence on, what he referred to as centre-right policies in political parties in western Europe for a long time. I am not sure that it is limited purely to centre-right parties, but the hon. Gentleman is broadly correct.

I think that the big benchmark was the papal encyclical of Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum", which has been reiterated time and again by the popes, about the need to have regard

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for people in the workplace and their rights as individuals. The dignity of work has been a constant theme and was reiterated this week by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in its document, which is certainly not pointing to or supporting any political party but is flagging up to hon. Members and to the electorate the fact that we have obligations one to another. One of the areas on which the hierarchy especially concentrated was that of the workplace.

Those who read the speech by the hon. Member for Taunton will see that there could be circumstances in which he would support legislation to prevent the exploitation of workers in terms of poverty pay. Those are not his words, but he suggested that he recognised that some employers pay such paltry wages that they cannot be deemed to be fair. That is an interesting comment from a Conservative Member and it shows that some people recognise that, under the Government's stewardship, some people are on poverty pay.

That reminds me of some audio archive material on the Labour movement that I listened to last night. I heard George Lansbury say that the poor get robbed because they are poor and that they are poor because they are robbed. That is a feature of the lives of many people in Britain. They are suffering the blight of unemployment, poor housing and poor health facilities, and resources for their children's education have been largely withheld or misdirected by the Government.

Any Government in Britain must deal at some stage with the need for bold decision making. They must be candid with the people of Britain. They need to make the conscious decision to shift scarce resources into the key public services of housing, education and the national health service. There is no way of avoiding that and it needs to be said clearly, unless we are to deceive the electors and pretend that we can reduce taxation and, at the same time, provide essential public services. It is simply a matter of arithmetic. It is time that politicians of the left, right and centre were much more candid and put the choice to the British people.

Reference has been made to the shift in the Labour party. All I can say—I think that this view is held by many Labour Members—is that it does not matter whether we are called socialists, social democrats, new Labour, real Labour, as I choose to call myself, or any other title. The common denominator of my hon. Friends is that we believe that people with the broadest backs should bear the heaviest burdens. That is the clear, distinctive feature between ourselves and Conservative Members, who believe that it is possible and fair to diminish the responsibilities of people who are already privileged and advantaged, in terms of income, educational opportunity and employment, to the disadvantage of people who are substantially poor.

I notice that the Gracious Speech refers to the need for legislation or action by Government

"to help people make better provision for their long term care needs in old age."

That is of course true. Clearly, there is a need for Government initiatives to recognise the fact that, largely because of the success of the NHS and the welfare state, which were created nearly half a century ago by a Labour Government, people are living longer and their aspirations in retirement, in old age and late into the evening of life are much higher. We must ensure, however, that the quality of life and dignity of those people—hon. Members, too, will be old one day—are guaranteed.

We can have private initiatives to make such provision, but we must also recognise our obligations as a community to provide state help for people in retirement and in old age. The concept is as old as the scriptures. It is a matter of "Honour thy father and thy mother". All too often, the Government forget that obligation.

I represent a constituency with some 14 or 15 miles of Thames river frontage. I am proud for it to be on the Thames estuary. It is a great place for recreation, quite apart from its being the last remaining part of what used to be the port of London. I obviously welcome the announcement in the Queen's Speech that there will be measures to implement the Donaldson report recommendations following the Braer disaster. We need to ensure that people in the shipping industry who pollute our estuaries and our coastlines pay a heavy price. I hope that it is a heavy price. There must be severe sanctions against shipmasters and people who own and commission ships if they pollute our waterways.

I have especially strong feelings on this matter, representing as I do an area on the Thames estuary, which has a fragile eco-system. It is rich in birdlife. If we in the vicinity of the Thames suffered a disaster such as those unhappily experienced by colleagues from other constituencies around the United Kingdom's coast, it could be disastrous for the beauty, quality and variety of birdlife and of other species in and around the Thames. I welcome that proposed measure and await with interest details of the sanctions and punishments that will be meted out to people who continue to disregard the need to protect and maintain our coastal environment.

The Queen's Speech makes significant references to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Last night, President Clinton made an important speech about the prospects of expanding NATO. I have told the House previously of my view that the Government should energetically take initiatives to facilitate the early admission to NATO of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic as the first tranche of new countries to join the organisation. I am pleased again to make such a reference on the occasion of the visit by the President of the Republic of Poland to the UK, to meet the Prime Minister, various Ministers and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. Government and Opposition Members in Poland, for all their domestic political differences, are united in their desire to gain admission to the European Union. That process will not be easy, but it must begin, and I hope that it will be completed in the minimum time.

We are also marking the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising. Anyone who has seen the documentaries broadcast over the past few days cannot help but be moved by the enormous courage and sacrifice of the people who stood for freedom and national self-determination 40 years ago. Although the enlargement of the European Union and the admission of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and other countries to NATO is in the interests of the UK, it is also a moral issue.

If all the problems experienced since 1945, such as the cold war, had any meaning it was that we were seeking the day when all the countries of Europe would achieve

parliamentary democracy, as they have; change to market economies, which they are; and take their rightful place in the free associations of nations. It is extremely important that the sentiments expressed in the Queen's Speech are vigorously pursued by the present Government and adopted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) when he becomes Prime Minister.

The Gracious Speech refers to the fact that, in 1998, the UK will host the Asia-Europe summit in London. It will fall to my right hon. and hon. Friends to preside over that occasion, and I look forward to a Labour Government having the presidency of that summit. In the preliminary stages, I hope that the present Administration will pay regard to countries that are not yet in the European Union but have a legitimate and vested interest in the deliberations and decisions of the Asia-Europe summit. At a similar summit held some months ago, those countries were excluded. If Europe is to mean anything, we must acknowledge the interests of emerging markets and democracies in central and eastern Europe, which ought to have the opportunity to access such an important summit.

Parliament is on the last lap before a general election, and there is clearly a mood in the country for change. Millions of people have as adults known nothing other than Conservative Governments. No matter how the Prime Minister and Conservative Members wriggle, or how much propaganda featuring satanic eyes they produce, nothing will alter the course of events. The people recognise that the hallmark of this Government is arrogance. This Administration have—rightly or wrongly—a reputation for sleaze. They have been maladroit in many areas of policy and now the chickens are coming home to roost.

I hope that, in the weeks remaining between now and a general election—and the election of a Labour Government—the Government will show contrition and that they will recognise that there is little to show for their 17 or 18 years in office. Many people have got rich, some have been comfortable, but the hallmark is a disfigured and divided society in which many people have been victims. There are people who have no job security or no job; some cannot sell their homes. When Tory Members talk about the success of the economy, I point to the fact that many of their supporters—or former supporters—cannot sell their homes. I look forward to the time when we have a vibrant economy and renewed confidence; when people have security at work; and when trade unions are fashionable once again and people are allowed to join them.

The other evening, I saw on television a Tory Member of Parliament commenting on the document produced by the Roman Catholic bishops. In respect of their reference to the right to join trade unions, he said that the Conservative Government recognise that right. That is not true—there are people who desperately want the protection that a trade union provides, but they know that, were they to join one, they would get the sack. There is no beating about the bush: today, trade union membership can result in people losing their jobs or prevent them from getting a job. That is one of the outrages committed by their Government—they have prevented people from having basic protection in the workplace.

I look forward to the day when I can go into the Aye Lobby in support of legislation produced by my hon. Friends that reinstates, with pride, the great opportunities for employees that arise from the security and counsel provided by trade union membership.

9.22 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), because I know that he will be interested in what I say. Convention demands that hon. Members stay for the following speech and I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his Workplace Injury Victims Bill which he introduced in 1995.

I want to speak in respect of a single issue—one that was not referred to in the Gracious Speech. During his speech, the Prime Minister made a commitment to amend the compensation recovery unit—a long overdue measure.

Part of my constituency—the borough of Clydebank in Scotland—has the worst record on asbestos-related disease in Great Britain. To put it in context, the national average for mesothelioma is about 20 per million deaths, whereas in Clydebank the rate is 212 per million deaths.

The shipbuilding, ship repairing and asbestos factory areas of Great Britain have suffered greatly. The top nine areas for deaths of men from mesothelioma are Clydebank, Barrow and Furness, Plymouth, north Tyneside, Portsmouth, south Tyneside, Southampton, Barking, Dagenham and Gillingham—all shipbuilding areas, all carrying into the future the burden of deaths resulting from asbestos-related diseases. The Health and Safety Executive says that by 2025 there will be 10,000 deaths a year from asbestos-related diseases.

Hon. Members should try to imagine what it is like to find out that one has an appalling terminal disease and then to have to prove that it is asbestosis. One then has to prove where it started to develop, perhaps 20, 30 or 40 years ago, find workmates to prove where one worked, obtain employers' records, get a good lawyer, win an award, which is often delayed at every stage, and then enforce a settlement. After all that, one sometimes has to pay back tens of thousands of pounds to the Government for any benefits that have been received. The Government even go into the money awarded for pain and suffering, which is money to which they have no entitlement. At the end of that hazardous journey, one may be left with only £2,500. The Government have said today that they accept that that is a repulsive way of acting.

I became involved in this matter through my constituency interest. I want to pay tribute to Clydeside Action on Asbestos and, particularly, to Mr. Iain McKechnie. Sadly, some of the people I want to congratulate are no longer with us because of the nature of their disease. I want to thank Mr. Frank McGuire, a solicitor in the Glasgow area, who campaigned because he thought that the law was repugnant.

We lobbied the House and persuaded my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, to take up the issue. Clydeside Action on Asbestos gave evidence, and that all-party Committee produced a superb unanimous report. I should like to thank the hundreds of hon. Members who signed two early-day motions to keep this issue going.

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead does not use wild language, but the report said that the existing situation was pernicious, repugnant and an offence against natural justice. It was indefensible. It also said that it was deterring compensation claims. Why should someone attempt to obtain compensation while knowing that any benefits would have to be repaid, leaving only £2,500? Even the Government were losing out because people were not pursuing claims.

Even more important than the unanimous report, the Select Committee produced a solution. The solution is clear: make the polluter pay. The firm or the responsible insurance company, rather than the sick person, should pay back the benefits. That has considerable advantages. First, if the insurance companies have to pay back the money, they will settle up quickly. The person who was dying was not getting a settlement because all the advantages were with the insurance company. It has also been decided that the money for pain and suffering should be ring-fenced so that it is not possible under the law for the Government to march in and claim that money.

I congratulate the Government on seeing the sense of that and realising—this will influence them—that they will not lose money by changing their approach. In fact, in their statement, the Government say that they think they will receive an extra £40 million a year back from the asbestos companies and their insurance companies.

I praise the Scottish media—journalists with Scottish Television and the *Sunday Mail*, and others who highlighted the issue—the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, which campaigned to alter the work of the compensation recovery unit, the Trades Union Congress and the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

Many people other than asbestosis sufferers will benefit from the change. Last year, £70,000 was paid back by someone suffering from head and facial injuries; £67,000 by someone suffering from back and spinal injuries; and £66,000 by someone with multiple injuries. All the top 10 highest clawbacks were more than £57,000. The Bill is significant, because last year 30,000 people paid back money to the compensation recovery unit. They will benefit from the Bill if the details are right, and thousands of others, who do not yet know that they will contract a culpable sickness or disease, will be under a better regime because of the change in the law.

We must be cautious because we have yet to see the details of the Government's proposals. It was suggested in the Social Security Select Committee that asbestos-related diseases should be excluded from the compensation recovery scheme altogether because of their special nature. A similar disease, pneumoconiosis, is excluded because the mining unions managed years ago to negotiate a special deal.

We want to know what the Government intend to do about retrospection and about what are known as analogous benefits. For example, will the Government attempt to claw back money that has been provided for home helps or other assistance for people coping with disease?

There will be much support for the proposals on Second Reading and in Committee, if the detail is right. I hope, however, that the House will take great care with the legislation. The compensation recovery unit was introduced only in 1990. It has self-destructed within six years because the Government are clawing back a far higher sum than they anticipated—about £150 million a year.

I welcome the fact that the Government have moved under pressure and have accepted the Select Committee report. I welcome the change that has been made, but I hope that those who serve on the Standing Committee will be extremely careful and make sure that there are no unintended consequences.

9.33 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Miligairie (Mrs. Worthington) and to have listened to his detailed speech on compensation. He has been working very hard and, we hope, to some effect. We shall see what the Government can do in the latter days of their term of office.

It is not a matter only of pneumoconiosis caused by asbestos: there is a case in my constituency of someone who received what seemed like a substantial sum for a car crash. He was a lorry driver, but he is no longer able to work and has lost any potential to earn for the rest of his life. The sum seemed large, but it has to last him the rest of his life, and £47,000 of it has been clawed back. He is left with about the same sum to compensate him for the loss of his quite substantial earning power, so there is something deeply wrong with the system.

There is another case in my constituency—similar cases have probably occurred in other constituencies—concerning people working in the darkrooms of hospital X-ray departments who had apparently been exposed to toxic fumes for some time. They are now developing severe symptoms similar to arthritis which prevent them from working.

In every case that I have come across, the hospital has insisted that to get compensation the claimant has to sign an agreement not to take the matter further. The hospital claims to be paying them for the injury caused by inhaling the fumes, but when the compensation recovery unit investigates the matter, it says that the money is to compensate for loss of earnings. If the claimant is being paid income support for loss of earnings, everything is taken back and he or she is left with about £2,000, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) said. It is scandalous that the hospital gets away scot-free with an out-of-court settlement and the compensation recovery unit takes most of the money back from the injured person.

Hon. Members may note that I am wearing an Earl Haig poppy. One of my English colleagues asked me if the Scots had brought the day forward, but I am wearing an early poppy because today we launched a campaign to increase the poppy fund in Scotland. A young lady from Scotland who will be featured in all the adverts was at Dover house for the launch. My poppy is botanically correct, because there is no green leaf on a poppy, as featured on the English and Welsh version. Having paid for my poppy, I assure hon. Members that I shall wear it until everyone else is wearing them.

I also noticed that the money box for the poppies at the Scottish Office was chained to the desk. I do not know whether that is a comment on 17 years of Conservative

rule, but I assure everyone that, when Labour comes to power, the poppy box will be freed and we shall not have to worry about people stealing the money from the Scottish Office.

I noted some Conservative Members saying earlier that they were in favour of a single currency. I should like to add one thought on that. Much is said about how well the burgeoning finance sector in Scotland is doing—indeed, a new financial centre is being built in Edinburgh. If the centre of gravity of the single European currency moved to Frankfurt, what chance would there be of organisations and financial institutions remaining solely in Scotland? That is unlikely. Organisations in Edinburgh, like those in London, are likely to move at least a branch office to Frankfurt. It is unlikely that major finance houses dealing in the euro will sit outside the currency area, trading in London or Edinburgh. Wherever the headquarters are, we shall be seriously damaged if we do not take action to ensure that we are at the centre.

After 17 years—and particularly the past few years since black Wednesday—the Government are seen to be seriously divided on Europe. They tried to paper over the cracks at the party conference, but they know that they are seriously divided, which is why they cannot lead with confidence on Europe.

I am told that the Chancellor is a jazz fan. I think that he must be a big band fan rather than a modern jazz fan like me, because he holds a steady beat but shows no development in the melody that he is playing. It is all about control and safety on interest rates and inflation. Inflation was negative during the great depression of the 1930s. The problem is that nothing is being done to strengthen the real economy of Britain or Scotland.

The growth that everyone talks about—as if the public can be conned on the issue—is from such a low base that we are only beginning to catch up with our European neighbours. They have much stronger fundamental economies because they did not suffer the great ravages brought about by the previous Prime Minister and the ineptitude of the present Prime Minister, who assured us that we were in the European monetary system at the right rate for the pound, until we crashed out at such great cost.

People talk of unemployment coming down, but we all know that the figures are increasingly falsified. During Scottish Question Time last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) referred to the New Cumnock survey. The Labour party surveyed every house in the village of New Cumnock, which had a declared unemployment level of 290. The survey found 1,200 unemployed people in New Cumnock. Only 290 were receiving benefits, so they were the only ones appearing in the Government statistics, but the real number is 1,200. That is about the right proportion. There is probably about three times as much unemployment as is registered by the Government.

A gentleman came to see me at my recent surgery. He is clearly unemployed. He is seeking employment. He is outwith the period when he can receive unemployment benefit. He cannot find work. He receives no income support because his wife works 16 hours a week. So he is not classified as unemployed. His son returned from Germany after serving in the Army there. He stayed on in Germany and worked there, but was then made unemployed. He received unemployment benefit in Germany. He returned to his home town of Falkirk to be told that he would have to live there for two years before he could claim unemployment benefit in his own country. He even had to put up with the indignity of having to produce his passport to prove that he was British.

The Government propose nothing on prices and nothing to protect the consumer from the behaviour of what I can only describe as cartels. We know that there is no protection for consumers in regulation of the utilities based on RPI-minus. People face increasing bills every day. I shall give two examples. One is petrol prices in central Scotland. I represent Grangemouth, where most of the oil comes ashore and is refined into petrol. I opened a huge extension of the depot where about nine or 10 different companies drive in to take petrol which they have bought on the spot market or from the oil refiners.

In my area a litre of petrol costs 58.9p—the same price as on the motorways of Britain. That is in Grangemouth, where the petrol is refined. I can drive into Lanarkshire—Motherwell, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid)—and buy petrol at 55.9p a litre. The reason is that an independent has come in on the spot market and brought the price down at the pump. Q8, which is the only independent garage in my area, sticks with the cartel and goes for the higher price. Nothing is being done to prevent that practice. It is a massive rip-off of the public and the Government should do something to deal with it.

The second example is standing charges, which are a blight particularly on the incomes of the elderly, especially people who use only a small amount of energy from the public utilities. I have here a gas bill to illustrate the problem. It is a bill for 300 cu. ft or 3 therms. The cost of the gas is £1.43. The standing charges of 10.39p per day for 249 days amount to £25.87, plus VAT of £2.18. So for £1.43 of gas, the pensioner pays £29.48. Something must be done about that, and the Government are the people who should be doing something.

Back when I first spoke in the House, the Government promised to do something about subcontractors who faced massive losses when large contractors went into liquidation. In a serious example in Scotland, a building company with 10 subsidiaries went into liquidation and reappeared and resumed trading within a month. Every subcontractor who put anything into the buildings that the contractor was constructing lost every penny. One company in my area lost more than £200,000.

The Government promised to do something about that problem. One Conservative Member raised the matter in a ten-minute Bill, but the Government never introduced legislation on it. So the same situation prevails. Whenever a contractor goes down, the subcontractor goes down entirely, even though the contractor can come back up with a new name and often with the same directors within a couple of months. The subcontractor has no claim against the new company. In Canada, an Act called the Lien Act allows people to take a lien against the building for which they subcontract. If the contractor goes down, the building is sold and the subcontractors recover a large amount of their money.

The Government also promised to do something about interest on bad debts, but there was nothing in the Queen's Speech about that. Every day, small companies seeking payment are put off. Often, they are driven to the wall while the large company which incurred the debt uses

[Mr. Michael Connarty]

people to put them off until they can no longer claim their money. Nothing has been done by the Government about that.

We are told that inward investment is doing well. We heard a speech today that seemed to have been written by the Secretary of State for Scotland about inward investment by Chunghwa in Motherwell and inward investment in Fife. However, the reality is that inward investment in projects by companies from the tiger economies and Japan is falling. Every month, a higher percentage of that investment is an investment in the equity shares of companies in Britain—buying up British companies, not putting fresh investment into Britain as in the Chunghwa or Hyundai examples.

What is happening on the export side? Recently, I was present at the opening of a new export centre in Grangemouth. I applaud anything that any organisation—even the present Government—does to generate economic activity, and I was there in a supportive role in my constituency, pleased to see the export centre come to my area to take the initiative selling British and Scottish goods abroad.

I talked to people that day at the opening. They said that their warehouses and storerooms were filling up and they were not selling goods abroad. The obvious reason is that, in the early 1990s, and even 1994, we were told, "Europe will turn up in 1995. Focus on Europe." That was wrong, and we now have a mini-recession in Scotland. Exports are not doing as well as they should be, and they should not be talked up in the way they are.

Representing, as I do, a port like Grangemouth, I am told by people who work in the docks what they bring back and forward. At the moment, shiploads of personal computers are coming back from the continent unsold. They are taken to Bathgate, where they are broken up, cannibalised and scrapped. Last year's supposed export boom is coming back as unsold goods and being scrapped in Bathgate. There is something very wrong with a Government who do nothing about that.

The last economic comparison I want to make is between what I would call the fat cats in utilities and poverty in Scotland. Last Friday, on United Nations day, a conference on action on poverty took place in Scotland. At the same time, we read in the press about the latest problems facing people in industry. Earlier, we discussed the finance sector, in which everyone has a great deal of investment and faith. The reality is that 150,000 jobs have been axed from banks, insurance companies and building societies since 1989. There is a massive flood of jobs out of the industry. It is expected that a further 100,000 jobs will be culled—a good word—from the industry in the next few years.

Meanwhile, fat cats in the utilities have continued to award themselves massive pay increases. The value of the salary package of Keith Henry, chairman of National Power, has increased by 74 per cent. to £782,555. He was appointed on a basic salary of £325,000 in February 1995, and suddenly he is getting that vast increase. The basic pay of Brian Staples, chief executive of United Utilities, has increased by 58 per cent. to £409,900.

How are people in Scotland supposed to view the actions of Conservative Governments in the past 17 years when they produce such salaries at one end of the economy while at the other end a study shows that inadequate benefits in Scotland mean that income support is now £34 short of the amount required for a low-cost budget for a couple with two children under 11.

The study found that unemployment is now much more prevalent in many parts of Scotland than it was 17 years ago. It found that the taxation changes made by the Government have favoured the rich to the point where, between 1979 and 1993, the average United Kingdom per capita income increased by 38 per cent. but the poorest 10 per cent. of the population saw their income drop by 17 per cent. while that of the richest 10 per cent. increased by 82 per cent. What will people think of the Governments who presided over that change?

In Scotland, 20 per cent. of school-age children are eligible for free school meals. In the city of Glasgow, that figure has doubled; it is nearer 40 per cent. than 20 per cent. Those are the economic results of the Government's policies, and those problems should have been tackled in the Queen's Speech.

Just one of the United Nations commitments, if taken seriously by the Government, would have changed what was in that document:

"We commit ourselves to promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work."

That would not match anything in the Gracious Speech today because the Government have run out of ideas about what to do with the economy.

Another problem facing Scotland—probably more so and more unfairly than any other part of Britain—is bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Scotland has the best beef in Britain—the best in Europe, I believe—yet it has been pulled down by a problem that originated in the dairy industry. BSE is not just about a few jobs. People think that agriculture is something out there and that we are really an industrial nation. But Labour is interested in the problem because in Scotland alone there are 12,000 jobs on farms affected, 6,500 jobs in meat processing, 15,500 indirect jobs and a further 1,500 direct jobs, plus 1,500 jobs in transport. That is a large section of the Scottish population.

Today I met two members of the National Farmers Union for the Forth valley area which covers my area and that of the Secretary of State for Scotland. In "Stop Press" for today's lobby, the NFU said:

"We have just met the Scottish Secretary at the Tory Party Conference in Bournemouth. Because of the Government's wavering we have absolutely insisted that the legislation necessary to begin the cull in Scotland should be introduced".

Where in the Queen's Speech is there any reference to required legislation? It requires legislation to bring in a compulsory cull of cattle. We cannot do it by regulation. The legislation must be dealt with on the Floor of the House. There is nothing about that in the Queen's Speech. All the talk about sticking by the Florence agreement is contradicted absolutely by the lack of any statement in the Queen's Speech.

It is now easy to identify the cohort herds, particularly the dairy herds in England and Wales where most of the BSE came from when beef breeders bought in heifers from the dairy herds. Those herds are still being milked today and that is why we have a problem—that is the

reality. That was the message from the Scottish farmers today: because money is still being made from milking those cows in England and Wales, people there are not keen to see the cull go ahead. That is the reality.

I believe that the large cull is required. All the scientific analysis saying that we need only a small cull is not acceptable to the farming population and will not deal with the problem of BSE in the way that is needed. If England and Wales want to drag their heels—if they want to persuade Ministers that certain Liberal Democrats may take their seats from there if there is a large cull on the dairy farms of England—it is up to those on the Conservative Benches to argue the case for England and Wales. But in Scotland, the necessary large cull of 5,000 should begin as soon as possible and the legislation should be on the statute book as quickly as possible. Since 1991, traceability is adequate to allow that to be done.

The reality for Scottish farmers is that fat cattle were fetching 140p per kilo in 1995 and now they are fetching 100p per kilo. If your income dropped by that percentage, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would want to know why, and if the Government could do something about it, you would demand that they should. The compensation scheme and the cull must be introduced and the legislation must be brought into the House as soon as possible.

An accreditation scheme has been suggested, whereby there are non-BSE certified herds and BSE herds. They would have to go through some procedures to get the cohort cattle out and to get rid of the danger of cohort cattle reintroducing BSE. That means that we would have a two-tiered beef system in Scotland—not because of anything done by beef farmers in Scotland, but because of the imported BSE strains from England and Wales.

In Scotland, we already have a beef assurance scheme. I want to tell the House something about it, because I believe that, if any cattle fit this, it is safe to eat them now. I think that many of the herds in Scotland would fit the criteria. All herds must be established at least four years prior to application. They must be beef herds managed separately from all other herds so that there is no cross-contamination. They must not have been fed using feed containing meat and bone meal during the last seven years and there must be no confirmed cases of BSE originating from that herd. There are cattle in herds in Scotland like that now, but they cannot be sold abroad because the Government have not been able to persuade the European Community that they should be allowed in. One of the reasons is that we are now considered to be a problem in Europe and not a part of Europe. The Government are responsible for that, and it is one of the greatest problems we face.

I apologise to other hon. Members who may wish to speak, but I intend to continue as I have sat here since 2.30 this afternoon and others have not.

In Scotland, we also face the problem of the cost of the reorganisation of local government. The Government told us that it would be only £76 million. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has now brought out a paper analysing the cost and showing it to be £281 million. If one tries to run a local authority when the Government say that the shortfall will be £76 million and that is all that they will allow—in fact, they do not even allow all of that—and then the real cost is £281 million, an extra £200 million, it can mean only one thing: cuts in services. It means a loss of service to the people in local authority areas.

It will also lead to much disillusion for the people who want the services. The Government said that redundancy costs would be £43 million, but they stand at £68 million. The Government said that the miscellaneous costs of the wind-up, including redundancy and information technology, would be £43 million in total, but the figure stands at £105 million. The Government said that the cost of capital under-provision would be £17 million and the cost is, in fact, £73 million. Those figures add up to a massive bill for local authorities which they cannot pay.

At the same time, the Government have voted themselves a majority on every council in Scotland. It is their only chance to get a majority anywhere in Scotland. The Government do not control a single council, but the Secretary of State sets the capping limit for the first time on the level of rates that can be raised. That means that the service which is most affected—because it is the most capital-intensive—is education.

Education in Scotland is precious. The leader of the Labour party said that our vision must be education, education, education. I can tell him—I am sure he knows—and the hon. Members here tonight that education has been the main vision of Scotland for decades, in fact for more than 100 years. Some 100 years ago, we had a tradition in Scotland of leaving the pits for education and then for university. It is the one way to get out of a depressed economic situation—to escape through education.

What do the Conservatives offer us? They offer us more selection—a new weeding-out process. Soon 20 per cent. of pupils will be selected. That will mean that 20 per cent. of local pupils will not get into a school. If a school is good enough to be selective, it is good enough for local pupils. The issue is weeding out versus including in, and we are for including in. The Secretary of State for Scotland added a clause to the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 to preserve and conserve places for pupils in his area to go to Balfron high school, because too many people from Glasgow tried to get places there. He wants to preserve the comprehensive ideal in his constituency, but he does not want the same ideal for the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Labour party is clear about its pledges. People keep saying that the Labour party does not have policies, but we have many policies on which I am proud to stand. In "New Labour, New Life for Scotland", it is stated clearly:

"The comprehensive system has served Scotland well."

It adds that Labour

"will cut class sizes in the first three years in primary school."

That has been done in the USA and has been successful in improving literacy rates and stopping pupils dropping out of the literacy cycle. The Labour party

"will also encourage the development of a range of different approaches including setting in Scottish schools".

The document also makes the point that teacher training will

"ensure that best practice is available to all teachers to maximise their skill in mixed ability teaching."

It emphasises the fact that comprehensive education plus flexibility in teaching approach gives the best start for anyone.

On skills and training, the Government have failed abysmally. They brought in a voucher scheme in Scotland called Skill-Seekers and they claim it is a great success. I

[Mr. Michael Connarty]

have looked at the destinations of school leavers in Scotland in the past year as the leader of Labour's task force on skills and training. Of 16-year-old school leavers, 31 per cent. in Tayside and 29 per cent. in Strathclyde fall out of economic activity by October of the year they leave school. In Grampian, the figure for fifth-year leavers is 17 per cent., and that is repeated throughout Scotland.

Almost 30 per cent. of the population have been failed, which means that 57,000 people in the unemployment figures for Scotland are under the age of 26. That generation has been betrayed by the Government and, as the leader of the Labour party has said, that generation is being paid for by the taxes of everyone because the Government have failed to reduce the public sector borrowing requirement which pays for social security.

I was struck by an article in *The Times Educational Supplement* which spotlighted drop-out rates in higher education. The Government make the great boast that there are more people in higher education than ever before, but the reality is that people are on courses that are inadequate. The colleges' aim is to fill places because, as the article makes clear, in some colleges lecturers do not get pay rises unless they can fill the seats in their classes. Anyone who delivers a message to a college in Scotland, or England and Wales, is liable to be signed up for a course because that is worth £4,000 to the college. The problem is that people are dropping out so much that colleges have to focus on the drop-out rate, not on taking people on.

The article, which is from *The Times Educational Supplement* of 27 September, also states:

"Thatcher's children are the most self-centred and ungracious generation ever, according to many managers and principals involved in recruiting them for the new colleges."

They apply to dozens of colleges, take one and never let the others know that they are not coming. It says that the principals'

"views were corroborated by the information manager of one of the fastest-growing colleges in the Midlands."

The manager stated:

"The intake this year were born the year after Margaret Thatcher came to office and quite frankly, they are they rudest that I have ever come across."

The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) tried to explain how things stand with reference to the Bible. Perhaps there might be references to other philosophies. Marx said that the superstructure of a society is a reflection of the substructure. If someone is unemployed, living in poverty and feeling that there is nothing in the education system for him, he will rebel and cause trouble. We must deal with that. We must educate people properly and give them a job. By adopting that approach we shall be doing something—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Mr. A. G. Aiyer

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

10 pm

Mr. Peter Butler (Milton Keynes, North-East): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter on the Adjournment, although I wish to record immediately my regret that it should be necessary so to do.

The background is straightforward. My constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Preen, set themselves up in business. They built up a reasonably successful business, with a turnover of about £250,000 a year. They were trading from a leasehold property in Milton Keynes. Their landlords refused to comply with the repairing covenants in the lease, and instituted a campaign of intimidation and disruption in an attempt to persuade my constituents to abandon the lease.

The situation deteriorated to the stage when it became necessary to consider court action against the landlord, who was refusing to carry out repairs or to permit the quiet enjoyment of the premises to which the tenants were entitled.

In December 1992, the landlord issued a false invoice—subsequently withdrawn—in the sum of £12,000. On the basis of that invoice, the landlord threatened my constituents with action by the bailiffs. That is the background to the matter.

Mr. and Mrs. Preen were advised that they could either sue the landlord, with all the risks involved in that, or place their business into administration. On 21 December 1992, they contacted a firm of accountants called Fryer and Co., of Luton. A Mr. Aiyer from that firm arrived and accepted instructions from them, reassuring them that he was a chartered accountant, qualified in protecting companies in such situations, and licensed by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales as an insolvency practitioner. At this point, the company was solvent, with cash in the bank more than adequate to cover the sum properly due to the landlord. The only other creditors were Mr. and Mrs. Preen, as directors of the company.

Accordingly, on 22 December Mr. Aiyer, a chartered accountant and licensed insolvency practitioner, of 27 Cardiff road, Luton, was appointed as administrator to protect the company. My constituents thought that their problems were now under control. Little did they know that the nightmare was only just beginning. I shall not trouble the House with the details of Mr. Aiyer's conduct over the following months. Suffice it to say that, on the facts that I have, it is clear that, when he was not being negligent or incompetent, he was being deceitful and dishonest.

We have reached the summer of 1993. At this stage, Mr. Aiyer moved in for the kill. He let it be known that he intended to close down the business, having removed the fittings into storage with another company with which he had a business relationship, which company in due course raised inflated invoices for the storage fees. He then intended to secure the transfer of the company in its entirety to yet another company, with which it is believed he had a continuing business relationship. It seems that, at about this time, he also sent to Companies House forms purporting to be the resignations of Mr. and Mrs. Preen as directors of their company.

So my constituents were in the position that their solvent company was being taken from them by a chartered accountant and licensed insolvency practitioner whom they had appointed initially to protect the company. To whom is the layman to turn in circumstances like these, when a professional is, to put it neutrally, failing in his or her duty, or, to put it realistically, being dishonest? The answer, of course, is that he should turn to the recognised professional body. That is the body charged within the profession to self-regulate.

On 13 July 1993, Mr. and Mrs. Preen reported Mr. Aiyer's conduct to the director of professional conduct at the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, which I shall refer to merely as the institute. They expected the professional body to act swiftly to protect members of the public. In this case, it might have been expected to be especially swift, because the disciplinary committee, on 20 October 1992, only two months before he was appointed to Mr. and Mrs. Preen's company, had found Mr. Aiyer guilty of misconduct within the meaning of its byelaws and liable to disciplinary action, in that, between January and June 1991, he had passed clients' moneys through his firm's office account. He had been reprimanded, fined and ordered to pay costs. Despite this knowledge, the institute took no action on the urgent complaint lodged in writing by Mr. and Mrs. Preen.

We now know that the investigation of Mr. Aiyer had been flawed.

It was not noticed that he was at that time not complying with the terms of the licence. We now know that, because on 8 November 1994 he pleaded guilty to having acted illegally as an insolvency practitioner from 1986 to 1993. He entered a plea of guilty to that at Luton magistrates court. Had the institute been diligent and discovered that when it investigated him in 1992—by which time he had already been acting illegally for some six years—none of the following would have happened.

For some time—not days, not weeks, but months—the institute's only response to the complaint was by standard pro forma notices of receipt of communications. My constituents firmly believe that, if the institute had acted professionally and competently when the complaint was lodged, the subsequent conduct of Mr. Aiyer could not have taken place, and they as members of the public would have received the protection from a corrupt accountant to which they were entitled, and which the institute is charged by statute to provide.

In the event, Mr. Aiyer continued with his plans. The assets were completely transferred away from Mr. and Mrs. Preen, who received not even one penny in the pound in respect of the amount standing as owing to them in the accounts of the solvent business at the time when Mr. Aiyer was appointed administrator at the end of 1992.

Mr. and Mrs. Preen became concerned that the institute was not taking any action. In December 1993, they contacted me, as constituency Member of Parliament for their place of residence, although not for their previous place of business.

On 4 January 1994, I commenced a correspondence with Mr. Greenwood, the case officer at the Institute of Chartered Accountants. I sought confirmation that an investigation was under way, and a time scale for that investigation. After a reminder some four weeks later, I received a response from the institute. It stated that the matter might be disposed of at the beginning of March 1994, but that, if a formal complaint to the disciplinary committee were preferred, it would be several months later.

Time passed, with no contact from the institute. I therefore wrote to Mr. Greenwood again on 21 July, putting it to him:

"Looking at this objectively, as an outsider, it does not look at all satisfactory. Here we have what is a genuine complaint, which may or may not be upheld in due course but which certainly requires investigation. You are the professional body charged with that investigation. It is taking months and you still cannot give any indication of a date when it will be concluded.

Are you satisfied with this state of affairs? If so, how do I explain to a constituent that the profession appears to have no interest in coming to a conclusion within a reasonable time scale. If you are not satisfied, would you like to suggest ways in which it could be improved, either by action of your own Institute or by Government intervention?

On the assumption that a profession should be unhappy with an unsatisfactory state of affairs, I will look forward to your response."

I received a holding reply, and, on 12 August, a fuller reply stating that the matter had "been discussed in March", and that a sub-committee had been set up

"to examine the papers in detail".

On the question of the time scale, Mr. Greenwood stated:

"this case has taken slightly over a year to reach its present position which is not, in my view, unsatisfactory".

I have to say that I do not share the institute's view that one year is a satisfactory length of time for a preliminary investigation of one of its members, particularly one who already had a record of disciplinary proceedings.

Following that, the customary period of silence ensued from the institute until I wrote to it on 15 October 1994 asking whether there had been any progress. Mr. Greenwood replied that there had been progress: the small sub-committee's report had "recently come to hand", and would be considered by the investigations committee on 29 November 1994. He went on to say:

"I or one of my colleagues will advise Mr. Preen of the outcome as soon as possible thereafter".

That was never done.

Mr. Preen contacted me again in February 1995, approaching 19 months after he had lodged the original complaint. It turned out that the matter had been considered in November, and that Mr. Aiyer had been asked to attend a committee on 3 January, subsequently adjourned to 31 January. None of that was communicated either to me or to Mr. and Mrs. Preen, and it might have remained a secret for ever had not Mr. Preen yet again initiated contact with the institute himself.

On 22 February, the institute wrote to Mr. Preen that the hearing on 31 January had been not a disciplinary hearing, but an interview aimed at assessing what might have caused problems in Fryer and Co., and what might best be done about them. A decision had been made not to prefer a formal complaint.

The institute went on to give the astounding news that the insolvency licence had in fact been withdrawn, saying:

"that was done last autumn, administratively, not by disciplinary action."

When challenged, the institute said that it was not its practice to make such a decision public until it took final effect.

[Mr. Peter Butler]

When it was asked for an explanation of that, it turned out that, in effect, Mr. Aiyer had been told that he could not take on any more clients, as he had been acting illegally for some years, but that he could continue with the clients he currently had. Presumably so that he could do that without his practice being disrupted, no one would be told that his licence had been revoked until March, some four months later.

I formed the view at this stage, as I think any reasonable man might have done, that the conduct of the institute as regards its investigations and disciplinary procedures was unsatisfactory. I therefore wrote to the president of the institute on 7 March, expressing my concern and saying:

"it would appear on the face of it that the Institute is not discharging its duties properly".

I asked for a meeting to discuss the case.

The president did not reply, but I had a response from the secretary and chief executive by letter of 14 March. In it, the secretary said that he was satisfied that the institute had discharged its duties properly and gave me, for the first time, the news that a prima facie case of misconduct had been found against Mr. Aiyer. He said:

"the investigation committee was of course aware of the withdrawal of Mr. Aiyer's licence and the impact that would make on his professional life".

I think that that phrase may be taken to sum up the view of the institute, which appears to be that its primary—almost sole—objective is to protect its members rather than to afford protection to the public. The secretary and chief executive made no reference to my request for a meeting to discuss the matter.

I was in exactly the same position that my constituents had been in. I was unable to persuade the institute to keep me properly informed, and I was unable to satisfy myself in the slightest that it had acted properly in this matter. It turned out that the administrative withdrawal of his licence referred to by the institute was as a result of the plea of guilty, to which I have already referred, entered by him in Luton magistrates court on 8 November 1994 to a charge that he had acted between 1986 and 1993 as an insolvency practitioner at a time when he was not qualified to do so, an offence contrary to section 389 of the Insolvency Act 1986. Mr. Aiyer was given a conditional discharge for two years and ordered to pay £100 costs. Even that was not a matter that the institute felt it necessary to bring to the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Preen as the complainants, or myself as their Member of Parliament.

That is the whole of this sorry tale. A man who did not comply with the requirements to permit him to practise as an insolvency practitioner none the less did so as a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, and under the protection of his membership of that institute, for some seven years. In the course of that time, the institute itself had taken disciplinary action against him on other matters but without noticing his failure to comply.

While he was in the process of what amounted to theft of my constituents' assets and company, the institute did not act with due dispatch and diligence in response to a complaint by members of the public who looked to the institute to regulate its members properly. Had the institute done what we have the right to expect it to have done, much of the damage would not have taken place.

My constituents have no redress against a bankrupt accountant, or against the institute, unless they can show that there was bad faith. What are they then to do except to take it up with their Member of Parliament, and by way of an Adjournment debate? I am led to believe that no sanction can be imposed by the House or the Secretary of State on the institute, other than the ultimate sanction of removing its right to license practitioners.

The whole story is a state of affairs that I no longer find acceptable. I know that meetings have taken place with the Insolvency Service and the institute to try to improve the institute's complaints procedure. Indeed, I believe that the institute has accepted that errors have been made in the past in a number of cases, and has promised to do better for the future. That is reassuring, but it does nothing at all to assist my constituents.

As a postscript to this sad tale of fraud, deception and incompetence, I can tell the House that Mr. Aiyer himself was made bankrupt at Luton county court in July 1996. This bankruptcy was described by the local press as having

"cost him a once successful business".

My constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Preen, know exactly how that feels.

The final irony is that the institute immediately washed its hands of the whole matter, on the basis that, as a bankrupt, he had automatically ceased to be a member.

I hope that the Minister, in replying to this brief debate, can assure the House that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales is, in his view, a competent body to carry out its duties and that arrangements are in place to ensure that it will do so in future, because it has singularly failed to do so in the past. If the Minister is unable to give that assurance, which I would of course accept from him, self-regulation will clearly have failed, in this part at least of the accountancy profession, and the Government must then be driven to consider something along the lines of the complaints tribunal or ombudsman which are applicable in other professions.

The director of the complaints section of the institute has said that he hopes

"it will be some consolation to"

Mr. and Mrs. Preen

"to know that shortcomings to which you drew attention have been addressed."

It is not the slightest consolation to a couple who placed their faith in a member of the institute and who have been defrauded of everything.

The issue that I have raised in the debate affects everybody who instructs and trusts any member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales. The dilatory correspondence, the failure to keep my constituents or me informed as promised, the undue delay and the lack of disciplinary penalty—all conducted behind a wall of secrecy and the grudging release of information only when pressed—lead me to believe that the institute is falling down on its statutory obligations. On behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Preen and the public generally, I look to the Minister for assurance that the institute will not be allowed to conduct itself in this way any longer.

10.14 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. John M. Taylor): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North–East (Mr. Butler) on securing a debate on this matter. I listened to his speech with interest. The important sentiment that seizes me is that I greatly sympathise with his constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Preen. They are clearly dissatisfied with the way in which matters proceeded following Mr. Aiyer's appointment as administrator of their company. Furthermore, they are most unhappy with the way in which the Institute of Chartered Accountants subsequently handled their complaint about Mr. Aiyer I shall return to their case, but I should like first to make some general points about the regulation of the insolvency profession.

One of the major recommendations of the review committee on insolvency law and practice, which was chaired by the late Sir Kenneth Cork, was that insolvency practitioners should be members of a recognised professional body approved by the Secretary of State. These proposals were accepted by the Government. Seven bodies, including the principal accountancy bodies and the Law Society, both in England and Wales and in Scotland, have been recognised to authorise insolvency practitioners. The Secretary of State also has a licensing function and currently authorises some 150 practitioners.

In 1992, my Department's insolvency service commenced a programme of routine monitoring visits to practitioners to test compliance with the legislation. Visits were undertaken both to practitioners authorised by the Secretary of State and to those authorised by the recognised bodies. The visits identified a number of practitioners with compliance problems.

Since 1994, the bodies have had in place a formal programme of monitoring visits to practitioners. The purpose of the visits is to assist in determining whether a practitioner is and continues to be fit and proper, and to promote compliance not only with statutory obligations but with best practice. It is clear from the monitoring process that the majority of practitioners are continuing to make improvements, and are now regarded as having acceptable procedures. When failures in compliance are identified, undertakings are sought where appropriate. In more serious cases, the authorising body will consider whether further action is necessary.

My officials in the Insolvency Service are and will continue to be in close contact with the bodies as part of the continuing development of the regulatory process. In particular, there is in place a programme whereby officials visit the bodies to examine their procedures in relation to authorisations and the monitoring and handling of complaints. Appropriate recommendations are made to the body concerned where there appears to be scope for improvement.

Following discussions between my officials, the professional bodies and the Society of Practitioners of Insolvency, agreement was reached earlier this year on the development of best practice guidance for practitioners. This followed concerns which had been raised, particularly in relation to the disclosure of remuneration and appointment procedures. The Society of Practitioners of Insolvency agreed to take the lead in the preparation of this guidance material, which is then issued by each of the bodies to its own practitioners. That is directed to ensuring that the highest standards are pursued, and that a consistent approach is adopted by all practitioners.

There has therefore been considerable progress in the development of the regulatory process since its introduction by the Insolvency Act 1986. The professional bodies are well aware that the regulation of the insolvency profession is the subject of continued scrutiny. This very morning, my officials met the professional bodies, who agreed in principle to set up a working party to review their experience of professional regulation in the 10 years since its introduction. The details of that review will be announced shortly, but clearly, everyone concerned in and with insolvency will welcome that development. I promise that my Department will play a full role in helping to take those discussions forward.

I refer to the particular case that concerns my hon. Friend and his constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Preen. My hon. Friend will recall meeting my officials earlier in the year to discuss his concerns. It is clear that the manner in which his constituents' complaints were dealt with by the Institute of Chartered Accountants was not all that it should have been. There were delays in the investigation into the complaint, and delays in communicating its progress and its outcome to Mr. and Mrs. Preen.

Mr. and Mrs. Preen were not the only people to complain about Mr. Aiyer. By the time the investigation into their complaint had been completed, the institute had already decided to withdraw his insolvency licence. Mr. Aiyer is no longer an authorised insolvency practitioner or an institute member.

I referred earlier to the monitoring visits that my officials make to the recognised professional bodies. Such a visit was made to the institute in 1995, as a result of which recommendations were made in relation to their procedures and practices. Because there were clearly concerns about the handling of Mr. and Mrs. Preen's complaint, my officials arranged to meet the director of the institute's department of professional conduct, Mr. Matthew Ives, and two of his senior colleagues. The meeting focused on not only Mr. and Mrs. Preen's concerns, but more general concerns over the way in which complaints made to the institute were dealt with, and the institute's response to the recommendations arising out of the monitoring visit.

The institute recognised that Mr. and Mrs. Preen remained dissatisfied with the way in which their complaint was handled, and acknowledges that matters were not dealt with as they might have been. There have, however, been material changes to the institute's procedures for handling complaints since Mr. and Mrs. Preen raised their concerns about Mr. Aiyer.

The director of professional conduct was able to point to the introduction of controls to ensure that the issues raised by the complainant are properly identified in every case at an early stage. Further controls ensure that the progress of the investigation into the complaint is closely monitored and managed. Additional resources have been allocated specifically to deal with insolvency-related complaints.

[Mr. John M. Taylor]

The institute recognises that those improvements come too late for Mr. and Mrs. Preen. The director of professional conduct has written to them to express his regret at their dissatisfaction, and his recognition that there were deficiencies in the handling of their case, for which he has apologised.

My hon. Friend asked me whether some sanction is available to my Department, short of withdrawing the recognition of a professional body, where it had proved itself to be incompetent in the regulation of its insolvency practitioner members. He will be aware that, under the legislation, my Department has no such sanction. Either a professional body is recognised or it is not. I hope that he will accept that most insolvency practitioners operate to a good and ethical standard most of the time and, in so doing, are effectively regulated by the recognised professional bodies. There are always exceptions to that rule, and clearly we are dealing with one such exception tonight.

As I have said before, and it merits saying again, the onus is on the profession and the recognised professional bodies to ensure that exceptional cases are reduced to the absolute minimum, if not eliminated entirely. My officials will be keeping a close watch on the institute's new procedures for handling complaints. It is important—the institute recognises this—that there is no repetition of such cases.

This has been a sorry tale, but I recognise that insolvency, whether it affects individuals or companies, will rarely bring much comfort, if any, to those involved. In such circumstances, insolvency practitioners have an obligation not only to apply their professional expertise but to ensure that the public interest is fully served, by acting in ways that are transparent and fair. Public confidence in the regulation system can only be maintained if the recognised professional bodies ensure that their approach to regulating their members is dedicated to the achievement of those objectives of transparency and fairness.

My Department will continue to press for improved standards within the professional bodies and among the practitioners that they regulate. I assure my hon. Friend that our aim remains a high standard of regulation in the insolvency profession. I thank him for bringing these matters to the Floor of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 24 October 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Business of the House

2.34 pm

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): As the House is aware, the debate on the Address in reply to the Gracious Speech will be brought to a conclusion on Wednesday 30 October, and you, Madam Speaker, have already indicated the pattern of that debate.

Following the conclusion of the debate on the Address, the business will be as follows:

THURSDAY 31 OCTOBER—Proceedings on the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill.

FRIDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Debate on the improving schools programme on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

In the week commencing 4 November, I envisage that a number of Bills will be set down for Second Reading, which will be published either later today or tomorrow.

There will be Government business on Thursday 7 November.

FRIDAY 8 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

In the week beginning 11 November, I envisage that Government business will be taken on each day and that there will be a number of other Second Readings of Bills to be published either this week or next. I can give one piece of information, which I hope will be helpful to the House, about the Thursday of that week. I propose that on Thursday 14 November there will be a debate on Hong Kong on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. The debate will be opened by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): I thank the Leader of the House for that information and for responding to our requests for another debate on Hong Kong.

As hon. Members will be aware, this will be a particularly short Session, and it is even more important than usual that the House has as much notice as possible of forthcoming business. I trust that the Leader of the House will try to keep us informed on that basis and I hope that he can confirm this afternoon that he will shortly be able to tell us the days which will be available for Second Reading of private Members' Bills and, indeed, which days will be constituency Fridays.

It would also help the House if the Leader of the House could give an indication, on an on-going basis, of when the Bills contained in the Queen's Speech are expected to be published, including, of course, the Bill to set up a paedophile register and the Bill to outlaw stalking, both of which the Prime Minister accepted yesterday should be Government Bills.

Following on from that, I should like to raise a question about the procedure that will be adopted on the guns Bill. The Home Secretary has said that he wants that Bill to be enacted as quickly as possible, and I think that that is common to both sides of the House, but can the Leader of the House give some indication of the time scale of that Bill? Given the very deep and serious concern in the country as a whole, will he urge his colleagues to think again about their refusal to allow a free vote on the important issues regarding the control of handguns, about which many hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned?

Finally, as the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has not asked to come and give a statement to the House about the latest evidence on bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and as the lobby of farmers yesterday confirmed our worst fears about the chaos surrounding the Government's management of the BSE crisis, when will the Minister of Agriculture make a statement to Parliament about the crisis, or is he too frightened to appear before the House?

Mr. Newton: Perhaps I might take the last point first, because, of course, my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture answered a private notice question on these matters in the House on our first day back in the spillover from the previous Session, so I hope that the hon. Lady will not feel it reasonable to press the implicit charge that she makes. I simply do not agree with the implicit charge that she made in the last part of her remarks.

As for research, my understanding is that the research published today confirms—or provides additional evidence—that there may be a link between BSE and the new strain of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Everything that the Government have done since advice was received from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee earlier in the year has been based exactly on that proposition. Indeed, it could be said that Government policy has proceeded on that basis for some six years now, because, earlier, action was taken that went beyond what the scientific advice strictly required at the time. I hope that the hon. Lady will reflect on what she said.

On a slightly different note, I was grateful to the hon. Lady for her acknowledgement of the advance notice that I gave of a debate on Hong Kong. As she rightly said, the Opposition have been asking for such a debate for some time. I am glad to have been able to respond.

I will, of course, give as much notice as possible of business. Given that none of the Bills has yet been published, the hon. Lady will appreciate the difficulties. However, much of her curiosity will be satisfied in the next 48 hours, and even more in the next nine or 10 days.

I readily undertake to give early information about the dates on which private Members' business will be taken, and the dates on which Government Fridays and constituency Fridays—non-sitting days—will fall.

We will publish the two Bills to which the hon. Lady referred as soon as possible. They were the subject of exchanges yesterday, and in accordance with the undertakings given, we will ensure that the Opposition are kept informed. However, I am unable to give definite dates now.

[Mr. Newton]

On the procedures with regard to the firearms legislation, I cannot add to what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday. It is our aim to publish the Bill either before the end of this month or shortly afterwards.

Sir Peter Emery (Honiton): At the start of a new Session, we welcome the fact that the Lord President is still in office. Will he consider the procedural reports that have not been debated, two or three of which would benefit from the views of the whole House being expressed? Will he bear in mind the possibility of finding a half day—if not this week or next week, at least in the near future—in which we could have that debate?

Mr. Newton: I greatly value the reports produced by the Procedure Committee, and am always mindful of my right hon. Friend's requests. However, at this particular moment I am dealing with a large number of requests for debates on Second Readings of various Bills. I may have to put those requests ahead of his, but I will bear it in mind.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I press the Leader of the House on the issue of a statement about the research on bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease? In seven months, scientists have produced some important and useful research. Should not that research have been available long ago? They have had seven or eight years to examine those results. Is not it extremely important that one of the responsible Ministers—none of whom will take part in the debate on the Loyal Address—comes before the House, explains the significance of this research for the eradication policy and, in particular, explains why that policy is months behind schedule? The promises that the Prime Minister made after the Florence meeting have all been broken, so why should we believe any new promises?

Mr. Newton: I cannot add to what I said to the hon. Lady. I will bring the hon. Gentleman's point to the attention of my right hon. Friends.

Mr. Nicholas Budgen (Wolverhampton, South–West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that speedy and agreed measures often lead to ill-considered and bad legislation, which is what happened with the Dangerous Dogs Act 1989? Is there a danger that the House, in its sympathy for the parents of Dunblane, will forget the legitimate arguments of the people who practise their skills in gun clubs? Would not it be better to have a careful debate on the Adjournment before we rush into legislation on the control of heavy-calibre pistols?

Mr. Newton: There is a general desire for action to be taken as a matter of urgency. That is not being done quite as hastily as my hon. Friend suggests. Lord Cullen made a long and careful study of these matters in the interval since the Dunblane shootings. I have no doubt that in the wake of that report, and in response to concerns in the country, the view of the House will be that it is right to make early progress.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Has the Leader of the House seen a transcript of the remarkable speech on the private finance initiative made by the Chancellor of Exchequer two years ago? The Chancellor apparently wants to restrict the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General to undertake value-for-money investigations of PFI contracts. In so far as the Comptroller and Auditor General is an Officer of the House and the Chancellor is part of the Executive, is it not an abuse of an Officer of the House to make such a statement and should not there be a full statement from the Dispatch Box?

Mr. Newton: I have not read the transcript but I have read a copy of the speech that I found in my box a few nights ago. I read it with some care and I do not regard it as saying what the hon. Gentleman says it says.

Mr. Bob Dunn (Dartford): Is it possible to arrange for a debate in Government time on the constitutional arrangements by which the country is governed, given that many Conservative Members wish to demonstrate our opposition to any changes affecting the working and composition of the House of Lords, to regional government, to the recreation of the Greater London council and to devolution for Scotland and Wales?

Mr. Newton: In the light of the pressures to which I have referred on our business in the next few weeks, I cannot make an immediate promise of such a debate. However, I congratulate my hon. Friend on making in such crisp and hard-hitting form the speech that he would make if there were to be such a debate.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Will the Leader of the House have a word with the appropriate Minister about the reduction in war pensions for those who were in the far east during the second world war? They received pensions arising from their duty at the time and recently some of them and some widows have had their pensions reduced because at the time the service men were smoking. As the Leader of the House used to be in charge of social security and is a heavy smoker, does not he have a little sympathy for those people who, 50 years ago, were not aware, as people are today, of the consequences of smoking? In any case, they were smoking because of the severe stress under which they were placed. May we have a statement on that and can the matter be reviewed?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that for some time I was the Minister responsible for these matters. I know how difficult they can be and he may be assured that I have great sympathy for those whose war pensions for disablement or death arising from service in the forces are in question. However, I have to underline that that is the basis of the policy. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will look carefully at what has been said about this case. It is important to remember that the scheme provides benefits when disablement or death are attributable to service in the armed forces.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): May we have a debate next week on the provision of leisure facilities so that I may put before the House the great difficulties that are faced by many riding schools? I am president of the Association of British Riding Schools, but I am not paid for that. The issue should be brought before the

House because many of those admirable institutions are being put out of business, thus denying riding facilities to many poor and ordinary people as well as denying a good and sensible living to those who run them.

Mr. Newton: I would not wish to dismiss my hon. Friend's legitimate concerns. However, it sounds like an appropriate subject for my hon. Friend to pursue on a Wednesday morning or in a daily Adjournment debate, and I am sure that he will seek to enlist your sympathy in that respect, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Why have we not had a statement today from the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this morning's European Court judgment on the VAT sixth directive? Hon. Members in all parts of the House and people in business have been telling the Government and the Treasury for some time that their proposals on VAT were unfair, unsound and open to legal challenge. As the potential bill for this and similar cases could run to many billions of pounds and make the Chancellor's predecessor's activities on black Wednesday look small in comparison, is it not high time that a Treasury Minister came to the Dispatch Box to tell us the exact consequences and implications of that court judgment?

Mr. Newton: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman appears to be engaging in a certain amount of hyperbole, but, as with many legal judgments, the first thing to do is to study the terms of this one carefully. I am advised, however—and this is where he was exaggerating—that, at the most extreme, the loss would be around £200 million, not the billions to which he refers, and that back tax would be payable only if traders could substantiate claims going back 23 years.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid-Staffordshire): Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a statement to be made on the amount of expenditure on the national health service? He will be aware that, yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition said that the last Labour Administration spent more in real terms on the health service than the current Conservative Government. It turns out that House of Commons Library statistics show that the Conservative Government spend in real terms some 40 per cent. more than the last Labour Administration. This matter needs to be put straight, as I am sure that the leader of the Labour party did not mean to mislead the House.

Mr. Newton: The point was very well made in an intervention yesterday afternoon and it was not answered. I have no doubt that my hon. Friend's further point will in due course elicit a response from the Leader of the Opposition.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In the first tranche of Second Reading Bills, will there be one dealing with the decommissioning of weapons, or is the delay since March due to the fact that perhaps both the Irish Government and Her Majesty's Government are not convinced that there will be a genuine ceasefire and do not wish to waste the House's time?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman knows that the reasons for giving careful consideration to these matters are not quite as he seeks to suggest. I cannot say that I expect the decommissioning Bill to be among the first tranche, but he will know that reference was made to it in the Gracious Speech.

Mr. Andrew Faulds (Warley, East): When can the House have an opportunity to debate the increased social damage that the intended bi-weekly Camelot lotteries will cause to poorer members throughout every community in the country, in every constituency in the country?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman will know that this follows a judgment, by the Director General of the Office of the National Lottery, under his responsibilities, that granting this application is consistent with the duties placed on him under the legislation, but both he and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage will monitor carefully the effect of the introduction of a midweek lottery and they will take into account the point that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Can my right hon. Friend find an early opportunity to discuss sport, particularly the Prime Minister's excellent proposal in relation to the British academy of sport, to give hon. Members the opportunity to talk about the excellent facilities that might be available in their constituencies? I am especially interested in pressing the case of Portland as the best place for a British academy of sport.

Mr. Newton: I take note, as I am sure my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will, of the pressure of the constituency interest, which I well understand. On the main thrust of the question, it is an attractive subject for a debate and I will bear it in mind.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will the Leader of the House reconsider his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) about firearms legislation? Is he aware that the reputation not just of the Government or the Opposition, but of Parliament is at stake? Following the Dunblane massacre, people in Britain were concerned about handguns and they are not giving in—and I hope that we will not—to the gun lobby. It seems inconceivable that Parliament will not have a free vote. Surely on such an issue there is every possible case for such a vote. As the Government have already climbed down on two matters yesterday, why do they not climb down on this issue and allow Members to have a free vote on whether we want a full ban on handguns?

Mr. Newton: I indicated to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), I hope courteously, that I cannot add to what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, and I am not going to do so in response to the hon. Gentleman either.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (The Wrekin): Does the Leader of the House share my astonishment at the Home Secretary's view that the quickest way to get legislation on to the statute book is by means of the private Member's Bill procedure? Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange a debate on parliamentary procedure and confirm that the majority of the Bills introduced by the 20 hon. Members who are lucky enough to be successful in the ballot never reach the statute book? Even the Bills that do reach the

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statute book take several months to do so. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern at the Home Secretary's ignorance of basic parliamentary facts?

Mr. Newton: On the contrary, I have been given some reason for concern in the last 30 seconds about the hon. Gentleman's understanding of parliamentary procedure and what occurs with private Members' Bills.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): When President Clinton was in Ireland, masses of people turned out in Belfast and Dublin wearing white ribbons to support the cause of peace. Today is Ceasefire Now Day in Ireland, as can be seen from early-day motion 42.

[*That this House notes that the Solidarity to Organise Peace (STOP) group is organising a Ceasefire Now Day on Thursday 24th October throughout the Irish Republic and for which they are asking for one minute's silence in memory of Warrant Officer James Bradwell, who was murdered at the Thiepval barracks in Lisburn; notes that on this day STOP will urge the Provisional IRA to call an immediate ceasefire, as desired by 71 per cent. of their own voters according to a poll in the Irish News, and will encourage the loyalist paramilitaries to maintain their own two year old ceasefire; and encourages all those who sympathise with this initiative to wear white ribbons in solidarity.*]

As a result, people in Ireland are repeating the exercise to which I referred. The demand for peace has not gone away. Is there some means by which the House can show its sympathy with that cause, such as a minute's silence for the warrant officer who was killed at Lisburn, and with the demands that the IRA should enter into a ceasefire—even if it only takes the form of the right hon. Gentleman's reply?

Mr. Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy, and I am happy to respond. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to raise those matters and make his points. I would like, as would everybody else in the House, to support the efforts of groups—wherever they may be—working for a peaceful and lasting settlement in Northern Ireland.

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Leeds, South): I suggest that the Secretary of State for Health addresses the House along the lines of his speech to the Association of Directors of Social Services last week, when he suggested that the future role of social services departments should be limited to purchasing. That comment seems ill-timed in view of the national report on child abuse, which obviously envisages social services departments continuing their current major role in dealing with child abuse.

Mr. Newton: From my knowledge of such matters, for which I have also had responsibility as a Minister, I believe that the hon. Gentleman is being somewhat unfair. None of the reports that I read of my right hon. Friend's remarks suggested anything other than a determination to ensure proper registration and inspection schemes for homes of whatever kind. The issue is how that is best achieved.

Mr. Toby Jessel (Twickenham): As the national lottery was mentioned a few moments ago, does my right hon. Friend consider that the time is right for a further general debate on that subject this winter—particularly in view of the national lottery's tremendous success in raising sums of money for the arts, the national heritage, sport and charities, which is a brilliant national achievement?

Mr. Newton: That is an attractive subject for debate, but one of the Bills expected to follow yesterday's Queen's Speech is connected with the national lottery, so that might provide the opportunity for a debate of the kind that my hon. Friend is seeking.

BILLS PRESENTED

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office

Mr. Secretary Rifkind, supported by Mr. Secretary Heseltine, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Lang, Mr. Anthony Nelson and Mr. Jeremy Hanley, presented a Bill to make provision about privileges and immunities in relation to an economic and trade office established in the United Kingdom by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 1.]

Local Government and Rating

Mr. Secretary Gummer, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Howard, Secretary Sir George Young, Mr. Secretary Forsyth, Mr. Secretary Hague, Mr. David Curry and Mr. James Clappison, presented a Bill to make further provision about non-domestic rating; to make further provision about parishes and parish councils; to confer additional powers on parish councils and community councils; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 2.]

Crime (Sentences)

Mr. Secretary Howard, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Rifkind, Mr. Secretary Dorrell, Secretary Sir Patrick Mayhew, Mr. Secretary Forsyth and Mr. David Maclean, presented a Bill to make further provision with respect to the treatment of offenders; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 3.]

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SECOND DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 October],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—[*Sir Norman Fowler.*]

Question again proposed.

Foreign Affairs and Defence

2.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Malcolm Rifkind): This debate offers the House the opportunity to consider British foreign policy against the background of a Europe that has changed more in the past 10 years than probably at any time since the French revolution in 1789. Over the past 10 years, we have seen the collapse of the Berlin wall, end of the cold war, disappearance of the Warsaw pact, disintegration of the Soviet Union and a series of other dramatic changes in Europe. They have had an effect which has resonated throughout the world and has had substantial global implications.

For some 44 years, our world was essentially a bi-polar world as the two alliances—the NATO alliance and the Warsaw pact—faced each other in a potentially threatening fashion. There were super-powers in each alliance—the United States and the Soviet Union—with massive nuclear arsenals. There was the ideological conflict of capitalism versus communism.

Those disagreements, disputes and conflicts were not limited to Europe. The cold war meant that events throughout the world were assessed, largely, in relation to their implications for the cold war. Indeed, the rest of the world called itself the third world. The very name it gave itself had significance only as an aspect of the cold war between the west and the Soviet Union. When there was a coup d'etat in Latin America, the main interest was whether it would produce a Government who were pro-communist or pro the United States. If there was a revolution in Africa, what were the implications for the cold war? If there was a civil war in Afghanistan, what were the geo-political considerations beyond Afghanistan in the wider international context?

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is taking a historical road and I should point out that this is the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising. Also, since it is the 40th anniversary of the Suez aggression, would it not be appropriate for the Government to publish a White Paper which, for the first time, gives the truth about what happened before the aggression and about the collusion which undoubtedly took place between the three Governments—the British, the French and the Israelis? After 40 years, why can we not be told the full truth at long last? Surely we are entitled to know.

Mr. Rifkind: I suspect that we do know the full truth. I am not aware of any significant unresolved issues. Although the hon. Gentleman's party has not been involved in producing White Papers for a long time, he should realise that the primary purpose of a White Paper is to look to the future. We are content to leave it to historians, taking into account Government documents, to assess the lessons of the past.

That bi-polar world is now behind us with the end of the cold war and we now have a multi-polar situation. There is only one world super-power, yet we have the development of global politics. So many issues are affecting the world as a whole in an unprecedented way. The last time there was a global world, it was based on colonial empires. All those empires—the British, the French and even the Russian—have now disappeared. The factors that now lead to global issues, which will increasingly dominate our debates and the interests of our country, do not arise simply as a result of the end of the cold war but have been given a spur because of that.

Market economy capitalism is dominant throughout the world. Almost every country, including communist China, is developing what is, in effect, a capitalist economy. We have an extraordinary development in personal communications and information technology which is accelerating and which will give rise to new global dimensions. We have the movement of capital in an unprecedented way which is making it impossible for any one country to have a completely separate economic policy.

We have the extraordinary growth of trade, not just with the single market in Europe or the North American Free Trade Agreement area, but with the countries of south-east Asia, Japan, Latin America and China which are increasingly becoming major international contributors to the extraordinary increase in global trade and are doing so through the disintegration of internal barriers to wealth creation and economic activity.

There are not just encouraging developments. There are new global threats of which we should be equally conscious. One of the most unwise predictions of recent years was that of the American philosopher who, at the end of the cold war, said that it was the end of history. I prefer the alternative statement which is that as one door closes another slams in your face.

We have significant new threats. The international development of terrorism and crime can be properly combated only by unprecedented international action. The threat of drugs is, clearly, an international threat with those who produce drugs and allow them to transit through their territory having to be involved in dealing with that difficulty.

There is the ever-present threat of weapons of mass destruction, and I do not mean only nuclear weapons, on which most attention has been focused. The increasing threat from chemical and biological weapons is introducing an entirely new dimension into the world, and it is relevant not only as a threat from states but as a potential threat from terrorist organisations.

We have increasingly become aware of the fact that environmental considerations can be understood properly only in global terms. Pollution knows no national boundaries—as we discovered when the Chernobyl disaster had implications for farmers in Wales and elsewhere. Those issues, too, require an international response.

The worrying and disturbing growth in religious extremism has major political consequences. I am not thinking only of Islamic extremism, although that has

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been the most visible example. The assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister by a fellow Israeli demonstrates a similar problem and is indicative of a serious and challenging difficulty that has to be dealt with.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): Bearing in mind the news this morning about what is happening in Burma, and given the record of oppression of minorities—including Christian minorities—by the State Law and Order Restoration Council and the Burmese Government, can my right hon. and learned Friend assure us that the international community is as anxious to stamp out the type of corrupt extremism practised in a country such as Burma as it is in stamping out corruption in countries closer to home?

Mr. Rifkind: Burma is one of the most disturbing examples of the suppression of basic political liberties, which is happening at a time when there has been a significant increase in political liberty in so many other parts of the world, including Asia. There is a need for international interest in this matter, and to use whatever means are available that would have some prospect of helping the growth of democratic institutions.

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston): Should the Danes revive their proposal for European sanctions in Burma until there is an improvement in human rights, will the Government—after the Foreign Secretary has expressed those sentiments—support them?

Mr. Rifkind: I should like to make two points. First, the level of European—including British—trade with Burma is insignificant; therefore, we should not kid ourselves that sanctions alone would have a significant impact. Secondly, the British Government's view is that economic sanctions can make sense only if they are endorsed by the United Nations. We do not believe that sanctions promoted by individual countries or groups of countries are likely to have an impact, which is precisely why we disagreed with the United States on sanctions against Iran. The Security Council gave its endorsement to such a policy in the case of Iran, which it did not in the case of Libya. Our view on sanctions against other countries is based on comparable considerations.

Sir David Steel (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Will the Foreign Secretary at least give us an assurance that, until there is a change of heart in Burma—including the promised dialogue with the opposition party and the lifting of restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi—there will be no further Government-sponsored trade missions to Burma?

Mr. Rifkind: We currently do not have such missions that I am aware of, and I do not think that it is at all likely that there will be a change in policy.

Sir Peter Emery (Honiton): Before the Foreign Secretary finishes the part of his speech dealing with Europe, will he consider much more fully the American desire to dash madly for NATO enlargement? Does he realise that, although it is correct that there is no way in which the Russians should be able to have a veto over any enlargement, it is necessary to ensure greater confidence between Russia and the rest of Europe? There must also be some lateral thinking on issues of non-aggression, weapons control and even non-aggression pacts, rather than build up the obvious fear of every leader of any party in Russia about the enlargement of NATO, whether that fear is justified or not.

Mr. Rifkind: I do not think that the countries of central and eastern Europe believe that there has been a "mad dash" towards allowing their membership of NATO. We are normally criticised by them because they believe that the entire process goes too slowly. I very much agree with my right hon. Friend that the issue of NATO enlargement should not be examined in isolation. If the policy is to be sensible, we must remember that European security is indivisible and that NATO enlargement should be part of a tripartite strategy.

I believe that NATO enlargement should go ahead, but it should be accompanied by a strategic relationship between NATO and Russia, very much for the type of reasons that my right hon. Friend the Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery) mentioned, and I believe that there must also be a coherent strategy for NATO's relations with those other countries that are not applying to join NATO—the most important being Ukraine—which also have very important security interests which we need to take into account.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) *rose—*

Mr. Rifkind: I want to make progress, but I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Winterton: My right hon. and learned Friend has mentioned some of the problems that have occurred recently. Will he mention the grotesque, dramatic refugee problem that now confronts the world? I shall not now mention Zaire, Rwanda or Burundi and the tragedy of the refugees in that part of Africa. I shall mention a small country in the north of India, Bhutan, and its problems with Nepal. What are the British Government doing to solve the severe and growing refugee problem in Bhutan and Nepal?

Mr. Rifkind: My hon. Friend is right: the movement of peoples, especially refugees, is a very serious problem in various parts of the world, and I am aware of the background to the problem in Bhutan. I do not claim that the United Kingdom can directly make a major impact on that problem—that is for the countries of the region to tackle—but my hon. Friend can assume that of course we will do our best, along with others, to help to solve that problem.

I have mentioned the way—

Sir Peter Tapsell (East Lindsey): While we are on the subject of NATO enlargement, may I say how very much I agree with what my old and right hon. Friend the Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery) said on that subject? [HON. MEMBERS: "Old?"] I meant a friend of long standing. He is much younger than I am, anyhow.

As a matter of wisdom, looking to the future, it would be very unhappy indeed if, at a time when Russia is going through what will be only a temporary phase of weakness, we were to give all the Russian leaders a feeling that we

are seeking to take advantage of that to create a position that will threaten their national future. It is very alarming if a succession of national leaders visit eastern Europe and promise individually that specific countries will be admitted to NATO by certain dates. Let us remember the pledge that we gave to Poland in 1939, which we were not effectively able to fulfil and for which the Poles have never really forgiven us, and for goodness sake do not let us make similar mistakes again.

Mr. Rifkind: It is precisely for the reasons that my hon. Friend gives that the process of considering NATO enlargement has been taken forward very slowly, cautiously and carefully in the past few years. I do not believe that we shall rush into those matters. It is likely that a decision will be taken by the middle of next year to enter into negotiations with some of the applicant countries. I cannot predict how long those negotiations will last. I hope that they will not last too long, because I do not believe that the uncertainty is of benefit, but I assure my hon. Friend that it is precisely because NATO is not only a political club—it involves commitments to collective security—that we must address those issues, and do so sensibly.

I mentioned the way in which we have moved into a multi-polar world, and I said that the challenges that confront us are very different from those that confronted us a few years ago. That is especially true in Europe. Much of the political debate, in this country and elsewhere, is about the future institutional development of the European Union—issues of majority voting, and so on. We should remember that, important though those issues are, they are not necessarily the most important ones confronting Europe.

In the past few years, we have been presented with some extraordinary challenges which have not yet been properly addressed. We have a great debate about what degree of integration is sensible in western Europe. It is worth remembering that the experience of central and eastern Europe has been not integration, but disintegration.

The Soviet Union collapsed into 16 separate countries. Yugoslavia disintegrated into five new states. Czechoslovakia broke up into two countries, fortunately peacefully. Therefore we have an experience of unprecedented integration in western Europe, when the experience of eastern Europe has been disintegration. One of the great challenges for the whole of Europe is to find a way to bring together those two parts of our continent in a way that can produce harmony and stability.

Yes, we witnessed the end of the cold war—the cold war has been seen to be a temporary aberration of European history—but it has been replaced by a pretty hot peace. We have not yet had peace and stability throughout Europe. I believe that, during the entire cold war, not one NATO or Warsaw pact soldier lost his life in conflict between the two alliances—not a single person—yet, in the years since the end of the cold war, we have had the slaughter in Bosnia and the great loss of life in Chechnya, Armenia and other parts of Europe.

I believe that the enlargement of the European Union will ultimately be even more important than the specific powers of European Union institutions, because unless we achieve a proper, meaningful and stable relationship with countries such as Ukraine and Russia—the new nation states of eastern Europe—we shall make a fundamental and historic mistake.

I have a suggestion for the House: we should stop talking about the former Soviet Union or the Commonwealth of Independent States when we refer to those countries. Countries such as Ukraine, Armenia and the Baltic states are now independent nations, just as Poland, Hungary, France, Britain or Germany are. Every time we refer to them as the former Soviet Union, we imply an identity that can be understood only by reference to their relationship with Moscow. We do not refer to Poland as the former Warsaw pact nor to the United States as the former British empire.

Sir Peter Emery: Shame.

Mr. Rifkind: If we can apply consistency, I do not mind, but until we refer to the United States as the former British empire, we should refer to those countries as what they are. Ukraine is eastern Europe; Russia is eastern Europe; Poland, Hungary and the other states are central Europe; and that geographical designation would have a political impact as well as being a more accurate reflection of their situation.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North-East): What about Scotland?

Mr. Rifkind: That is western Europe—I hope that that is not controversial.

I want to report briefly to the House on the intergovernmental conference, which continues to have serious and important deliberations. The timing is now pretty clear: at the Dublin summit later this year, the presidency will produce draft conclusions, not with a serious expectation of immediate agreement but to focus the debate more specifically on the outstanding issues, because only when one addresses texts does one know where each country stands and what are likely to be the important areas of difference. There is now total agreement that the Amsterdam summit of June next year will be the end of the intergovernmental conference. Britain agrees with that, and I believe that it is the view of all the member states.

Important progress is being made on issues such as the future of the Western European Union; there is not yet final agreement, but there is broad acceptance of the way in which we are heading on such matters. The important question of the relationship of WEU to the European Union remains, and I believe that our determination that the one should not be subordinated to the other will be reflected in the final conclusions.

On common foreign and security policy, on the role of national Parliaments and on the subsidiarity protocol, good progress has been made, and over the next few months satisfactory conclusions will be reached. Some issues will be more difficult to resolve than others, but I believe that it is right to draw attention to those on which progress is already being made.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): The Secretary of State mentioned the Western European Union. As he well knows, its enlargement is being discussed. How would that future enlargement be affected by the proposed enlargement of NATO to include the central European countries of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic?

Mr. Rifkind: There has been a foolish assumption in certain quarters—it is not being pursued now—that a

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country would be entitled to join WEU without joining NATO. That is an unsustainable proposition because WEU, like NATO, involves a commitment to collective security. Joining is not merely a political declaration. The treaty of Brussels, under which WEU was set up, is a treaty of collective security, but the assets that provide that security are NATO assets, so the United States has a crucial role. The political and factual reality is that one cannot be a full member of WEU without being a member of NATO. Only those countries that are contemplating joining both will be able to consider accession to WEU.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will my right hon. and learned Friend say a little more about the European Court? Many of my constituents know that, if the courts in this country do something that the Government believe to be wrong, the Government can introduce a Bill and change the law. My constituents are concerned that no power in the land—not Westminster and not even the Council of Ministers or the European Parliament—can reverse a European Court decision. Can we have an assurance that European Court decisions that politicians do not believe to be right can be reversed using European Community mechanisms?

Mr. Rifkind: The European Court was created by the treaty and can therefore be changed by treaty amendment. The intergovernmental conference provides an opportunity to make certain changes. The United Kingdom has published its proposals—I shall not go into them today, but they are available to the House. That is the way in which one deals with any such situation.

The single most important issue for the intergovernmental conference is only beginning to be addressed now—flexibility. We must consider the extent to which groups of European Union states will be able to act together, when not all member states wish to do so, and still have access to European Union institutions. If they do not want access to EU institutions, there is no problem, as the Schengen agreement has shown. Any group of countries can join together on their own initiative and take certain actions jointly. However—this is a fundamental British position—access to European Union institutions for those in such agreements is acceptable only if all 15 states agree. We believe that not for theoretical or ideological reasons, but because access to European institutions means the involvement of the European Commission, the European Court of Justice and the budget. That is not acceptable unless all 15 agree.

Such agreement is possible, as with the Europol convention. The issue was whether countries under the Europol convention should have access to the European Court of Justice. The final agreement was that the other 14 states would have access to the European Court of Justice on Europol matters and the United Kingdom would not. That arrangement is acceptable because it was agreed by all 15 member states.

I do not suggest that we or any other country have thought out all the implications of flexibility. It is a fundamental issue and much more work needs to be done in this country and elsewhere if we are to move in that direction. No one doubts that the European Union of the future will be flexible—that is unavoidable and such flexibility already exists to some extent. The issues are how the system will work, what the institutional implications will be and how the interests of minorities as well as majorities can be properly safeguarded.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has just said that the way to change a European Court decision that people find offensive is by altering treaties? Cannot European Union regulations and directives be altered under current treaty arrangements? If the other method is the only one available, we are really into something rather tight.

Mr. Rifkind: That is a fair point. Part of the problem has been that some directives have not been properly drafted and have been insufficiently precise about what is required. That inevitably gives the European Court the opportunity to make law as well as to interpret it. There is a need for greater precision, clarity and care in the drafting of directives and regulations. I am saying to those who criticise the powers of the European Court that those powers are created by treaty and can be amended only by amending the treaty. That is a straightforward point.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend's caution on flexibility, but given that we are all under the single jurisdiction of the European institutions, which tends to be an enlarging and deepening jurisdiction, if we allow some member states to take that jurisdiction even further just for themselves, what protection will we have against that jurisdiction extending to the other member states? That is particularly problematic, given that we have a single market with freedom of trade, free and open borders for workers in the European Union and a free transfer of rights between individuals of member states. Is it not increasingly becoming impossible to compartmentalise jurisdiction in some states and not others, unless those states have a constitutional safeguard to prevent the court from enlarging its jurisdiction unilaterally?

Mr. Rifkind: I have considerable sympathy with my hon. Friend, who sums up an important part of the challenge that we face. However, we cannot duck that challenge. We already have flexibility and it will increase. The challenge for all member states is how to manage that flexibility—what degree of flexibility should be permitted with access to European institutions and how to prevent the unacceptable consequences to which my hon. Friend referred.

I do not claim that we have all the answers today. That is precisely why I said that more work needs to be done and that our final judgment on these matters will be determined and not just influenced by whether we find a satisfactory way of managing them. We cannot avoid the issue. Flexibility already exists and is bound to increase as the European Union enlarges. The real challenge is not whether we deal with it but how we deal with it.

Before I leave the subject of the European Union, let me refer to certain remarks made by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook).

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Rifkind: Let me make some progress first. Perhaps I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

I noted with interest that, in his speech to the Labour party conference, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"we are going to put jobs at the head of the European agenda . . . jobs will be the bottom line by which we judge whether Britain will join any single currency."

So jobs are the most important criterion—the single question. Yet, in the same breath—[HON. MEMBERS: "Not the single important question."] The right hon. Gentleman certainly said that jobs were the most important consideration. He said that they would be the bottom line and at the head of our European agenda. He said that jobs would be both at the head of the agenda and the bottom line. Yet, in the same breath, he said that, within the first year after the general election, if there were a Labour Government they would end the British opt-out and sign up to the social chapter. No attempt was made to reconcile those brave words which are mutually incompatible.

The right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that unemployment in Britain is the lowest in Europe and is declining at a time when in other member states it is larger and increasing. In Britain, the figure is below 8 per cent. In Germany, it has been 8 and 9 per cent. In France, it is 12 per cent.; in Italy, 15 per cent.; and in Spain, 22 per cent. and increasing. If the right hon. Gentleman says that that is all very well, but it cannot be credited to the British Government, let me remind him what has been said by others whom he may consider more impartial. Let me remind him what was said in *Le Monde* on 20 October last year.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Last year?

Mr. Rifkind: Yes. I am coming up to the present day. *Le Monde* remarked:

"How does one interpret the incredible change in unemployment in Great Britain? If unemployment is dropping in Great Britain, it is because they have done everything to deserve it. For several years, considerable efforts have been made to improve the workings of the labour market thereby boosting job and new company creations".

Philips, the Dutch company, said:

"The most competitive country in Europe today is the UK. It has a great sense of realism, a great sense of the competitive spirit".

The chairman of BMW in Germany said:

"Great Britain is currently the most attractive country among all European locations for producing cars."

The Leader of the Opposition went to Germany and lectured the German CBI. He might like to know what the president of the German CBI said about the causes of unemployment:

"Excessively high German labour costs are costing more and more German jobs. There is really no call for minimum wages in our economic system".

Mr. MacShane: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Rifkind: In a moment. The right hon. Member for Livingston has to make up his mind: either he wants to make jobs a priority or he wishes to give priority to his ideological objectives. He cannot do both.

In his recent interview in the *New Statesman and Society*, the right hon. Member for Livingston made a remarkable statement:

"The terrific potential for a Labour victory in Britain is that not only would you have a straight majority of Prime Ministers at the EU summit from socialist sister parties, but you would also then have one of the key players in Europe on their side. With a Labour Government in Britain we could put together an alliance that would enable a different agenda at those EU summits."

He says that that is a socialist agenda. I understand that socialism is not a dirty word for him. In a recent interview, he said:

"I am not afraid to use that word—socialism".

I wonder from whom he was distinguishing himself. I wonder especially what is the socialist agenda in Europe to which he is committed, because we have not heard much about one from the Leader of the Opposition. He does not tell us anything about socialist agendas or suggest that that is why a Labour Government are required. Since such an agenda is the pet scheme of the right hon. Gentleman, I would be grateful if he could enlighten us on it.

Mr. MacShane *rose—*

Mr. Rifkind: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. I know that he often speaks for his Front-Bench team, and I am sure that he is about to do so now.

Mr. MacShane: The Foreign Secretary gave us unattributed quotes from *Le Monde* of a year ago and mentioned a German leader. May I put to him the remarks last week of Mr. Adair Turner of the CBI? He praised Germany, pointing out that its growth rate in per capita gross domestic product had been higher than that of the United States in the past five, indeed 10, years, and said that the high wages—there is no minimum wage in Germany—forced managers to compete effectively and that the German model had much to teach Britain. Instead of patronising Germany, would the right hon. and learned Gentleman care to learn something from it?

Mr. Rifkind: I am happy to praise Germany and its economy. It has had the remarkable good sense to reject socialist government for the past 10 to 15 years. That may in part explain the phenomenon to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Mr. Peter Shore (Bethnal Green and Stepney): The Foreign Secretary has been very generous with his time, but I really think that he should treat the House more seriously when he is discussing such issues and should abandon, for a time at any rate, the more frivolous approach that he is adopting.

Surely we can get the right hon. and learned Gentleman to agree with this: the social chapter, as a major issue, is a fraud. There is virtually nothing in it, and although it may suit him to pretend that it will have an enormous effect on costs in Britain, he knows that that is untrue. I know very well that my hon. Friends know it to be untrue as well. It is an empty satchel.

What matters, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman pointed out, are the different labour costs in different parts of Europe. They are due to national legislation rather than to the social chapter. They are also due—I should like him to give his view on this—to the fact that continental European countries are still bound in with the exchange rate mechanism and have exchange rate policies that are not competitive. We have enjoyed precisely the revival in

[Mr. Peter Shore]

the economy that has occurred because we escaped the ERM and are in a much more competitive exchange rate position.

Mr. Rifkind: I have no quarrel with part of what the right hon. Gentleman says, but he knows perfectly well that the main reason why other member states of the European Union want to force us into the social chapter is that they wish to erode our competitive advantage, which arises out of the lesser non-labour costs that the UK enjoys. That has been endorsed by the leaders of German industry as well as by industry in other countries.

I am conscious of the fact that the new challenges that we face in Europe and around the world have to be reflected in the nature of our foreign policy. For the years to come, I believe that British foreign policy should be founded on four basic pillars. The first is the partnership of nations, which is our concept of the way in which the European Union should develop. Secondly, we need to take forward the transatlantic dimension: the concept of Atlantic free trade. The move towards tightening our links with the countries of north America is crucial. I am particularly delighted at the first meeting of the Oxford Forum—bringing together American congressmen, Members of Parliament and German parliamentarians—because in recent times there has been minimum contact at parliamentary level. Congress takes a deep interest in seeking to influence foreign policy but, sadly, congressmen have not always been keen to meet foreigners. That has been a problem, but we are slowly overcoming it.

I believe that the third pillar of our foreign policy should be promotion of the extraordinary asset that we have in the English language. The English-speaking world and the Commonwealth are a great British asset. The Commonwealth covers a quarter of the globe, and it is an asset not only to us but to all the countries within it, because of our common interests.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will my right hon. and learned Friend therefore give his support to BBC World Service Television for the valuable role that it plays in ensuring that not only the English language but independent news is heard throughout the world?

Mr. Rifkind: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I look forward to the day when BBC World Service Television has the same extraordinary success as the BBC World Service has had and continues to have. That must be the target, and it is an objective that we support.

The fourth pillar on which our foreign policy needs to be based is the championing of global free trade. Early next month, the President of the Board of Trade and I will publish a White Paper on the fundamental link between free trade and foreign policy. I believe that that is a natural subject in which the United Kingdom can take a lead. We are by nature a merchant free trading nation and, just as within the European Union we have advanced the cause of free trade and the breaking down of economic barriers, so at global level, as the world moves towards adopting the year 2020 as the target date for global free trade, the United Kingdom has a special contribution to make.

The four pillars of our foreign policy are best summed up by Tennyson's description of the Duke of Wellington:

"that tower of strength

Which stood four-square to all the winds that blew!"

That is the approach that we should adopt.

Before I conclude, I shall refer briefly to three or four specific areas of the world—

Mr. Menzies Campbell *rose—*

Mr. Rifkind: I shall not take up too much of the time of the House, because I know that many hon. Members wish to speak, but I shall give way to the hon. and learned Gentleman.

Mr. Campbell: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way—although I cannot match his literary allusion. While he is talking about the principles that should govern British foreign policy, will he say whether he agrees that one should be the need to promote respect for human rights, which was mentioned in the Gracious Speech? If so, how does he explain our continued willingness to supply arms to the Government of Indonesia while they are engaged in the brutal suppression of East Timor?

Mr. Rifkind: We do not provide the Indonesian Government with arms that are used in East Timor, but we are prepared to provide equipment legitimately required by that Government for the external defence of Indonesia. That is our criterion, and it has been consistently applied.

I shall talk first about Hong Kong, which is perhaps the single most important priority for the United Kingdom in terms of our obligations over the next year. Useful progress has been made this year, and the Prime Minister and I could depend on no one more than my friend, the Governor of Hong Kong, because of the extraordinarily impressive way in which he has carried out his responsibilities. In his policy address on 2 October he revealed the determination with which he wishes to take forward those responsibilities.

One of the important decisions still to be taken is the appointment of the first chief executive of Hong Kong. We welcome the fact that the Chinese Government have said that they recognise that the choice of person for that post will be crucial in determining the confidence of the people of Hong Kong, and we look forward to hearing of that choice.

British responsibilities and interests in Hong Kong will not end in June next year. It is sometimes assumed that after that date we shall somehow have no continuing involvement or responsibility, but that could not be further from the truth. We are building our consulate general there, which will be one of our largest anywhere in the world—much larger than many of our embassies in other parts of the world. That reflects the fact that we have billions of pounds' worth of assets in Hong Kong, and that our trade with Hong Kong is even greater than our trade with China. Hundreds of thousands of people there will continue to hold British passports. Most important, we shall continue to have an ethical responsibility to help the people of Hong Kong when problems arise, as they undoubtedly will in the years to come.

I must express my concern at the reported remarks by the Chinese Foreign Minister about freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in Hong Kong after the handover. Freedom of the press and freedom of assembly are guaranteed by the joint declaration and by the Basic Law. No mention has been made of the restrictions suggested by the Chinese Foreign Minister in his reported remarks. We have urged the Chinese Government at the highest level to clarify the remarks, as it is important that they should reassure the people of Hong Kong in this sensitive area.

Another key issue is whether a provisional legislature should be created. We have made it clear to the Chinese Government that there is no justification for establishing such a provisional legislature and that the members of the Legislative Council should be allowed to serve their natural four-year term of office. China must show that Hong Kong will be run by the people of Hong Kong, and that can be achieved only if the legislature comprises those who have been freely and openly elected by the people of Hong Kong. Neither the joint declaration nor the Basic Law makes mention of a provisional legislature, and China must explain how any such arrangement would be compatible with either. The establishment of a provisional legislature would seriously call into question the commitments made in the joint declaration. The House has heard that we will have a debate on Hong Kong later this year, and that is all I wish to say on that subject at present.

I now turn briefly to the important issue of Cyprus and the future of that divided island. The recent violence has shown how fragile the peace has been recently. We have a great interest in the future of Cyprus. We are one of the guarantor powers, and we have the sovereign base areas on the island. This country is home to more than 250,000 Cypriots. A political settlement next year would be enormously important to Cyprus and to Europe, and there ought to be better prospects for such a settlement than there have been for some time. Cyprus wants to join the European Union, and that will be much easier if it is a united island. It would be extraordinarily difficult to incorporate a divided island into the EU, and that point is increasingly understood.

I recently appointed Sir David Hannay as the British special representative in Cyprus. I did that not because we intend to have a separate British initiative, but because it is important that Britain, the United States and the EU work closely together to make the maximum contribution. I plan to visit Cyprus before Christmas. That will be the first full-scale bilateral visit to Cyprus by a Foreign Secretary since independence in 1960 as, until now, it has been thought inappropriate for such a visit to take place. I look forward to meeting President Klerides in Nicosia, and Mr. Rauf Denktas in his capacity as leader of the Turkish Cypriot community. We will do our best to work with others towards a settlement of the dispute.

I wish to comment on recent allegations about our relations with Argentina and on the recent speculation on the arms embargo. The Government have from time to time considered the partial relaxation of the arms embargo, and we have recognised that some relaxation could take place. However, we have concluded that the time is not yet right. If we decide to implement any relaxation of the embargo, there will of course be an announcement to Parliament. The allegation that the Department of Trade and Industry's advice to Rolls-Royce in June 1995 reflected any change in the arms embargo or was linked in some way to the oil agreement is absurd and has no foundation. I am happy to clarify that point.

I wish to comment briefly on Bosnia. The House will be aware that a peace implementation conference will be held in London in early December. We are all conscious of the great success of the implementation force—IFOR—operation, but the mandate of that force comes to an end later this year. Nor is the civilian reconstruction work at an end.

The main thrust of our policy as we approach the London conference should be to develop the concept of a contractual relationship between the international community and the various parties in Bosnia. We must impress on them that, if they wish to continue to receive military support and economic help, it is necessary for there to be a clearer understanding of the measures that they will take to rebuild their countries, to restore the dialogue between the Bosnian Government and the Bosnian Serbs and to help to reconstruct a single Bosnia-Herzegovina. The international community cannot be expected to stay in Bosnia indefinitely, and the operation must continue on the basis of a clear understanding of our priorities and the conditions that have been accepted by the countries concerned.

The middle east peace process is the final area to which I wish to refer. It, too, is an area that has given rise to enormous concern. We were all full of euphoria until a few months ago, but in recent times the situation has become very grave. I shall be in Israel and certain other countries of the middle east in a couple of weeks and I do not intend to launch some separate dramatic initiative. I believe that the proper role for the international community is to speak with a single voice. The future of the peace process will depend on the Israelis and the Palestinians, not on any other country. It is for them, if at all possible, to enter into real dialogue and to make substantive progress on the outstanding issues. I believe that the United States, United Kingdom and France are the three countries of the international community that can most influence the outcome, but I believe that the way in which that can be properly taken forward is by close co-ordination of the international community and by putting forward our maximum contribution to assisting those working for peace.

The first step that we would like to see is, of course, agreement on Hebron. It is being negotiated at the present time, but it has not yet been fully concluded. I believe that, if there is an agreement on Hebron, it will not be the end of the road. It will not be the final statement on the matter. It will not itself have revived the peace process, because other undertakings have already been given which still have to be fully complied with. I am most worried at this precise moment about the situation in Gaza, where I believe the international relief organisations, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, are not able to carry out their full responsibilities and are not getting the co-operation, both on access to the area and on the work that they are doing, to which they are entitled. It will be important to urge the Israeli authorities to reconsider some of the restrictions and controls. Any restrictions that are not legitimate on the ground of security should not be there. I believe that the security need can sometimes be exaggerated and used to try to justify controls and restrictions that are unacceptable and are causing grave suffering. It is necessary to work for progress in that area, and that is what we shall seek to do.

I have mentioned that there are four pillars to British foreign policy: the partnership of nations for our European policy; the transatlantic relationship; the Commonwealth

[Mr. Rifkind]

and English-speaking world; and the growth of global free trade. That gives Britain a unique role in the world, not as an empire but as a medium-sized power with global influence. I believe that Britain's interests coincide with the interests of the world community as a whole.

There are three particular interests to which I shall refer. The obvious one of peace throughout the world is something with which we identify, as does every other civilised country. Secondly, there is prosperity, which can best be achieved through free trade and through the growth of liberal capitalism, which is increasingly becoming the universal philosophy of the modern world. Thirdly, there is global respect for personal liberty and for the rule of law. It is in the area of personal liberty and the rule of law that the United Kingdom also has a particular contribution to make, because those qualities have existed and flourished in this country probably for longer than in any other country.

Those are the objectives of our foreign policy. I commend them to the House.

3.48 pm

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston): Yesterday, the Prime Minister set the House a sterling example of bipartisanship when he went for what appeared to be an impromptu expansion of the Gracious Speech and included two measures that had been left out only because, apparently, the Government were in doubt whether Labour would support them. I am touched by the vision of the Government going through the measures in the Queen's Speech, working out whether Labour would support them and leaving out those that they felt we might not support.

I am also inspired by the bipartisan approach that the Prime Minister showed yesterday, so, to try to build as much common ground as I can with the Secretary of State, I shall at the outset of my speech focus on the areas where we agree—before relaxing into the disagreement with which both he and I are more comfortable.

I should like to respond to the Secretary of State's opening remarks about the international world that we now inhabit. There has never been an era in which international affairs were more intimately related to the domestic agenda, or a greater need for us to debate them coolly and rationally as part of those issues that concern us in our domestic society.

Our economy depends on our success in getting access for our trade in a global marketplace. Our environment will survive only if we get agreement on control of the global climate. Our security depends critically on the agreements that we can make on global weapons that have an intercontinental reach and a massive capacity for destruction.

Whether other countries have Governments who measure up to acceptable and responsible standards of behaviour is no longer a matter only for the populations of those countries, but may be of immediate and direct relevance to us. As a result of the collapse of central authority in Afghanistan, 80 per cent. of the heroin reaching the streets of London comes from that country. The present vacuum in the leadership of Russia has led to strikes over unpaid wages in nuclear power stations, which could have severe consequences for our country and for the rest of Europe.

We are all members of the world community. We all have a clear interest in ensuring that the international institutions that police and support the world community are in working order. I thoroughly agree with the sentiments expressed by the Foreign Secretary in his opening remarks. If we are serious, we must follow through the logic of those sentiments in the conduct of some of our policies.

During the Foreign Secretary's speech, we heard some interesting interventions on fundamentalism and terrorism, on migration, and on the environmental threat to the global climate. Those three major threats to the order of the international community have a common root in poverty. If we want to encourage the residents of poor countries to stay there and not to embark on migration, we must give them the hope of development within their own countries. If we want to protect the global climate against development in the third world, particularly in tropical countries—which, in turn, threatens our own climate—we must provide those countries with the means to achieve sustainable development so that they can protect their environments.

I put it to the Foreign Secretary that if he is concerned about the rise of fundamentalism, the increase in migration and the environmental threat, it is odd that the consistent trend of the Government's conduct on overseas aid has been repeatedly to cut the aid budget. Overseas aid is now only 0.29 per cent. of our gross domestic product. We are apparently about to receive a report from the National Audit Office which spells out that, at the very time when the aid budget has been decreasing, the proportion given in support of British trade—rather than for the relief of poverty—has been increasing.

Another consequence for policy arising from these considerations relates to the United Nations. Too often, United Nations institutions, such as the World bank, have pursued structural adjustment policies that were the exact opposite of the development policies required to tackle poverty. That is why many of us want a reform of the United Nations that gives at least as much weight to the Economic and Social Council as it gives to the Security Council.

In the past two decades, the world has undertaken many days of negotiations and spent many millions of pounds trying to contain conflicts after they have erupted. Those conflicts could have been resolved with less effort and much more cheaply had we first tackled the poverty that bred them.

Mr. Nigel Evans *rose—*

Mr. David Howell (Guildford) *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I shall give way to the right hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell).

Mr. Howell: I was interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about overseas aid. Private direct investment in developing countries, including some of the poorest countries of Africa, is running at $380 billion, which is about 20 times the total amount for overseas aid and technical assistance. We recognise the value of technical assistance, but do we have the right hon. Gentleman's support for further encouragement of private

investment as the engine of development, rather than reliance on the old business of cash-to-cash aid from Government to Government?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman has no problem with our support for private direct investment, which provides the technological transfer that is so important. If he speaks to those who are in government in those countries, he will be told that although the private direct investment is welcome, it is no substitute for public sector aid. First, direct investment goes overwhelmingly to the urban population, not to the rural poor. Secondly, direct investment will come only on the back of infrastructure development, which is possible only with official direct aid.

Mr. Evans: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No, I should like to proceed for a moment.

I was rather struck by the fact that, on the birthday of the United Nations, the Foreign Secretary's only reference to that organisation was in response to an intervention by me. I had hoped that this would be an appropriate debate on an appropriate day to extend the Government's best wishes to the United Nations by announcing that Britain intends to join UNESCO once again and take up its place in that organisation. If we are genuinely concerned about the complex nature of the world and the rise in fundamentalism, what are we doing staying out of the one international body that is committed to promoting cultural understanding and co-existence?

It would be pleasing to think that the importance of these international issues and their immediate relevance to a domestic agenda explains the fact that half the text of the Gracious Speech is about foreign affairs, but I rather suspect that it has more to do with the meagre menu of domestic measures proposed by the Government. Given their problems with the political situation at home, it is probably wise for them to talk as much as possible about the political situation abroad.

The next 12 months will certainly be rich and busy in foreign policy. Many fascinating and important events that will appear on the world stage are reflected in the Gracious Speech. They include the transfer of Hong Kong, the forthcoming summit on NATO enlargement and the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in October. Common to all those events is the fact that they address serious issues in international relations. They also offer challenges and opportunities for British diplomacy and will take place under the next Government, not the present one. I say that with increased confidence after the Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation this morning in which he said that the general election will be held no later than 1 May. We would welcome it earlier if it were possible to arrange that, but International Labour Day is an excellent date for this Government's day of reckoning.

Meantime, the House is in the odd position of being invited to debate the Government's policies on events in world affairs which will not occur until, mercifully, we have an opportunity to be rid of them. The first example is the transfer of Hong Kong, which will take place on 30 June. By 1 May, if that is the date of the general election, every detail of the transfer will have been buttoned down. The hour of sunset at which the British flag is to be lowered will have been settled. The lament by a lone piper will have been chosen by then and, in relation to the transfer, there will be nothing left for an incoming Government to resolve. The present Government will have to accept responsibility for the terms of transfer that they have negotiated and agreed.

I welcome the fact that the Government have responded to our pressure for a debate on Hong Kong. The Foreign Secretary will be aware that it is more than a year since we last debated Hong Kong and that in less than a year Hong Kong will be transferred. I shall develop our concerns at greater length in that debate, but I take this opportunity to echo the concern that the Foreign Secretary expressed about the interview of Qing Qichen in *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. In that interview, he expressed the view that the freedom of expression of the people of Hong Kong will not extend to criticism of Chinese Government leaders and that the right to demonstrate will not extend to the right to commemorate the Tiananmen square massacre. Moreover, those constraints on their rights will be maintained whatever is said in the Basic Law.

The interview gives rise to two serious areas of concern. There is the immediate concern that it suggests an understanding that the political freedoms of the people of Hong Kong after the transfer will be much more restricted than anything that has been envisaged so far, but it also gives rise to wider concern in that it reveals an alarming belief that the state can override legal rights. Were the conduct of the People's Republic of China after transfer to reflect those comments, it would be bad for Hong Kong, because it would be denied democratic rights, and for China, because it would reinforce its image as a country that has difficulty coming to terms with democratic principles and democratic words. It would also, however, be bad for Britain because it would reveal us as having left Hong Kong without an agreement that could keep in place open and democratic systems after our departure.

I shall pick up on what the Foreign Secretary said about Cyprus. Again, I find myself 90 per cent. in agreement with him. I agree that it is important for the negotiations on Cyprus's accession to the European Union that the dispute over the island be resolved. I think that the Foreign Secretary's exact words were that accession would be "much easier", but there can be no agreement over the division of Cyprus without the agreement of Turkey, and Turkey does not want Cyprus to succeed in its application to join the EU. I therefore put it to him strongly that, while we should work for an early resolution of the dispute over the island, we must be careful that we concede no Turkish veto over Cyprus's right to apply to, or to be admitted to, the EU.

I shall refer to two other foreign affairs issues before moving on to the semi-domestic debate on European issues. The first is the stalemate in the middle east peace process. The Oslo agreements provided an historic opportunity for reconciliation in the middle east after two bitter generations of conflict. We must not let that opportunity be lost. Sadly, the crack of the revolver that shot Yitzhak Rabin a year ago this month still reverberates throughout the middle east.

I wish to be clear with the House, which is entitled to assert this: the majority of electors in Israel did not vote to reduce the peace process to an impasse. Israel's Prime Minister was elected by a narrow majority on a commitment to "peace with security". The Israeli people

[Mr. Cook]

voted for security, but they also wanted peace because they knew that, without peace, there would be no security. If there is no progress in the peace process, we may be left with no process either. If my comments differ, therefore, from the Israeli Government's position, it is not that I am critical of the Israeli people, many of whom share the points that I am about to make.

The first and urgent priority must be to restore momentum to the peace process. Two qualities are required if it is to resume successfully. The first is that we must restore trust on both sides. Both sides must be confident that the other will deliver on the commitments that it gave in Oslo. I strongly endorse the Foreign Secretary's invitation to the Israeli Government to proceed with the withdrawal from Hebron, which is three months overdue and was agreed by the previous Government.

The second quality is hope that peace will bring an improvement in the quality of life on both sides of the divide. A fortnight before the tragic killings, I visited both Israel and the Palestinian authority. I was shocked by the subsequent violence, but I was not surprised that things in the Palestinian region boiled over.

Last year, when the Foreign Secretary addressed the House, he said that there had been substantial economic progress in the Palestinian region. I am sorry to report that that is not now the case. Unfortunately, for most Palestinians, the past year of the peace process has been associated with a reduction in the standard of life. Tens of thousands have lost their jobs as a result of the closure of the border. Restoring freedom of movement into and out of Israel, or even safe passage between different parts of the Palestinian authority, would be the most convincing way that the Government of Israel could demonstrate their commitment to the peace process and that that process will lead to an improvement in the quality of life for the Palestinian people.

Mr. Winnick: Is my right hon. Friend aware that people who adopt the attitude that Israel has as much right to exist as any other country will be encouraged in the main by his remarks? The best service that the pro-Israelis can do now is to speak up, as my right hon. Friend is doing, for common sense and against the extremists in Israel—who, I hope, do not represent the views of the vast majority of Israeli people. At the end of the day, there must be a Palestinian state as well as Israel.

Mr. Cook: I believe that it is entirely possible for us to speak as friends both of Israel and of the Palestinian people.

We have a direct interest in the settlement of that issue. While I was in Israel, I happened to bump into Lord Archer, who I understand was scouring the country for votes for the Conservative party—an entirely legitimate activity. I spent one evening addressing a meeting of people who were minded to vote for the Labour party in this country. We handed out 350 forms, of which more than 300 have been completed and returned by people anxious to vote for a Labour Government in Britain. That is a demonstration of the historic, cultural and community ties between our nations. If those ties give us the right to canvass votes, they also confer on us the responsibility to give friendly support in getting the peace process back on the road with—yes—the objective of peace with security for Israel, but with the recognition that that can be secured only on the basis of peace with justice for the Palestinians.

Before I turn to matters that divide the House, I shall respond to the Foreign Secretary's observations on Bosnia. We are one year on from Dayton. The House can take satisfaction at the implementation of the military side of the peace agreement. I salute the dedication, patience and professionalism of British troops participating in the implementation force and their role in achieving its objectives.

One year on from Dayton is a fair period to suggest that an explanation is owed by the commentators and politicians who claimed that a more robust approach to ending the war in Bosnia was impossible because the casualties would be too high and too many troops would be required. Since the NATO intervention that made possible the Dayton agreement, there have been fewer casualties among the international forces than in the preceding years, when they acted only as peacekeepers.

The implementation force has one major remaining task, which must be carried out if civilian and political reconstruction is to succeed. The war criminals still at large must be brought to book. It is difficult to comprehend why it is thought so impossible to achieve that objective. IFOR states that if it comes across Mr. Karadzic, he will be arrested. Pale is not such a big town—it is smaller than most traditional market towns in Britain. It is difficult to believe that it was not possible at some time during the past year to bump into Mr. Karadzic.

There is the real danger, as Carl Bildt pointed out that month, that the policy of arresting Mr. Karadzic if he is found is becoming a non-policy. The risk for Bosnia is that there can be no reconciliation in that country unless it is true that there is no immunity for war crimes. That principle extends wider than Bosnia. If the persons who committed atrocities in Bosnia are allowed to get away with them, the next time there is a similar civil conflict, that message will be absorbed by the individuals who give the orders in that conflict.

I think that I have managed to carry most hon. Members with me so far, and it is plainly time to inject a note of normal debate. I began by stressing the continuity of domestic concerns and global issues. In the modern world, nations are more interdependent than independent, and co-operation and partnership are not just desirable but essential to the quality of life of our people.

A central feature of foreign affairs debates in the House has been the increasingly strident demand on the Government to be as rude as possible to our immediate European neighbours. That is un unpromising platform from which to begin to achieve contact with the rest of the globe. The past year has seen the expression of the view that Britain should withdraw from Europe move from the fringes of the Conservative party to its main stream. In the past six months, the former Chancellor, the former Chief Secretary and even the present Chief Secretary have all, in various ways, suggested that withdrawal from the European Union might be practical. Not one of them was rebuked within 24 hours by the Minister of State, the Foreign Office's baronet in residence, appearing on "The World at One" telling them that they were out of line. I have to say that I would have

more sympathy if he were to do that to his colleagues who urge upon the Government a course of action which would plainly be disastrous for Britain's foreign relations.

I must say to Conservative Members who have in the past year expressed views about detaching Britain from Europe that they are in danger of believing their own speeches and falling for the myths that they peddle. Hon. Members may shake their heads, but three years ago I was one of the shadows of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Hamilton), who has been much in the news lately. It was a humble if not humbling role.

I remember the hon. Gentleman addressing the Conservative party conference. He told that conference that the caramel directive of the European Union took 12,000 words whereas it took only 200 words to put together the Lord's prayer. I was impressed by the comparison and telephoned the European Union movement to ask if it could help me trace the caramel directive. A weary spokesman told me that there was no caramel directive and that that line had begun as an after-dinner joke by Sir John Banham some two years previously in Brussels. I telephoned the Minister's office and asked whether they were aware that the caramel directive did not exist. I received a weary reply from a spokesman in the Minister's office, who said that they were aware that the Minister was wrong about the caramel directive but that he was right about the length of Lord's prayer. I fear that that quality of research lies behind some of the knee-jerk anti-Europeanism to which we have been subjected during the past three years.

I know that the Foreign Secretary does not share those views, although he sometimes finds it convenient not to admit to that. There is a curious omission in his section of the Gracious Speech. The really big thing that is due to happen in Foreign Affairs in the next 12 months is that on 1 July next year Britain will enter the troika of the European Union and on 1 January 1998 it will become the President of the European Union. That is not referred to anywhere in the Gracious Speech, but it is likely to be the issue that will most preoccupy the Foreign Office—*[Interruption.]* None of the issues in the foreign affairs section of the Gracious Speech requires legislation.

I understand why the presidency of the EU is not mentioned. If we want to accept that role, we have to accept the role of leadership at the top of the table, not heckling from the bottom. We have to accept the objective of seeking out the point of consensus in the European Union, not constantly priding ourselves on being the odd one out. Finding themselves with that opportunity and the challenge of being President of the European Union would be as big an embarrassment to the Government as to the rest of Europe.

I read repeatedly in the newspapers that, from now until the general election, the role of Europe in the Conservative election strategy will be to provide an opportunity to demonstrate strength through confrontation. We have been here before. Earlier this year, the Government displayed confrontation with Europe on heroic technicolor panavision scale in the war over British beef, which the Foreign Secretary very diplomatically and delicately did not mention once in his review of world affairs. We demonstrated our strength by a policy of serial vetoing, which, I understand, the Foreign Secretary thought up, called the policy of non-co-operation in Europe or—as I have discovered it was known to his officials—PONCE.

It may now be an appropriate time to ask, what good did PONCE do? It did not do the Conservative party much good; successive opinion polls established that the public were less, not more, likely to vote Conservative as a result of PONCE. The reason is simple. The public knew that the BSE crisis was made in Britain by a Government who had failed to provide the regulations that would keep BSE out of foodstuffs.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): Indeed weakened the proposed regulations.

Mr. Cook: As my hon. Friend corrects me, the Government weakened those regulations. After BSE appeared, they denied that there was a significant risk of its transmission to humans—a denial that looks doubly irresponsible in the face of today's heavy scientific evidence, which shows that that was a virtually certain transmission. The public knew that the stage-managed war with Brussels was another case of BSE—blame someone else.

The beef war not only did no good to the Conservative party, it did no good to farmers, as they loudly reminded us yesterday.

The beef war ended in the Florence agreement, hailed by the Foreign Secretary as a turning point. I understand why mention of the Florence agreement buries him in his briefing papers. I shall quote to the House what the Prime Minister said when he reported on the Florence agreement:

> "We aim to be in a position to tell the Commission by October that we have met the necessary conditions for decisions to lift the ban on two of the five stages—that is, certified herds and animals born after a specified date".—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1996; Vol. 280, c. 21.]

By October. I think I will carry the House with me on a bipartisan approach to the fact that this is the month of October, that there are seven days left and that not one hon. Member believes that, by next Thursday, those two of the five stages of the ban will have been lifted. The main reason why they will not be lifted is that the Government, having hailed the Florence agreement as a triumph, chose not to implement their side of the bargain.

The House must ask some questions. What is the Government strategy for getting the export ban lifted? What will we now do to ensure that the continentals honour the Florence agreement, now that we have not honoured our side of the bargain? If we have written off the Florence agreement, what will we do instead? Most of all, surely we are now entitled to ask: what was the beef war fought for? Why did we take on the whole of Europe to achieve nothing?

I am bound to say that all previous Governments had the wisdom not to wage war with France and Germany at the same time. All previous Governments, even Conservative ones, ensured that, in any previous war, one or other was on our side. They sought to turn the balance of power on the continent to British advantage. Only the Government have fashioned a foreign policy that takes on the whole of Europe at the same time.

That approach has met with incomprehension in the rest of Europe. It was well expressed by the Foreign Secretary's immediate predecessor, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), who has retired to the Back

[Mr. Cook]

Benches but continues to take an interest in such affairs. At the time of the beef war, he wrote:

"In the past few weeks, I have listened to Danish, Irish, French and Dutch friends of Britain. They do not see anything heroic about our present debate. They look on us rather as an elderly and respected relative suffering from a spasm in the corner of the room. They cannot do much to help us; they hope that the fit will pass before we do ourselves too much harm."

The clear lesson of the past three or four years is that the repeated confrontation with Europe—the fits and spasms referred to by the Foreign Secretary's predecessor—will pass only when the Government pass.

I should like to share with the Foreign Secretary my total agreement with the priorities he attributed to Labour's policy towards Europe. Yes, we will sign up to the social chapter. Is he aware that three dozen of the biggest and most efficient British companies have already signed up to the social chapter by implementing works council agreements? In doing so, they have said that having an agreement with their work force on the future strategy of their company is an aid, not a barrier, to competitiveness.

Yes, Labour has allies in Europe in the party of European Socialists—three of whom were kind enough to send messages of good will to our party conference. We offer Britain a Government who will have the respect, not the contempt, of the Governments of the other member states of Europe.

Yes, jobs will be at the top of our agenda and our bottom line—the alpha to omega of our European policy. I should mention one of the other spheres in which the Government are becoming isolated. I understand that the Government intend to persist in blocking an employment chapter in the treaty of union when they go to the Dublin summit and intergovernmental conference.

What possible national interest does Britain have in blocking the promotion of employment becoming an objective of the European Union? The Maastricht treaty, after all, sets out precise, tight objectives on Government spending, public debt and inflation. The Government did not object to those objectives being written into the treaty of European Union. A fortnight ago, I saw the Prime Minister on television taking credit for drafting those objectives. I suspect that the rest of Europe are now willing to let him have that credit, given that the period in which they have been aspiring to those objectives has coincided with lower growth and higher unemployment in their economies. That is why, across Europe, there is now growing support to balance those financial objectives with a commitment to employment.

In their time in office, the Government have promoted a dramatic shift in the nature of work. When they came to power, 60 per cent. of the work force were in full-time permanent jobs. This year, 60 per cent. of the work force are in temporary, short-term or casual forms of employment. Job insecurity is the barrier to the feel-good factor for which the Government are searching.

Against that background, I should tell Ministers that we will be delighted to take them on in a general election which they fight on the basis of their commitment to stop the European Union promoting stable employment. The fact that they will go to Dublin to fulfil that commitment demonstrates exactly how out of touch they are with the public's real worries. The people want a Government who do not delight in posturing over the fact that they refuse to agree with the rest of Europe. The public want a Government who can do business with Europe and get deals done in Europe.

The public do not want a Government who regard with fear the other member states as threats, but a Government who recognise those states as neighbours with whom we share common problems and must share common solutions. They want a Government who do not constantly block any measure to improve social conditions, and are determined to provide the people of Britain with the same rights at work as the rest of Europe—not with the worst rights in Europe.

The public want a Government who believe sovereignty rests with the people. They want a Government who understand that the real threat to the freedoms, rights and liberties of the British people is not from Brussels but from the ever increasing power that the Government are centralising in Whitehall. The people want a Government who will practise real subsidiarity, devolving power back to the regions and local communities of Britain. A Labour Government offer that.

If Conservative Members want a general election fought on the European issue, fine, we are ready for it—and we are confident that we can win it. We know that Conservative Members are not confident that they can. If they thought that they could win, instead of this half attempt at half a parliamentary Session, we would now be having a general election.

A general election is the one measure that the Government could announce that would command real popularity. It is the one step that would restore a feel-good factor and give to the people the hope of the fresh start that Britain now needs in Europe.

4.24 pm

Mr. David Howell (Guildford): I welcome the fact that we are debating foreign policy today and that the subject has not been relegated to Friday, which has been the practice in recent years. That is confirmation of the point made by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), that never before have domestic issues been so intimately interwoven with foreign policy issues, in every area, from jobs to home loan rates and our entire way of life.

I begin with the first paragraph of the Gracious Speech, which outlines some of Her Majesty's involvements with countries round the world in the coming year: Brazil, Thailand, India, Canada, Pakistan and Israel are mentioned. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary is shortly to go to Israel, and I hope that he has better luck—I am sure that he will—than the President of France, who recently experienced some difficulties there.

I pick the first paragraph because it reminds us—and we need reminding, especially when we consider the main preoccupations of the speech that we have just heard—that there is a wider world, and that foreign policy is not only about Europe and its problems—although of course we have to set those right. It is the mission of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, of its Ministers and of my right hon. and learned Friend, as he said in his excellent speech,

"to promote and protect British interests and influence."

To do that, we need to look beyond Europe and beyond the niceties of the European debate, which has, unfortunately, dominated our discussions so far this afternoon.

The *Financial Times* estimates—it is just a shot in the dark, but it is probably not too far out—that by 2003, only seven years away, the emerging markets such as Latin America, south-east Asia, Africa, central Asia and the Pacific rim will have a larger output than all the so-called advanced industrial countries put together. That is the most important reality of all. My right hon. and learned Friend grasped that fully in his excellent survey of the future.

The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs—when it has not been bogged down like everyone else in endless issues arising from the European Union and in the latest ideas, some of them hair-raising, flying around from the intergovernmental conference—has tried to point out in its reports that the wider world and its markets should be the main focus of this country's interests and foreign policy over the next 10 years. That is why we drew up a report on the Commonwealth, trying to point out that it is not merely an old club of people who are fond of criticising the former metropolitan power, but a new and vibrant network of some of the fastest-growing markets of the modern world. Our interests, exports and skills will be especially suitable for those markets and that gives us a huge advantage over other countries. The Select Committee is also preparing as quickly as possible a report on Latin America, another vast area in which there was tremendously close British involvement in the past.

It is not only a matter of considering foreign policy in terms of geographical areas. It will continue to be important to consider the promotion and protection of our interests and influence in terms of the networks—rather than continental or regional blocs—into which the world is increasingly being organised. The second or third largest of those networks is south-east Asia, run by the large group of overseas Chinese who operate a borderless economy that spans Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Jakarta, Australasia, Hong Kong and Singapore. That is probably one of the world's biggest economies and it is a network into which we have to link. We fail to do so at our cost.

Mercosur in Latin America already accounts for 7 per cent. of the planet's gross national product, and will grow very fast—faster, I suspect, than the more mature economies of western Europe. We should also bear in mind the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation grouping and all our friends in east and central Europe, to which my right hon. and learned Friend rightly referred. They are now beginning to adjust to the market economy and are very anxious to develop links with Britain. When the British travel in those parts of the world, too often one hears the remark, "Where have you been?"

Some fascinating new groupings that are emerging may become more important for money, jobs and exports than our immediate continental neighbours. Such countries include the Black sea grouping and the Ukraine, which my right hon. and learned Friend rightly mentioned, as well as the new countries of central Asia, which lie beyond that—once parts of what he rightly says we must not keep referring to as the former Soviet Union.

All those countries are alive with prospects. They have vast reserves of raw materials. The centre of gravity of the oil industry is moving back to where it started from in the Caspian sea and the central Asian region, changing the face of geopolitics.

As my right hon. and learned Friend set out, with his four pillars, our foreign policy must take account of a totally new pattern of interests, which we have to protect and promote. The key elements—the most visible part—are investment and capital flows. Those, not trade, are the gigantic forces of the world international system. Trade follows capital flows, induced by the huge capital investments flowing into the developing countries and rapidly making those markets emerge and mature fully.

Some politicians are slow to perceive what is happening, which is that some so-called emerging countries are leapfrogging the so-called developed countries, not just in investment and infrastructure, but in social structures. Systems of social security and genuine welfare support are developing based on the private sector and private pension schemes, marrying the state obligation with private finance to deliver higher standards of social security and welfare as well as higher general standards of living. Some Latin American countries provide good examples, Chile being the most telling. Chile generates enormous private pension funds, producing secure pensions for its citizens and such great savings that a supposedly developing country—indeed, a few years ago it was bankrupt, with hyper-inflation under a military regime—is now a major exporter of capital. It can save all that it wants for all its infrastructure and still export capital.

Our foreign policy thinking must adjust to that speed of events. The world is completely different from the one that we were thinking about 10 years ago, the heyday of believing that western Europe—and the European Union—was, in the short-cut and unthinking language of American management, "the only game in town". That era has passed.

To protect and promote our interests, we must catch hold of certain developments that did not exist before. One is the concept of overseas production. The Japanese talk of their overseas production, but no such concept exists in British statistics and one never hears it mentioned in policy discussion. It means the output of the vast amount of British-owned investment around the world. We are in the big league of the world's super-investors. From factories operated, owned and located by British interests flows a vast amount of production, which does not show up in the trade figures. That shows the absurdity of making judgments about the importance of bilateral relations on the basis of the trade figures.

The evidence is that an increasing proportion of the production emerging from British-invested and owned plants, factories, services and operations around the world is generating a huge income and represents an important part of our national interest. Sixty per cent. of our visible and invisible earnings—which are themselves dated and meaningless concepts—comes from outside western Europe. While recognising fully the importance of our own back yard in Europe, we should note that the greater proportion of our income comes from outside the European Union.

Our trade and business has changed. It no longer comprises products and manufactures, but comprises knowledge-intensive, service-intensive operations—

[Mr. David Howell]

products with a huge information content. Our maligned but highly efficient financial services, in which I declare a personal interest, have become one of the dominating forces in our export effort. If we are concerned with the promotion and protection of our interests and influence, we should ensure that those financial services are operated successfully and allowed to trade round the world on an even bigger scale.

London is already the centre of the world's capital-raising system. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend understands that it is completely in our interests to ensure that the wealth-creating machine that has developed in the past 10 years and has provided security for billions of pounds' worth of infrastructure assets in the developing countries—a point that the right hon. Member for Livingston fails to understand—operates successfully.

It is also enormously important to promote cultural diplomacy, commercial door-opening, opportunity-seizing and the general encouragement of Britain-friendly attitudes that are the backdrop to successful investment and capital flow. I shall return to that point in a moment, as I am not sure whether we are putting enough muscle behind that effort yet, although I know it is my right hon. and learned Friend's intention.

As my right hon. and learned Friend rightly said, our island has two huge advantages in this new world, with new trade patterns and new systems creating a change in the centre of gravity of the entire planet and a shift in favour of the so-called former developing countries—many of which have now developed.

As we said in the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and as my right hon. and learned Friend fully recognised, we have the Commonwealth network. It is transregional and not just another bloc. It is a most amazing network and does not always work in our favour, but as my right hon. and learned Friend rightly says, it is bound together largely by the English language, a common business culture and a heartwarming pro-British sentiment.

Britain left behind an empire, yet got a good word from most of our former colonies. We are now welcome not only in Commonwealth countries, but in Latin America where there are enormous pro-British ties, a longing for the British to return in force—as some of our businesses are now doing—and almost an obsession with learning English and seeking to promote ties with the British culture. It is an enormous business. An estimated 1 billion people throughout the world are either learning or seeking to learn English—with an English accent. That does not mean that business comes our way automatically, but it provides a fabulous basis for the export of our services, technology and information methods.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only the English language that binds us, but English law? Does he further agree that it is no coincidence that Britain is the largest foreign investor in the United States and that, similarly, the United States is the largest single investor in the United Kingdom? English law makes it easy for the United Kingdom, the United States and Commonwealth countries to conduct international trade.

Mr. Howell: I should even cap what my hon. Friend says. Such links are a question of not only common understanding about the systems of law but the amazing network of common understanding about a vast range of professions—architecture, accountancy, medical professions of every kind and scientific research. It is a fantastic network.

When the Foreign Affairs Committee sought to study all such things, it was surprised—perhaps other hon. Members were not—that as it lifted the lid on the Commonwealth, which has not been a very popular concept in this country for the past 20 years, it found a huge range of non-governmental contacts and links all over the globe that are flourishing and growing even faster today as new countries queue to join it. If new members are crowding in to join the Commonwealth, so much for the view that it is a dying concept. That is the background against which my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary rightly set out his pillars of foreign policy development.

One would expect from what my right hon. and learned Friend said—I know that this is the way in which his mind is working—that a large part of the emphasis of our resources and effort in external policy would switch towards every kind of scholastic, cultural and commercial contact, to encourage the flow of investment, the use of the Commonwealth network to which I have referred, and the promotion of English language teaching and vast local operations such as the Cultura groups in Brazil and Argentina, which are huge communities devoted entirely to the promotion of the English language and English culture. The question that must be asked is how much we are getting all that in focus at the moment and whether we could not sharpen that focus somewhat.

I must come to some awkward figures, which at the moment do not quite fit with the picture of the future that I am painting. First, in the diplomatic wing of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, within which there are many commercial posts and where effort is being mobilised to bring about the kind of world that I am describing, we find that the budget is being slashed. It is being reduced from this year's £1.4 billion to about £1 billion in 1998-99.

On the cultural diplomacy front, where neighbouring countries are mounting huge efforts to create inducements to encourage capital flows and inward investment into the so-called developing—in fact, developed—world, where future markets will be, we find that the excellent BBC World Service is under considerable constraints. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend has rightly pointed out that the resources which go in that direction are still great, but we are talking about priorities, not marginal concerns in external policy.

Through the British Council, the machinery can be set in motion in all the emerging market countries to establish the exchange of scholarships. They produce the additional desire for people to come to this country on paid educational visits as students, which is a colossal business and a vast export earner. We may criticise British education and may not have got it all right, but people want to come to this country for higher and specialist education. We can vastly encourage such visits through British Council work, yet many of its operations round the world run on a shoestring and are reduced to one or two people. Another pair of hands—I am not saying that more is always better—could generate vast additional business.

We find that added value in terms of prosperity and jobs in this country is being constrained, which indicates to me that the Treasury has not quite got the message that I am trying to share with the House. If we want value added in the new conditions and operations of the global economic system and the kind of security that we all seek in such a system, it is no use just thinking about Europe, just spending a third of our diplomatic resources in western Europe—for that is where they go—or slashing at the diplomatic wing, the World Service and the British Council on some spurious doctrine that every poppy must be cut to the same height and that every area should take the same amount of cuts. That is not priority-making, but wild cutting, which does not make sense in terms of the foreign policy priorities that my right hon. and learned Friend has set out so clearly.

One has to look at the overall external budget. I once heard my noble Friend Lord Howe, who was an extremely effective Foreign Secretary, say that the one thing that he regretted in his time was that he never had a chance to look at the overall external budgets of the United Kingdom, including defence, as well as, of course, the diplomatic wing, the World Service, the British Council and the Overseas Development Administration, and review the priorities on the basis of the whole canvas of our external spending.

I see that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is sitting on the Front Bench next to my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary, who was a very distinguished Secretary of State for Defence himself. I know that their budgets are squeezed and that their ears are full of the cries of excellent soldiers, airmen and sailors, who are saying how difficult it is to conduct their new defence arrangements with a mere £21.4 billion and that they do not like being squeezed by the Treasury any more than anyone else. But I have to lay before them the lopsided oddity of our external budget. Although at one end of the budget there is £21.4 billion, the diplomatic wing is being cut and cut, and judging from all the rumours, is about to be cut still further in areas where a few extra pairs of hands could earn colossal added value for this country.

My comments are not those of a Member of Parliament who has gone native about the Foreign Office. I am as critical as anybody of some of the policy activities of that Whitehall Department. But the National Audit Office put the argument succinctly when it said that every £1 spent in the commercial posts of British embassies in south-east Asia between 1993 and 1995—this is very precise—generated an extra £77 in earnings and business for Britain. For every £10 million, an extra £800 million is generated. That is very big added value; an enormous increment. We should be investing in it rather than cutting it back.

As I said, I know that the defence side is under pressure. Yet, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, we are going to buy 232 Eurofighter aircraft for £16 billion, which works out at £68 million each. I know that the marginal costs will be less and I hope that that £68 million includes delivery, charges, number plates and after-sales service, but that is a lot of money. Although it may seem a facile comparison on a superficial level, underneath there is a serious point that, for the cost of just four of those aircraft at £68 million each, we could transform the budgets of this nation's commercial efforts, the position of the diplomatic wing and the power with which the BBC World Service can spread the British cultural point of view round the world. The British Council could generate tens if not hundreds of millions of pounds in extra earnings from educational services and many other intellectual and knowledge services as well.

Although I realise that such comments are not practical politics, could we please look at that overall balance in a way that ensures that we put the money where the earnings will be in future and we do not get too dominated by the problems of security, economics and politics in the European theatre?

Diplomatic spending is running at half the French level and one third of the German level. When the Foreign Affairs Committee went to Latin America recently, we checked some figures and found that throughout Latin America, which is booming and moving into an era of massive export growth based on sound currency and open regionalism, the UK has 117 personnel in post, excluding locally hired personnel. Germany has 427 personnel there, France 384 and Italy 333. Even if half my analysis were right, such areas must be considered again. It is necessary to think in terms of some adjustments to the distribution of our scarce resources. Every pound must be fought for, as it is taxpayers' money and should not and cannot be freely spent.

So what does one conclude? Of course it is right, and inevitable, that most of the debate will be about Europe, because the European Union questions must be settled. I believe that the wait-and-see policy on the single currency can be developed into a strong and sensible policy. Indeed, it is the only sensible policy. I am a pro-European, and to my mind that policy can be seen as part of supporting the further integration of Europe.

The all-out political rush for the single currency is a dagger pointed at the heart of European unity. Nothing but division and difficulty will arise from the attempt to fabricate convergence on the basis of political will. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary made a superb speech at the Conservative party conference about the importance—and indeed, the sheer common sense as well as the constructive Europeanism—of waiting and seeing. I believe that he was right. That is exactly the policy that we should pursue.

I hope, too, that we can be good Europeans concerning common interests in foreign policy, without being sucked into the federalist ambitions for a single foreign policy and a single institutional machine to run it. In the light of what I said earlier about the fact that all the growth is outside Europe, we simply cannot afford to be corralled into that narrow European regionalism. It is essential that we rebalance our external preoccupations. I make that point as much to the Opposition as to anyone else.

We should also think in terms of rebalancing our scarce resources. Our resource effort should focus more on Asia, including the Indian sub-continent, where there is massive potential and marvellous good will, and huge markets are opening for the British. That effort should also concentrate on Latin America, which I have already mentioned, and on all our friends in eastern and central Europe, who are waiting for us.

At home we should mirror that emphasis, with domestic policies designed to encourage, or at least to remove the obstacles from, the export industries of tomorrow, which are education, research, financial services, language teaching and audio-visual activities of every kind, in which we lead the world.

[Mr. Howell]

I believe that British potential is as excellent as it ever was. Yesterday the Leader of the Opposition, in a dismal speech, talked about the "fracturing" of Britain. He cannot have travelled in the places where the action is happening. If he did so, he would find that United Kingdom businesses and services are marching rapidly and successfully into those new markets.

People see that Britain has falling unemployment and a sound currency, and that we have been through the difficulties of deregulation and modernisation—with much sweat and effort, and despite the total opposition of the Labour party at every point throughout the past 15 years—and have emerged as an extremely strong economy superbly positioned to take advantage of the new world that I have described.

Business is leading the way, and those who think about foreign policy must fall into line. I believe that my right hon. and learned Friend thinks deeply and sees that way forward, but others—some, dare I say it, are around him, and certainly many are on the Opposition Benches—are dragging their feet and refuse to face the conditions of the modern world. I beg them to do so.

4.52 pm

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I do not want to follow the right hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell) down the path that he took. Instead I shall consider areas of foreign policy, some of which were mentioned in the Queen's Speech and some of which were not, and I shall try to draw some lessons for us to learn as we come to the fag end of this Government and think about the way in which they have run our foreign affairs.

The Government have responded well in some areas, but like all other Governments they have failed to realise the need to continue that response. As a result, we see on our television screens and in the other media that the problems that we put off until tomorrow are revisiting us today.

I shall start with Zaire. Initially the world community reacted speedily and positively to the genocide that broke out in central Africa in 1994. Then, as usually happens in complicated foreign affairs, tiredness set in—the tiredness of the international community in the face of constant streams of refugees throughout the world, in eastern Europe, in parts of Africa and elsewhere. The refugees excite and concern us all until they are safely settled in their refugee camps. We send blankets and various things that they need for clean water and food; then we hand them over to someone else and say that they are someone else's problem.

Once a Government of sorts were established in Rwanda and the thousands of Hutu and Tutsi refugees were locked into the camps in adjoining countries, the situation was allowed to drift gradually off the agenda for most of us. I do not exclude the Opposition from those comments. We, too, allowed that to happen.

In July, Human Rights Watch/Africa produced two worrying reports, the first of which was about eastern Zaire and Zairean complicity in forcing Tutsis out of eastern Zaire. The second was about Rwandan genocide and human rights abuses against women. I am not certain how the Government responded to those reports, but although they were sent out in July, in view of what is going on now in central Africa, the clock might as well have been turned back to July.

The reports refer to the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994, and the flight of the mostly Hutu Rwandan refugees into north Kivu, which fanned inter-ethnic tensions in that region. Some of those refugees arrived in Zaire well armed, and worked to politicise and organise the local Zairian Hutu population into militia groups.

The reports called on the international community to respond to the growing conflict in that area, and their authors said that they perceived a growing silence and indifference to the problem. They also said that the increasingly poor handling of the refugee crisis had exacerbated the simmering conflict in the area, with predictable consequences. They said yet again that efforts by international non-governmental organisations to alert the international community to the potential for renewed violence were being ignored.

The reports made a series of recommendations, and although that was in July, when we read them and look at what is going on in central Africa now, we think, "If only we had acted on those recommendations at the time." Had we done so, perhaps the representatives of the media who are having to report the awful violence that is now occurring there would not have to do so.

The reports said that we should hold the Zairean Government accountable for the actions against the Tutsi population in northern Kivu and for other attacks on civilians. They recommended that the international community should encourage the peaceful and voluntary repatriation of Rwandan refugees from Zaire and provide the means necessary to isolate the camps and prevent further infiltration of ex-Far and Rwandan Interahamwe into north Kivu. The international community was also asked to put pressure on the Rwandan Government to improve their human rights record and create a climate conducive to the return of Rwandan refugees from the camps.

Apparently there was a need for the international community to monitor the actions of Zairean forces towards the civilian population. The reports called for the deployment of international monitors at airports and border crossings in eastern Zaire to enforce United Nations arms embargoes against the Rwandan military and militias. They also called for the establishment of a UN commission, and for an inquiry into abuses of civilians in that area.

The reports addressed a series of points to the Governments of Zaire and of Rwanda. Specifically, they called upon the Zairean leaders at all levels of government—national, regional and local—to denounce publicly the ethnic violence, to identify the political, administrative and military officials who have participated in militia attacks or profited from the insecurity in order to pillage or rape, to remove those people from their posts immediately, and to begin prosecutions.

The reports asked the Government of Rwanda to create conditions within Rwanda that would favour the peaceful and voluntary return of refugees from Zaire. The Rwandans were asked to respect the right to freedom of expression, freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, regardless of ethnicity, and to begin the trials of those currently imprisoned in that country who were accused of having participated in the 1994 genocide.

We and the international community did nothing to prevent the Rwandan Hutu extremists—who are determined to return to their country by force and were allowed to take arms into the refugee camps—from launching frequent raids into Rwanda from their bases in the camps in Zaire. As a result, we are seeing familiar scenes in our newspapers and on our television screens. There is the threat of a full-scale war that could engulf the great lakes area of central Africa. Hundreds of thousands of helpless civilians—who are already refugees from war and violence—are once again fleeing to safety. Aid agencies are warning that the recent movement of civilians could lead to a humanitarian disaster similar to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and exodus.

We had better listen this time, and we must pay attention and get it right. If we do not, the area could become engulfed in a war in which it will be difficult to say which side is which, and we shall be left once again to pick up the pieces. If we do not act now, that is what will happen.

Mr. Mike Watson (Glasgow, Central): Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation that he has so eloquently outlined in respect of Zaire, Rwanda and, indeed, Burundi is an example of where the UN might play an additional role in the future? Would not a centre for the resolution or avoidance of conflict be one way of ensuring UN involvement to a greater extent than occurred in the early days of the Rwandan dispute?

Mr. Ross: I agree. That is why I was disappointed that the Foreign Secretary did not refer more to the Government's intentions towards the form and future of the UN. We should ask why the UN has got it so wrong in that area. Why did the UN allow the issue to slip off the agenda? Why did it allow the problems to bubble up once again?

I should like the Secretary of State for Defence to respond to a particular dilemma when he winds up. We know that there could be elections in Zaire next year and that there is a degree of instability in that country. It is possible that some of the armies, who have armed themselves, could overrun Zaire. What Zaire needs is democracy, and it needs it soon. We know that the President—who is ill and receiving treatment outside Zaire—has promised elections. What action have the UK Government taken to ensure, first, that those elections take place and, secondly, that they are free and fair? Will Opposition parties in Zaire have a genuine right to argue their case? Will they be able to gain access to the media to ensure that the population hear the points that they want to make? We have made a mess of the issue so far, and we must start to put the pieces back together. If we assist in this area, we could help to ensure that there is some stability in Zaire.

I wish to refer to Cuba, a country that the present Government have in recent years dealt with better than previous Administrations. I can remember when those of us in the all-party Cuba group would regularly ask Foreign Secretaries how they intended to help Cuba move towards a resolution of its conflict with its big brother, the United States of America. I was always disappointed by the way in which successive Ministers with responsibility for the area would respond. They did not regard it as a joke, but they seemed to respond with smiles when we suggested that Cuba was ready to receive not only trade, but advice on how to rebuild its relations with the USA. The present Government, and a succession of Ministers from the Foreign Office and the Department of Trade and Industry, have done a great deal to help Cuba in its attempts to ease its tensions with the USA.

Trade between the United Kingdom and Cuba has increased dramatically. In the first six months of this year, some £56 million-worth of trade was carried out between ourselves and Cuba, and it may be possible to achieve a record level of trade between our countries. Substantial joint ventures are now taking place involving industries in Cuba and this country, particularly in the development and processing of sugar, where British-managed joint ventures are already in place.

The Helms-Burton Act recently came into the picture, and many people in this country were concerned about the effect that it might have. Those of us in the all-party Cuba group were pleased with the vociferous response from the Government to the contents of the Act and the representations that they made to the USA on the issue. Having spoken to the Cuban ambassador today, I can say that there is no real evidence that the Act has discouraged European countries—or even America's nearest neighbour, Canada—from forming joint ventures with Cuba. In addition, there is no evidence of any country withdrawing from joint ventures because of the Act. It is to the Government's credit that they responded as they did to the Helms-Burton Act, and their response was helpful.

The Cuban economy has grown by about 9.6 per cent. in the first six months of this year, and Cuba is hoping for an annual growth in gross domestic product of 5 per cent. In 1994, the exchange rate within Cuba was 150 Cuban pesos to the dollar. The present figure is 18 pesos. Clearly, Cuba was moving along—until hurricane Lili arrived, bringing with it devastation. Some 5,640 homes were destroyed and a further 84,000 were severely damaged by the hurricane. Some 200 factories were destroyed, and considerable damage was done to the sugar and coffee crops. It is believed, however, that sugar—a much hardier crop—may be able to bounce back. In addition, 120,000 tonnes of citrus fruit were destroyed. Happily, no lives were lost. In the main, that was due to the action taken by the Cuban Government to protect the people. More than 300,000 people were evacuated from the path of the hurricane and 267,000 livestock were moved to safety.

Cuba has not asked for direct aid from any other country, but it has asked the UN humanitarian agencies to provide assistance. I hope that the British Government will call on those UN agencies to provide assistance to Cuba. Cuba believes that it is responsible for dealing with the damage done to the lives of its people and to its economy, and it is confident that it can do so.

Also with regard to bilateral relations, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Mr. Sackville), recently visited Cuba, and while he was there a co-operation agreement between Customs in Cuba and Customs and Excise in the United Kingdom was signed that will allow for the training of Cuban Customs officers to take part in the battle against the trade in drugs. That is something for which Cuba is particularly grateful and it will help our own and the world's fight against drugs.

When the usual United Nations resolution on the blockade of Cuba is moved in the General Assembly, instead of abstaining, on this occasion, given the good

[Mr. Ross]

progress that has been made in other areas in our relationship, Britain should give a positive vote, calling for the lifting of the blockade against the island of Cuba.

I associate myself with everything that my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) said about the middle east. He has a difficult portfolio to handle and I was pleased that he was able to visit the middle east two or three weeks ago, just before the recent difficulties. While he was there, he impressed most people with his awareness of the problems facing both the Israelis and the Palestinians in their determination and struggle for peace. I particularly agree with his assessment that the issues that he identified are the important ones.

My right hon. Friend rightly identified the fact that the Palestinian economy needs to be revitalised or stimulated if there is to be a peace process at all. If that economy is to be revitalised, we have to do something to ensure that it is given an opportunity to grow. I welcome the new free trade status granted by the United States to the west bank and the Gaza strip, which join Mexico and Canada as lucky recipients of barrier-free access to United States markets, but they will not be able to take advantage of the free trade agreement unless the silly and sometimes provocative embargoes put on by the Israeli Government are lifted.

It is pretty meaningless to have a free trade agreement with the United States if it is not possible to get the manufactured goods out of the country and into the United States in the first place. The on-going closures of the Palestinian territories to which my right hon. Friend referred are the first problem, before the goods reach the point of embarkation, with all the nonsense that goes on there. If we do not lift the closures and see our responsibility as not only to encourage but to demand that the Israeli Government understand that this is part of the peace process, the free trade agreement between the United States and the Palestinians on the west bank and Gaza will be just a piece of paper and nothing else.

If the agreement were allowed to develop, it would open up the opportunity to the Palestinians, who—just as we need to trade with the European Union—need to trade with Israel, which is their closest partner. They need to trade with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the rest of the middle east, but they also need to trade with the rest of the outside world, and to do that, the restrictions need to be lifted. Although I welcome the free trade agreement itself, it does not mean much if it is not possible to get exports out of the country in the first place.

I particularly welcome the declaration of the European Union on the middle east peace process, announced on 1 October. The EU, having visited the area, noted that the Palestinians were concerned that their position with regard to the final status of Jerusalem was being eroded by the actions of the Israeli Government on the ground. I do not want to go over all that unfortunate period, but 79 human beings lost their lives. When Yitzhak Rabin lost his life, and we were all devastated by that, I had hoped that his would be the last life to be lost, since that he gave his life for a land at peace, to which he was committed. Whether or not a particular Government were involved in negotiating those agreements, I had hoped that they would accept that the agreements that had been made between the former Prime Minister of Israel and the Palestinian people were made with Israel and not just with a particular Government. They were made not with a Labour Government or a Likud Government, but between the Palestinian people and the Israeli people.

I commend the part of the EU statement that stresses the importance of the Euro-Mediterranean Association agreement, which is based on a common commitment to the peace process and calls on Israel to give a clear, practical demonstration of its confirmed intention to implement fully the agreements already reached with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, because that is the success or otherwise of peace in the middle east. If only Benyamin Netanyahu could understand that, as Prime Minister, he has inherited agreements and responsibilities. If he simply wants to accept the present arrangement, which is an uneasy peace, and if he thinks that he can enforce security by force of arms, surely the experience of the past few months will have dissuaded him from that. I listened to the Prime Minister of Israel on "Panorama" last week. I certainly was not impressed that he changed so dramatically and I was not convinced that he really understood what was happening and the part that he must play if there is to be peace in the area.

President Chirac is not the only person visiting the middle east. King Hussein of Jordan made a historic visit to Jericho, which is under Palestinian control. He made it quite clear that, despite all the difficulties, Jordanian-Israeli relationships were governed by existing peace treaties. Despite the fact that they were angry and distressed by what Israel had done over the period just before he visited Jericho, he made it clear that the existing peace treaties would be adhered to and built on, despite the actions of a new Israeli Government. He made it clear that he expected to see a link between the path of a comprehensive and complete peace in the region and the path of restoring the Palestinian and Arab people's right to the national soil.

King Hussein helped to calm the concerns of Palestinians, because there was a time when many people thought that the Israeli Government might use the peace accord with Jordan to supplement or replace the peace agreement with the Palestinians. He emphasised:

"We are working together, that our relations are as good as they ever have been and will continue to grow in that direction with mutual respect and trust and the determination to pursue our common goal of achieving peace for this region, for all its people."

We now hear that the UK Foreign Secretary is also to visit the region shortly. In the press today, the Foreign Secretary is quoted as saying that, during his trip to the middle east, he will not be using any megaphone diplomacy. He said that his response would be first to complement and reinforce existing efforts in mediation made by the United States. He also said that the outside world should not seek to prescribe what the outcome would be, that it was for the Israelis and Palestinians. I agree entirely. He also said that he expected a wise, imaginative and flexible response from Prime Minister Netanyahu and his colleagues. He said that that was vital.

The Foreign Secretary should remind Mr. Netanyahu that he—the Foreign Secretary—has responsibility for getting other agreements through both Houses of Parliament. On 29 February, the European Parliament gave its assent to the European-Mediterranean agreement with Israel. That must now go through both Houses in the United Kingdom. The Foreign Secretary should tell Mr. Netanyahu that unless he gets back to the peace table, starts talking seriously about peace and begins to lift some

of the restrictions on the Palestinian people, we shall have difficulty getting the European-Mediterranean agreement with Israel through either House. It is not that we do not want an agreement with Israel—we want to develop our relations—but we want countries with which we have agreements to live up to the agreements that they have already made, if only as a sign of their good faith.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to the media about the European envoy to the middle east. I welcome the comments of the Irish Foreign Minister, Dick Spring, who said that there was a clear desire for the European Union to have a more hands-on role in the peace process. It is important for Europe to play an increasing and more important role in the peace process. After all, half of Israel's foreign trade is with the European Union, and 85 per cent. of Palestinian aid comes from the European Union.

We do not want a repetition of what happened to the last European envoy, Mr. Thomas Dupla, who was forced to stay in his hotel and was not allowed out, because there was no agreement on what his job should be. We do not want to be represented by someone who is confined to his hotel. The Foreign Secretary said that we should spell out in detail what the envoy's role should be, or at least have some understanding of what his job should entail. I suggest that it should be to ensure that both the Palestinians and the Israelis observe international law. He could oversee the position, and guarantee that the Palestinians' human rights are restored and protected. He could also ensure that the massive amount of funding and finance from the European Union is getting through, and is not being held up at Israeli ports or by petty restrictions or downright obstruction. That would be a constructive role for him to play on behalf of Europe.

There is a major problem. Billions of pounds of aid have been pledged to the Palestinians, but every time the Israeli Government bring a closure on the west bank and Gaza the Palestinian economy loses $6 million per day.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that every time the state of Israel brings a closure, as he puts it, on the movement of Arabs from the west bank or Gaza into Israel, it is not an action but a reaction? It is a reaction to Hamas and other groups that have perpetrated terrorism against the state of Israel.

Mr. Ross: If it were that—

Mr. Fabricant: It is that.

Mr. Ross: If it were that, the hon. Gentleman's point would have some substance. But it has been announced that the west bank and Gaza will be closed this weekend because it is the anniversary of an alleged attack by the Israeli security services on Hamas activists in another country. Whether that incident involved the Israeli secret service, I do not know. I am simply saying that, as it has been decided that there may be some activity in response to that anniversary, this weekend the population in the west bank and Gaza will be confined to that area. The hon. Gentleman is not necessarily correct.

Every time the Palestinians are locked up, their economy loses $6 million per day which could be spent on improving infrastructure, improving the job prospects of Palestinians and improving the life of the Palestinian people. We should be aware of that, and I hope that the Foreign Secretary will take the matter up with the Prime Minister of Israel when he visits the middle east. I wish him luck. The House is united on this issue. The Foreign Secretary should make it clear to the new Government in Israel that we expect them to honour the international agreements that they have drawn up.

This country has a good record on building democracy in other parts of the world—a record to which parties on both sides of the House have contributed. In a document that was agreed at our party conference, we said that a Labour Government

"will be committed to supporting democracy throughout the world."

It says that we will not seek to impose our model of democracy, but

"we will offer practical assistance to countries that are committed to creating plural, participatory and accountable political structures".

It goes on to say that we shall do that by enhancing the role of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The Labour party is not the only party involved in the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

As the Secretary of State for Defence knows, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy is funded by the Foreign Office, all parties are represented in that organisation and I am privileged to be one of its governors. During the past year, the foundation has funded a wide range of projects to encourage democratic institutions overseas. It has supported political parties, the media, trade unions, women's groups, Parliaments and non-governmental organisations. Its work has grown, and it has given opportunities and encouragement to many individuals who are committed to democratic development in their own countries. Of particular importance are projects in Russia, Bosnia and South Africa. Those countries have regional and global significance, so it is vital to reinforce democratic efforts and activity.

As I have said, the Labour party intends to enhance the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and to give greater prominence in our democracy-building activities to the role of civil society. The recipients of assistance have tremendous respect for the work and methods of the foundation. That is shown by the enormous and increasing number of applications for projects, and by the fact that the foundation is increasingly being used as a model by similar foundations.

We have developed a niche for effective, small-scale projects and for encouraging work involving political parties within countries and from different countries. However, we have not been as effective as we would have liked in the former Soviet Union. As a governor of the foundation, I have argued that increased emphasis should be placed on that region, and I know that the other governors agree with me.

It is time to expand the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to meet the increasing demand from current recipient countries and to move into other areas where the need for such assistance is growing or could arise in the future, such as the middle east, Palestine, the Indian sub-continent, Cuba, central America and south-east Asia. The foundation's current budget is £2.5 million. An increase of £500,000 would go unnoticed in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office accounts, but it would have a dramatic impact on the foundation's capacity to increase its activities throughout the world. I

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should like to see the foundation extend its remit to work with those in exile in Burma, the Sudan and Nigeria, to prepare them for an eventual return to democracy. We should be allowed to carry out appropriate projects on a contract basis for the know-how funds and for the Overseas Development Administration.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy is a remarkable organisation in that all political parties play a part in it. It does a fantastic job wherever it helps to build plural, democratic, accountable structures and I recommend it for further support from the Government. I shall certainly demand further support from a future Labour Government.

5.30 pm

Dr. Charles Goodson-Wickes (Wimbledon): As usual, our debates on defence and foreign affairs tend to be civilised. That has certainly been the case so far today and was the case in last week's debate on the defence estimates. In that debate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence had every reason to be proud of the record of our armed forces, which give sterling service in so many parts of the world. That praise was echoed in all parts of the House. Today my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary gave a masterly exposition of our attitude to foreign affairs in this changing world. I particularly welcomed the historical context of his speech in which he spoke about a multi-polar world.

I am glad to see the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) in his place. He also had some interesting and sensible thoughts last week, but I understand that at the Labour party conference there was, sadly, no opportunity for a defence debate, which is a remarkable indictment.

Dr. David Clark: There was a defence debate in which the Labour party committed itself to the retention of Trident.

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: I took the precaution of obtaining the hon. Gentleman's contribution to what he refers to as a defence debate. I have the text in front of me. I understand that the debate took place under a larger, rather pretentiously ordered debate which was headed "Leadership in the World". The hon. Gentleman's contribution consisted of 17 sentences—I have added them up—which apparently reflect the whole of Labour's attitude to defence. Then he moved on, as he rightly said, to tackling the dissention in his party on the issue of Trident. He and I know perfectly well that usually 40-plus of his colleagues put their names to anti-nuclear amendments in the debate on the defence estimates. This year, surprise, surprise, the number had halved and about 20 of his colleagues put their names down for that debate.

I can only conclude, and I suspect that the country will conclude, that nobody was swayed by the hon. Gentleman's arguments about Trident. There was no philosophical argument, as I understood it. His main basis for not cancelling Trident was that the money on it had largely been spent and there were few savings to be had. None of his hon. Friends will be convinced by the philosophical rigour of that argument and I suspect that the country will conclude that Labour party principles have been subordinated to electoral advantage.

The hon. Member for South Shields looks rather uncomfortable. I shall quote one of the more dramatic phrases in his speech. He said:

"We have caught up with the Tories on defence."

That may be a bold statement, but it is not particularly inspiring. Let us examine his claim. Did Labour pledge to increase the establishment of the armed forces? No, of course it did not. Has it promised increased expenditure on defence equipment orders? Of course not. Has it produced any new ideas for recruitment? On that I grant a small point to the hon. Gentleman because he came up with the dynamic new idea that we should extend recruitment to citizens of our European partner countries. That suggestion will not take the world by storm. Admirable as are the soldiers of Greece, Italy, Finland or wherever, I cannot see any great merit in their being recruited into the British Army, which seems to be the extent of the hon. Gentleman's enlightened suggestion.

Dr. David Clark: Does not the hon. Gentleman think that it is right that people such as the Secretary of State for Defence should be eligible to join the British Army?

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: One could hardly find anybody more fervently committed to this country's defence needs than my right hon. Friend, whatever his distinguished ancestry. The hon. Member for South Shields spoke about citizens of other European countries and as far as I know my right hon. Friend is a citizen only of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman's argument is fallacious.

What does the hon. Member for South Shields really aspire to? He aspires to a defence review no less, based on what he describes as defence needs rather than defence costs. That is a rather interesting concept because it implies that his hon. Friends have obtained a blank cheque from the so-called shadow iron Chancellor to enable their defence aspirations to be met. Can Labour really justify the appalling uncertainty that would be brought about by a defence review after so much disruption in these changing times? What a contrast to the aspiration in the first paragraph on policy in the Gracious Speech which states:

"National security continues to be of the highest importance. My Government will continue to play a major role in NATO's adaptation and in decisions on its enlargement, and to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security."

The hon. Member for South Shields will be glad to hear that the paragraph also states:

"the United Kingdom's minimum nuclear deterrent will be maintained."

That is in accord with the wishes of right-thinking people throughout the country.

In last week's debate on the defence estimates my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave the salutary warning that after the cold war NATO had yet to meet an adversary which combines military capability with a strong political will. Against that stark background we should examine our own military resources and those within larger organisations to which we belong.

It is an enormous tribute to the adaptability and the morale of our forces that we have maintained the highest ever percentage of the Army deployed since the second world war. That is largely in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia. However, there is a price to be paid and I obviously declare an interest as a Regular Army reserve

officer. It is that we cannot indefinitely compress the training, deployment, leave and retraining cycle even further than critics of "Options for Change" predicted. Sadly, the term overstretch has become so much used that its impact has been lessened. If anything, its effect, seen particularly in inadequate intervals between tours, is more profound on families than on service men themselves. Their resilience is quite fantastic and nobody knows and cultivates it more than my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces with his typical enthusiasm and bonhomie.

The Army is 4,000 below strength and the demographic trough will continue until about 2002. Uncertainty over such matters as the Bett report, the Army medical services back-up and the future of the married quarters estate, although the last issue has been resolved, have taxed good will in the armed forces. I look forward to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence giving a progress report on what the Government have done to achieve recruitment of around 17,000 a year for the next three years—that should be its level—to ensure that we have a well-trained, well-housed and well-paid professional Army.

I wish to examine our role in the larger military organisations in which we participate, the adaptation of which is referred to in the Queen's Speech. I welcome my right hon. Friend's positive redefinition of the Western European Union's role as the European arm of NATO, whereby the WEU maintains political control of NATO assets if only European interests are involved. I have reservations, however—I accept that this is an unfashionable view—about NATO's proposed extension to include central and eastern European countries that were once members of the defunct Warsaw pact.

If, as the Government have stated, the Russians are wary of the WEU becoming the defence arm of the so-called European Union—that wariness would be shared by many Conservative Members—why should a fragile Russia be any more content with NATO's extension to the former Soviet border? Is it not understandable that it could be interpreted as a threatening move? Should we risk aggravating the uncertainty that unfortunately prevails in Russia and possibly provoking wilder elements to react against a new artificial division across Europe, moving to the east? In historical terms, it could be interpreted as the iron curtain simply being shifted eastward, not with all the implications of the cold war era, but with implications that the House needs to debate.

Furthermore, if EU Foreign Ministers are incapable of developing a common defence and security policy—again, many of us shed no tears over that at the current stage of European evolution—what makes the Government think that an expanded NATO could do better? Why muddy the waters of decision-making in an organisation that has worked supremely well for half a century and that has furthermore competently adapted from the cold war to the decisive leadership that it has shown in former Yugoslavia?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I apologise for intervening, but I spoke on this matter last night and I feel strongly that we should remind ourselves of the reason for NATO. It was set up, first, for collective security, but also looking forward to the day when new democracies could emerge in central and eastern Europe. That is happening. A historic window of political opportunity needs to be seized.

Miscalculation is one of the tragedies of our foreign policy this century. We need to recognise the rights of the people of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and some other states, for instance the Baltic states. Certainly Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic should be admitted into NATO in the first tranche. It is a matter of right, apart from our self-interest in terms of collective security and the fact that Poland, with its large land mass and significant army, can contribute a great deal.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. The hon. Gentleman did speak last night and he is having another go this afternoon.

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: I apologise for missing the hon. Gentleman's speech last night, but I suspect that I heard a rerun of it just now. I have a certain amount of sympathy with what he says, but I hope that he will realise from what I have said that it is a question of getting the right balance. Of course one wants to back up democracies that have developed so marvellously in former eastern European countries, but we should not rush headlong into expanding NATO without thinking about the implications, particularly in relation to Russia.

In the context of collective security, it is not difficult to identify potential flashpoints throughout the world. For instance, there are large and significant proportions of ethnic Russians—most of them, I think, holding Russian nationality—in the Baltic states. The middle east is going through yet another period of increased tension. Islamic fundamentalism has spread to as near as north Africa, within close range, given modern armaments, of the United Kingdom. Lastly—I do not pretend that this is an exclusive list—further flare-ups in the Balkans are possible.

There are at least two major anomalies in NATO's relationship with Europe. First, neither France nor Spain is yet fully integrated into the NATO structure. Obviously, we all welcome the positive and now speeded-up moves to bring about that integration, but it is and has been a problem. Secondly, there is the bizarre anomaly of European countries such as Austria, Finland, Sweden and Ireland preserving, for different historical reasons, their neutrality, which makes their accession to NATO unlikely. I was delighted to hear my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary confirm that NATO membership is equivalent to WEU membership and that a country cannot be a member of one and not of the other.

Those two points will underlie any further discussion about the development of NATO and of the EU. Surely the yardstick of any development or reform—however we put it—must be the question: would we get unanimous and speedy military decisions on matters of collective security, whatever and whenever threats might arise? We need look no further than the different and often conflicting interests of, for instance, Turkey and Greece to realise what complications could arise if, willy-nilly, we expanded NATO.

By all means, let us co-operate militarily with former eastern bloc countries and develop "Partnership for Peace". It is extremely healthy that we are planning—for, I think, the end of this year—military operations in Poland

[Dr. Goodson-Wickes]

and the Ukraine. I am not certain whether that has been confirmed, but, rather than any organic development, it represents the best way in which to get to know and understand each other and build trust.

Clearly, Poland is vital because of all its historical, emotional and geographical aspects. The Ukraine is an especially interesting example because, as far as I know, it has not applied to join NATO and will always have a special relationship vis-à-vis Russia. In any future balance of power in Europe, the Ukraine will always play an important part.

Those are important, confidence-building measures without organic change. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence not—and I am putting words into his mouth here which he will probably reject—to support NATO's enlargement for enlargement's sake, or to view such an enlargement as a substitute for broadening the EU, which many Conservative Members believe should be the prime aim and, in many ways, should take precedence over any possible NATO enlargement.

Since 1979, this Conservative Government have been tried, tested and proved right in military and foreign affairs. They have a record of which they can be proud. For the whole country's sake, we need them to continue in this uncertain world. I welcome the strong endorsement of policies to this end in the Gracious Speech.

5.49 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North-East): We have been told that the forthcoming general election will be characterised by far greater participation than ever before of theatrical and sporting personalities. Even so, none of us was sufficiently prepared for the shock of hearing the Foreign Secretary praying in aid the sayings of Mr. Tommy Docherty to make a political point. Mr. Docherty is better known for his football than for his philosophy, but I suppose that we must all find our aphorisms wherever we can.

I wish that the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson-Wickes) had been with me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) when this morning we called on the President of Poland, who is visiting the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman would have been made aware of the strength of Poland's desire to participate in not only the European Union but NATO, as a way of receiving recognition for the enormous changes in Poland. That country is understandably endeavouring to ensure that change is firmly rooted in the country's internal democracy and in membership of external institutions that is conditional on the maintenance of democracy.

NATO has succeeded in relation to Greece and Turkey. If one or both countries had been outside NATO, I suspect that the nature of the relations between them in the recent past might have resulted in not only disagreement but active conflict. NATO has in that sense accommodated countries that substantially disagree, allowing pressure to be imposed to resolve their disagreements by peaceful means, not conflict. The observations of the hon. Member for Wimbledon were not entirely well placed. He has much more practical experience of being a soldier than most right hon. and hon. Members, but on this occasion I must part company with his analysis and logic.

I do not part company with the analysis and logic of the right hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, in his remarks about the influence of and role played by the British Council and the BBC World Service. I suspect that he was speaking for virtually every right hon. and hon. Member—I was about to say with the exception of Government Front Benchers, but perhaps one can include even them. The economies made in relation to the British Council and the World Service are of small intrinsic value but have had an unfortunate and regrettable impact on those organisations, which ensure more than anything else that the United Kingdom's cultural and political values receive the widest possible audience.

It is said that there are no votes in foreign affairs—I do not know whether Mr. Tommy Docherty was the source of that quotation. That sentiment is generally accepted, although sometimes it is expressed differently. President Clinton did so rather negatively when he said, "It's the economy, stupid." Foreign affairs do not always command great interest in relation to electoral success. Perhaps that is why the Prime Minister's contribution yesterday did not make any mention of any foreign affairs issue. The Prime Minister addressed the House on the opening day of the debate on the Loyal Address without once referring to any of the foreign affairs issues raised in the Gracious Speech.

The Queen's Speech stated:

"My Government will continue to promote respect for human rights and the international rule of law."

Those words will have a particularly hollow ring in Nigeria and East Timor. During last week's debate on the defence estimates, I asked what possible moral justification the United Kingdom has for supplying arms to Indonesia. How does the UK

"promote respect for human rights"

by supplying arms to Indonesia? In foreign policy, we must exercise judgments about the countries that are entitled to benefit from relations with the UK. Countries that permanently flout human rights or have oppressive regimes should not enjoy that benefit.

The Indonesian Government are systematically abusing human rights in Indonesia and East Timor. We do not need to know whether Hawk aircraft have been used against persons offering resistance in East Timor. It is enough to know the nature and extent of abuse by the Government of persons who seek to maintain publicly any opinion other than that of the Government. We know enough from the award of the Nobel peace prize to Bishop Belo and José Ramos Horta for their campaigning against repression in East Timor.

Mr. Nigel Evans: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: In a moment.

British Aerospace has had my consistent support, and I suspect that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is about to make that point. I disagree with the right hon. Member for Guildford for seeking indirectly to make a point about the need for the European fighter aircraft and its cost. That aircraft is central to the United Kingdom's defence and to the success and future of British Aerospace. However, I do not believe that the export of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia is necessary for BAe's survival.

During the summer, the Prime Minister talked about introducing morality into politics. I have some reservations about the extent to which politicians of any kind should start moralising, but how about introducing morality into British policy on Indonesia?

Mr. Evans: I was also a little taken aback when my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell) started trading the EFA for money for the World Service and various other purposes. I am not saying that money should not be directed at such organisations, but one cannot go about it that way. Nevertheless, is it Liberal Democrat policy to stop the sale of Hawk trainer aircraft to Indonesia?

Mr. Campbell: Yes, absolutely. I will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of my speech to my party's annual conference, which made exactly that point—which I am repeating. If there is merit in consistency, perhaps I may be allowed a certain measure of self-congratulation for that, if nothing else.

If we are concerned about the moral high ground, why does not the UK take a lead in a campaign to achieve an outright ban on the production, export and use of anti-personnel land mines? Why does not the UK renounce the manufacture, sale and deployment of anti-personnel land mines? Can there be any greater rebuke to our conscience than that, every day of every year, thousands of men, women and children lose their lives or limbs as a result of the indiscriminate use of land mines? Is it not an affront to humanity that a device that costs $3 to make and $1,000 to clear should cause such widespread civilian casualties? Is it not to our shame that so many of those casualties are in the third world? The military case for anti-personnel land mines is increasingly challenged by senior military commanders who previously had responsibility for the deployment of those weapons. The moral case against them is overwhelming and unanswerable.

Many land mines have been indiscriminately strewn around Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Gracious Speech commits the Government

"to support peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraging full compliance with the Peace Agreement and promoting reconciliation between the former warring parties."

None of us wants to detract from that objective, but the real issue is whether there will be a follow-on force to IFOR and, if so, whether the UK will be part of it. We know the answer to the second question but not the first, because the Secretary of State for Defence answered the second question in the affirmative last week.

On the hypothesis that the international community resolved that there should be a follow-on force, the Secretary of State for Defence said that the United Kingdom should be part of it, as should the United States. Everyone agrees that the implementation force has been a remarkable achievement. However, we know that there is still instability in Bosnia-Herzegovina and that the ingredients for tragedy, despair and destruction are still there. We must not throw away the gains made in the past few months. I believe that there must be a follow-on force. The United Kingdom should be exercising every diplomatic effort to achieve that. The answer to the first question must therefore be that there will be a follow-on force and to the second that the United Kingdom will be part of it.

There will be risks involved in any such force. British service men and women will be put at risk, but I do not believe that the international community can risk a return to the endless litany of horror and degradation that has been suffered for so many years in a country that is right at the heart of Europe.

The right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) dealt forcefully and effectively with the issue of war criminals. We must robustly and with dedication bring to justice those who have been accused of war crimes. They must not be allowed to escape the consequences of their inhuman behaviour, if that is established in evidence. They must not be allowed to flout the civilised standards of conduct which it is incumbent on us all to follow. As I understand it, the right hon. Member for Livingston said that it was a matter of deterrence. He said that, if we do not deal with it effectively on this occasion, in the future others will feel free to visit the same sort of horrors on other people. That may be true, but there is a more fundamental point: the intrinsic evil of the actions of those against whom the allegations have been made is such that they should be brought to justice, irrespective of any question of deterrence.

The United Nations failed to bring peace to Bosnia, but it succeeded in keeping many people alive and in preventing even worse bloodshed. It failed because its members gave it ambiguous political objectives and inadequate resources for the mission that it was directed to fulfil.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the United Nations also failed because it does not have a command structure like that in NATO and that, therefore, it was bound to fail even if it had been given the political directions that he claims it lacked?

Mr. Campbell: I am coming to elements of reform which I hope might find ready acceptance from the hon. Gentleman.

If the United Nations is to be more effective in the future, it must be reformed. There is a political crisis—that may be an overworked word, but there is certainly political anxiety at the heart of the United Nations as we conduct this debate—about the future of the office of Secretary-General. I do not believe that whether Mr. Boutros-Ghali has done well or badly matters any longer. The fact is that he has lost the confidence of the United States. The United States is a permanent member of the Security Council and, for the sake of the United Nations, Mr. Boutros-Ghali should step down because the UN cannot afford the paralysis of a dispute in the Security Council about who should be its Secretary-General. However, there is a quid pro quo for such a gesture, which is that the United States Congress should release immediately funds to pay the outstanding contributions of the United States, which now amount to $2 billion. I suppose that, in a practical if not a theoretical sense, the United Nations may be on the verge of bankruptcy. We cannot tolerate that.

The hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) raised questions of reform. I shall tell him what I think is an essential minimum programme of reform for the UN. First, there must be an end to the financial profligacy that has characterised so much of what the UN has done. There must be an end to the overstaffing that

[Mr. Campbell]

has bedevilled the UN. There must be an end to appointments made on country of origin rather than on merit. We need a UN agency—this has been referred to obliquely, if not directly, by the right hon. Member for Livingston—for the prevention and suppression of conflict. We should resurrect the military committee of the UN and there should be a staff college responsible for the formulation and revision of peacekeeping doctrine and for instruction in peacekeeping techniques. We should resolve the much vexed question of assigned forces being available for rapid response at the instigation of the Security Council and in reliance of appropriate resolutions. That is the minimum programme of reforms necessary if the United Nations is to perform with more success in circumstances such as those it met in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This was the year of the Scott report. I have listened to Ministers and read with interest their responses. Nothing has persuaded me that the events that led to Lord Justice Scott being invited to carry out his extensive inquiry could not happen again. Nothing has been said or written which, in my judgment, would prevent a similar set of circumstances from arising.

The Foreign Secretary made what one might describe as a statement in relation to certain allegations about Government policy towards Argentina. I am one of those who believe that we should seek to improve our relations with Argentina. The future of the Falkland islanders will best be secured by an atmosphere of, if not trust, at least a higher degree of co-operation. I have met the ambassador and officials from Argentina and I have no doubt that other hon. Members who are similarly motivated will have done the same.

We know that serious allegations are being made which suggest that certain equipment which would otherwise have been the subject of embargo has been supplied. The Foreign Secretary made a careful statement, but he did not answer all the questions in my mind. I want to pose those questions because it is right that they should be on the record.

Has policy towards Argentina and the supply of arms or arms-related equipment changed in any way since it was first formulated? Has that policy been subject to different interpretation at any time since its formulation? Has Rolls-Royce been permitted to supply marine engine spares for use in Argentine navy warships? If it has done so, was it with the knowledge of officials in any Government Department? If it has done so, was it with the knowledge of Ministers from any Government Department? If Rolls-Royce has supplied marine engine spares for use in warships, would that be contrary to the Government's published policy? The House is entitled to have answers to those questions.

Several of those who have contributed to the debate have referred to the middle east. I believe that there is an opportunity for Europe, acting collectively, to exert a beneficial influence in that region. Most assuredly, we have an interest in the region and we have historic associations with many countries there.

The recent eruption of unrest between Israel and the Palestinians came about as a result of an action regarded by the Palestinians as extremely provocative, but the underlying cause of that eruption was the departure from the principle of land for peace, which lay at the centre of the Oslo accord. The Secretary of State mentioned the need for early withdrawal from Hebron by Israeli forces, but that would not be an end of the process. Withdrawal from Hebron should be the first step in a revitalised peace process, in which the Oslo accord and the principles on which it was founded should be the centrepiece of negotiation.

The Secretary of State told us that he was going on a tour to the middle east and would eschew megaphone diplomacy. I doubt that anyone would criticise that. Nevertheless, I suggest to him, and to others responsible for formulating United Kingdom policy on that matter, that the centrepiece of our policy should be an acceptance that the European Union should take a much more vigorous role in endeavouring to help the peace process.

We should urge Israel to cease provocation such as the continuing building of new settlements. We should urge Israel to implement the Oslo accord. We should urge Israel to end the closures of the occupied territories, which have such a devastating effect on the Palestine economy. We should urge Israel to end its predatory action in relation to the city of Jerusalem. We should urge Israel to abandon its threat to close the Orient house in Jerusalem.

Some of those proposals are more significant than others. Some of those features of current Israeli policy toward the Palestinian people cause considerable distrust and anxiety, and unless those issues are resolved, one cannot look with optimism on a favourable outcome to the present exchanges—I was going to say peace negotiations, but I doubt that what is happening justifies that description. The present exchanges are unlikely to be successful unless the issues that I just mentioned are properly resolved.

I mentioned a role for the European Union in the middle east. I conclude by referring to the United Kingdom's role in the European Union. This is surely a time when our country is entitled to clear and unambiguous leadership in the debate about Europe. There has been a temporary lull in the internal storm in the Conservative party on that topic—no doubt induced by the soporific breezes of Bournemouth—but one must ask oneself how long that will last, and how long the Prime Minister can expect to straddle the gap on Europe in the Conservative party.

Mr. Mackinlay: Until 1 May.

Mr. Campbell: Not as long as that, I fancy. One might say that that would be the terminus a quo of his capacity to straddle that gap, but I doubt that he will manage to get to that point, at least in relation to Europe.

The events of the summer speak for themselves. I do not wish to rehearse them, but one unique event was eloquent of Government disarray: the hon. Member for Upminster (Sir N. Bonsor), who was in the Chamber earlier, spoke on radio programmes, criticising a Cabinet Minister for breaching Government policy.

In the curious circumstances of the dispute in the governing party about its policy towards Europe, that is probably the most curious event to have occurred. Nothing similar can have happened in modern political times. If it has happened, the junior Minister has not been notable for his survival afterwards. It was an extraordinary event, and it emphasised the fact that this gap, division, disagreement, lies at the heart of the Conservative party.

Four principles should guide the debate on Europe. First—in some senses I echo the Prime Minister—Britain must be unequivocal that its future is as a full and committed member of the European Union. Secondly, Britain must work to make the European Union more democratic and decentralised, and we must rigorously enforce the principle of subsidiarity at every level of government, in Europe and in the United Kingdom.

Thirdly, Britain must be committed to going ahead with monetary union if economic conditions make it possible to do so. Finally, any substantial change in constitutional arrangements between Britain and the European Union, including the question whether we should join a single currency, should be submitted to the people of Britain for approval in a referendum.

The Gracious Speech contains, characteristically, many ambiguities and euphemisms—nowhere more so than in relation to Europe. The expansion of NATO is desirable; the expansion of the European Union is inevitable; a comprehensive test ban treaty is worth while; free trade is advantageous; but Europe is central, and the Government's divisions appear irreconcilable. Those divisions will halt them until they are driven from office.

6.15 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): I have the honour to follow the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell), who demands that we have a referendum if the Government decide to enter a single currency—yet the Prime Minister has committed us to such a referendum in those circumstances. The hon. and learned Gentleman also says that we should strengthen subsidiarity, yet the Prime Minister himself introduced the concept of subsidiarity at the conference in Birmingham some years ago when we had the presidency of the European Union. It is pleasurable to witness such cross-party unity, on that issue at least.

I shall discuss Israel later, but I cannot resist saying that, at the moment, many people might feel that Binyamin Netanyahu is being held hostage in his own coalition, and that one of the reasons for his hard-line policy is the number of Members of Parliament from the Religious party in his Cabinet, which is a direct consequence of the proportional representation that Israel must suffer in the Knesset. It is Liberal Democrat policy that we should have the same sort of—

Mr. Menzies Campbell *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I am happy to give way. I think we are going to witness a U-turn.

Mr. Campbell: First, my party does not support the system of proportional representation that is used in Israel. That system allows for representation, however minuscule the vote. The system that we support demands that a party gain 5 per cent. of the vote before it obtains representation—a system that has worked successfully in Germany so that the German economy has been the most powerful in Europe for the past 30 years.

Mr. Fabricant: If we are going to trade comments such as that, I would say that the 5 per cent. system also operates in Italy, and that it might be argued that the Italian economy has been paralysed because of coalitions. The situation in Germany is very different because there is far less controversy between the different parties in Germany.

Mr. Watson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: No; I wish to reach the main part of my speech.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary said that the four pillars of our foreign policy are the transatlantic alliance, relationships with developing countries, world trade and, of course, Europe. The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East has had fun talking about the Conservative party's possible divisions on Europe, but he must accept that similar arguments on Europe are taking place in the Labour party and the Liberal party. There would be rigor mortis in the Chamber if there were no such arguments. The most profound issue facing the United Kingdom today is our relationship with Europe. I have used the word "argument" advisedly, because to argue is to discuss. I have not said that we are quarrelling, and yet I can say that some Liberal Members oppose their leader and do not want a federal Europe. I suggest that argument on Europe is inevitable and that it is positively healthy.

I should like to raise one specific European matter, because it has affected one of my constituents—although it has general importance in our relationship with Europe. At 6 o'clock on Thursday 11 July 1996, my constituent—Mr. Stanley Allsop of Lichfield—was arrested. He was held in prison without charge for 68 days, he was not allowed to see a lawyer for four days, he was not allowed to make a telephone call during the entire period that he was in prison, he was not charged with a crime, and he was not allowed to see his wife, his children or his grandchildren.

After 68 days—on 17 September 1996—Mr. Allsop was released. Did this incident happen in Iraq? No. Did it happen in the People's Republic of China? No. It occurred in France. He was arrested because he was asked to transport into the United Kingdom a container, which was sealed in another country, that had drugs inside. The French authorities eventually came to the conclusion that he could not possibly have known that there were drugs in the container that he was collecting for his transport firm, which is based in Lichfield.

The extraordinary aspect of the case is that in France, as in many other parts of the European Union, English law does not prevail and, therefore, there is no habeas corpus. Astonishingly, what happened to Mr. Allsop could not have happened in the United Kingdom or in the United States. It certainly could not have happened to him in Australia, New Zealand, India or South Africa, where English law prevails—*[Interruption.]* The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East says Dutch law prevails in South Africa.

Mr. Campbell: I am always happy to assist the hon. Gentleman with his education about the United Kingdom. The law in South Africa is Roman-Dutch in origin—exactly the same as the law in Scotland.

Mr. Fabricant: I think that the hon. and learned Gentleman will find that the system of habeas corpus has been incorporated into South African law. I have worked

[Mr. Fabricant]

in South Africa, and pure Roman-Dutch does not prevail, as he maintains. Habeas corpus—the very principle of English law—applies in South Africa.

The problem with the situation in France and in other parts of the European Union—although not exclusively there—is that, at times, there is more corpus than habeas. People can be held for long periods without being allowed to see relatives, to consult a lawyer or to make a telephone call. They can be held without being charged. That situation is patently wrong and against the principles of natural justice.

Before we discuss such issues as how straight cucumbers should be, or possible directives on caramel, we should discuss, as a high priority, a common principle of human rights in the European Union for the protection of all European Union citizens. That comment presents a bit of dilemma for me, because I am not at all keen on European directives that impinge on the legal process of any European Union country. It is necessary, however, to have a common basis of human rights so that European Union citizens know that they will have access to lawyers and cannot be held in prison unless they are charged for a specific crime.

It is extraordinary that Mr. Allsop was held in prison in France—only 40 miles from the south England coast—but that he had no access to a lawyer for such a long time, was not allowed throughout his imprisonment to make a telephone call or to see his wife, children or grandchildren.

Mr. Allsop was released on 17 September 1996. I should like to pay tribute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary intervened on his behalf, as did my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and Baroness Chalker in another place. The British embassy was active on Mr. Allsop's behalf in Paris, and there was a successful outcome.

While trying to obtain Mr. Allsop's release, I learnt the extraordinary fact that 15 other British citizens are being held in France without charge. That must be wrong. There must be a common standard of justice and a basic standard of human rights throughout the European Union. If there is not, the European Union will become a meaningless place.

I was delighted that my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary, in his introduction to today's debate, spoke about the need for world trade. He will recall that, on 26 April 1996, I introduced a ten-minute Bill entitled the Association (United Kingdom, United States and Former Dominions) Bill. I said that it is important, when entering a partnership, to enter a partnership of compatibles. When I was in business, I learnt that it is no good entering partnerships unless one feels that the partners are reasonably compatible and have the same business objectives. I am not married, but I suspect that—unless it is a forced marriage—it is helpful to marry someone who will be compatible over the years, as a longer-lasting and genuine friendship is more likely to result.

I do not agree with forced marriages or with forced partnerships. There must be compatibility, and I believe that we are very compatible with such countries as the United States and with the former dominions—Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They share not only the English language, but the English legal system—and the principle of habeas corpus.

Although the population of the United Kingdom, the United States and the old Commonwealth countries, at 356 million people, is smaller than that of the European Union—including the United Kingdom—at 369 million, the gross national product of the EU, including the United Kingdom, is $7,280,975 million, whereas the combined GNP of the United Kingdom, the United States and the old Commonwealth is more than $8,274,500 million. I am not suggesting that we exclude one set of partners or the other, or that there is a conflict between trade with the United States and the old Commonwealth and with our being at the heart of Europe, but it is important that we continue to maintain our links with the United States.

As I said in an intervention in the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell), the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, British companies are the single largest holder of shares in United States companies, and United States companies have the largest number of shares in United Kingdom companies. That has come about not by historical accident but as a direct consequence of our common heritage and of the fact that it is so easy to do business between us.

Before I came to the House in 1992, I had a company that designed and installed equipment in radio stations and provided services for them. My "compatible" partners and I formed a company from scratch; by the time we sold it in 1991, 48 countries were using equipment and systems designed by us in the United Kingdom. When firms in France owed us money, I found that it was a difficult exercise to go through the French legal system, but when we were owed money by firms in the United States, I was stunned by the fact that the American system had evolved so similarly to ours.

The United States gained its independence from us in 1783 and could have evolved a totally different legal system; in fact, its system developed in parallel with ours. I think that it was Nietzsche who said that a language was the very soul of a nation—the very basis of how people think. That is demonstrated by the compatibility of the United States and the United Kingdom in so many matters. I was therefore delighted when my right hon. and learned Friend said that the Atlantic alliance was one of the four pillars that we should develop in our foreign policy.

Our foreign policy has now moved back to the first Elizabethan era. People forget that when Elizabeth I formed what in effect became the diplomatic service, she did so on the basis of trade, not diplomacy. Many years ago, when I worked with officials in British embassies to try to get our equipment exported to various countries, I dealt with diplomats who had never been in trade and had no interest in it—I think that they rather looked down on it—and yet trade, indirectly, paid their wages.

There has been a transformation since 1979: now, people working in the commercial sections of our embassies and high commissions are often borrowed from industry or have joined the diplomatic service from the Department of Trade and Industry. That is to be welcomed because it strengthens our exports.

Both Conservative and Opposition Members have mentioned the BBC World Service. I join them in congratulating the BBC on the effectiveness of that

service, which lies not only in the quality of its broadcasts but in the quantity of its listeners. Although the World Service is now being broadcast in FM stereo in many places, which means that it can be received on ordinary domestic radio sets, most listeners have to find it on short wave, which is quite a complicated process; yet it can boast more listeners than Radio Russia—formerly the Radio Moscow World Service, to which I had the privilege of supplying equipment and services—Deutsche Welle, Radio Beijing and the Voice of America combined. It is an incredible balancing act to maintain the quality of broadcasting and the quantity of listeners. Domestically, the BBC has often failed to broadcast politically unbiased programmes and to provide worthwhile programming that attracts listeners. A good example of that is Radio 3, compared with Classic FM.

I am pleased that there is a continued desire for Turkey to join the European Union. Turkey is part of the cornerstone of Europe. I look forward to hearing more about Turkey from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North (Mr. Elletson); I know that he visited Turkey in the summer and has learnt the rather complex Turkish language.

Greece presents certain problems. Hon. Members will recall that Greece has had disputes with Macedonia, which it tried to prevent from using that name, and with various other countries. I hope that, if we can resolve the Cyprus problem, Greece will decide that now is the time to absorb Turkey into the European Union, provided that it is economically safe to do so. Turkey is an important nation and deserves to be a member, closely following the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary.

Russia has genuine concerns about the expansion of NATO. Hon. Members have said that Russia should be reassured that NATO is not an offensive power on its borders but a defensive power and a force for good. It is all too easy to forget that, throughout its history, Russia has felt beleaguered and encircled by hostile neighbours. At a time when Russia is going through great difficulties, it is important to reassure it that NATO is not a force for imperialism or for evil and that it will not jeopardise the Russian people but will provide stability and strengthen the very safety that Russia seeks.

Li Lanqing, the vice-premier of China, is coming here next week. I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary will tell him that we are concerned about religious persecution in China and in provinces such as Tibet, to which the Dalai Lama is still unable to return, and that no one has forgotten the massacre in Tiananmen square. Incidentally, people in China know about Tiananmen square largely through BBC World Service broadcasts in Mandarin and Cantonese and through the satellite transmissions—which have, sadly, now stopped—of BBC Television on the Star network.

I was delighted to hear that the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) had caught up with the Tories on defence. I should like to claim some credit for that. He will recall that, in 1987, he and I fought a reasonably clean battle for the South Shields constituency; much to my surprise, he won. It is quite clear, however, that my arguments on defence got through to him. Only a few years ago, the Labour party was criticising our deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles in response to the deployment of SS20s by the Warsaw pact; I firmly believe that the west's resolution in deploying those missiles was one of the factors in the break-up of the communist regime in the Soviet Union.

Dr. David Clark: The mists of time have affected the hon. Gentleman's memory. We had a good, clean fight. I shall not remind him of my majority, but it was considerable. Before he gets too carried away on unilateralism, I should like to point out that I resigned as the deputy Labour spokesman on defence in 1981 when the party went unilateralist because I was a multilateralist.

Mr. Fabricant: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has said that, because it confirms two points: first, that he is a decent sort of fellow; and, secondly, that the Labour party was unilateralist and, I believe, jeopardised the peace as a consequence. Our strength at that time maintained the peace and resulted in our winning the cold war, bringing democracy to the poor benighted people of Russia.

The Minister of State for Defence Procurement (Mr. James Arbuthnot): I should point out to my hon. Friend that the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) has still not answered the question that he was asked last week; why, if he was a multilateralist, did he say that he would not be prepared to use nuclear weapons, destroying the point of having a nuclear deterrent?

Mr. Fabricant: That is a disturbing thing to hear. There is no point in having nuclear weapons if the potential enemy believes that we would never use them. They have to be there as a deterrent. Please God, nuclear weapons will never be used in action, but they have to exist as a deterrent and they must be credible. Nuclear weapons have no credibility unless people believe that a country is prepared to use them.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey): Nuclear weapons have been used.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), in her high-pitched voice, is criticising the fact that nuclear weapons have to be available and—*[Interruption.]* Would the hon. Lady like to intervene?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. Seated interventions are not welcome to the Chair.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. They are not welcome to me either.

The Leader of the Opposition has talked about his role model being Margaret Thatcher. He now finds himself crossed with the Archbishop of Canterbury with his views on morality. It is interesting that he, too, has caught up with the Tories on defence. I am not convinced by that, but it is reassuring that he has seen the light. But why should anyone go for the imitation when they can have the real thing?

The right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) asked why we were so opposed to the social chapter, saying that the minimum wage would be a marvellous thing. If it is so marvellous, why does the Labour party not say what the minimum wage should be? I suppose that, if the Conservative party wanted to go for cheap votes, we could say that we liked the idea of a minimum

[Mr. Fabricant]

wage and then set it at a very low rate of 10p or 20p an hour. Labour Members are not prepared to put their commitment where their mouths are, so we do not know what their commitment to the minimum wage is. As in so many other areas, there is no beef to their policy; they just make empty promises.

The right hon. Member for Livingston welcomed works councils. We should not forget that the Conservative party first came up with the idea of stakeholding, and promoted it. In previous Budgets, the Conservative party has encouraged employee share participation and has given employees the chance to own shares in their company and gain tax relief on them.

We have had an interesting debate. I am pleased that we have four pillars on which to pursue our foreign policy: strengthening our position in Europe; strengthening the transatlantic alliance; encouraging world trade; and promoting our relationship with the developing tigers in the far east.

If the World Trade Organisation can reach its objectives by 2020, there will be free trade throughout the developed world. I should like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister who, some years ago—in this Parliament—successfully ensured the passage of the general agreement on tariffs and trade Uruguay round, which led to the formation of the WTO.

Speaking controversially as an individual, not as a member of the Government—because I am not—by 2020 we may not need the European Union. If there is free trade between all developed countries, we shall have free access not only to all the European countries for trade, but to north America and the far east. I hope that that will be so. In the meantime, I commend the Queen's Speech to the House and I commend the speech made this afternoon by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

6.45 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): We are focusing today on the aspects of the Gracious Speech relating to defence and foreign affairs. You will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is with mixed feelings that I note that the ambit of our debate on foreign affairs has been widened by the inclusion in the foreign affairs section of the Gracious Speech of a reference to Northern Ireland. That is unwelcome to my hon. Friends and me, as well as to the people of Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, the practice of including the reference to Northern Ireland in the foreign affairs section of the Gracious Speech developed more than 20 years ago. It was precisely 20 years ago that the former hon. Member for South Down, Mr. Enoch Powell, framed and tabled an amendment to the motion on the Loyal Address on behalf of the Ulster Unionist party. It is with regret that we have to repeat that amendment exactly. There was a period when the reference to Northern Ireland was in the right section of the Gracious Speech, but for some reason it has slipped back in the past couple of years. That sends the wrong signals to a host of people. I am not sure why it is done and I should appreciate an explanation from the Government.

I note the references in the Gracious Speech to the fight against terrorism and the commitment

"to promote respect for human rights and the international rule of law."

I should like to address the latter topic first, drawing the attention of the House in particular to the way in which human rights and international law have been used, are being used and can be used to resolve conflicts in many parts of Europe.

Several references have been made during the debate to central and eastern Europe. Hon. Members will know that there is the potential for conflict in many areas of central and eastern Europe, where national boundaries do not correspond precisely with ethnic and national groups. In some areas, such potential conflict has been defused by recourse to concepts worked out in human rights law, and in particular the principles developed in recent years by what is now called the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

I shall refer in particular to the treaty between Hungary and Romania concluded on 16 September this year. Hon. Members will know that there are significant minority problems in Romania, which has between 1.7 million and 2 million Hungarians, living mainly in Transylvania. Hungarians continue to suffer ill-treatment by the Romanian Government.

The issue was drawn to my attention last September, when I had the honour of being included in the United Kingdom delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. During my visit to Bucharest, I attended a meeting of all the bishops in Romania except those of the Orthodox Church. In Romania, Churches are organised on a communal basis. The Orthodox Church is ethnically Romanian, while the other Churches—the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Presbyterian and Unitarian Churches—are all ethnically Hungarian. I met the bishops of the Hungarian Churches, who told me about the discrimination suffered by the Hungarian minority at the hands of the Romanian Government.

That is a matter of great concern, in a part of Europe where boundaries were changed in the 1920s and 1940s. I hope that the potential for conflict is defused by the treaty between the Governments of Hungary and Romania.

It will come as no surprise to the House to hear that I very much approve of article 4 to that treaty. Let me briefly draw attention to its main provision:

"The Contracting Parties confirm that, in accordance with the principles and norms of international law and the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, they shall respect the inviolability of their common border and the territorial integrity of the other Party. They further confirm that they have no territorial claims on each other and that they shall not raise any such claims in the future."

I note that they regard that as being in accordance with the principles and norms of international law, and they are quite right. The Governments concerned appear to agree that the basic principle for addressing the potential for conflict with national minorities in central and eastern Europe is respect for existing frontiers and the complete absence of territorial claims.

That is generally accepted, even in regions where the existing borders are not ideal. I am thinking particularly of the justifiable argument that citizens of Crimea could raise in regard to the inclusion of Crimea in the Ukraine. They could claim that it was a rather capricious act of Stalin in the late 1940s. It had no significance at the time as both

countries were part of the USSR, but now it has considerable significance for the mainly Russian population of the Crimea. The Russian Government have been careful not to raise even the suspicion of a territorial claim to that area.

The treaty between Hungary and Romania deals with all aspects of the relationship between the two countries, particularly with provisions to protect the rights of national minorities. I shall not deal with them in detail, but the starting point is for the two Governments to accept and to apply as legal obligations the extensive provisions defining the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and religious groups as contained in certain instruments of the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

It is obvious where the argument leads. Romania and Hungary are not alone in experiencing such problems. The same is happening in other parts of central and eastern Europe, such as the Baltic states, which have substantial ethnic minorities. The solution to minority issues in those countries will probably be along the lines of the agreement between Romania and Hungary.

I am not suggesting that the treaty is perfect; I know that the Romanian minority is disappointed that no provision has been made for autonomy for the regions where the Hungarians form local majorities. There is a strong argument for making extensive provisions for local autonomy in such circumstances. However, the agreement sets out the basic principles for dealing with minority issues, which will probably be applied in the Baltic states.

As the Gracious Speech refers to promoting respect for international instruments, why do the Government resolutely refuse to apply the principles contained in agreements to which the United Kingdom is party to the minority problem and the conflict within the British Isles? Instead of following the example of the rest of Europe and implementing agreements that the British and Irish Governments have entered into, we are saddled with the failed Anglo-Irish Agreement. I make no apology for describing it as having failed; one has only to look at the record of the past 11 years. Events this summer demonstrated the complete bankruptcy of that agreement, which is now used as an instrument to create trouble rather than peace.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was entered into before most of the OSCE instruments that are now being applied. Why are the Government not prepared seriously to consider replacing it with something along the lines of the agreement entered into between Romania and Hungary?

The OSCE agreements and accords contain provisions that enable any country involved in the OSCE to raise issues with regard to other countries. I am thinking particularly of the Moscow mechanism, which enables countries to raise questions about the treatment of minorities in other countries, and the Copenhagen accord, which established the Commissioner for National Minorities. Those two instruments constitute a mechanism for some external supervision of the treatment of minorities. If the Irish Government have an interest in ensuring fair treatment of the Irish nationalist minority in the United Kingdom, the OSCE Commissioner for National Minorities and the Moscow mechanism represent a means by which they can reflect that interest. The procedure and machinery established by the failed agreement of 1985 is now redundant. It has been overtaken by events and developments in European law.

The Gracious Speech also refers to the fight against terrorism—a matter of real concern in my part of the United Kingdom and to the citizens of London in view of the warnings about renewed terrorist activity by Sinn Fein-IRA. We are glad that the security forces succeeded in foiling major outrages here in London in June and September. Any problems and deficiencies that might have crept into the intelligence network during the IRA ceasefire have obviously been repaired to the extent that vigilance was successful. We accept that one cannot always be successful if one thinks merely in terms of defending targets. For various reasons, lapses may occur and the bomb may get through. The incident at Thiepval barracks in Lisburn underlines that point.

We need more than just a defensive response; we need to do more than just try to defend the likely targets of terrorist aggression. We need a more positive security response. I think that people throughout the United Kingdom are somewhat surprised that, in the months since 9 February when IRA-Sinn Fein resumed violence, the Government have not been more active and that it has taken so long for a security response to terrorism to develop. I hope that things on that front will change in the near future.

I should refer also to the Prime Minister's comments yesterday on terrorism and the position of Sinn Fein with regard to the inter-party talks. With reference to the renewal of violence by Sinn Fein-IRA, I particularly note that he said:

"That is plainly incompatible with joining the talks. They have excluded themselves by their return to violence".

The phrase, "They have excluded themselves" is significant. He did not say that they are excluding themselves. It is quite definite that they have excluded themselves. That must surely mean that we have reached a point where the possibility of Sinn Fein-IRA entering the process has gone. The Government may want to use a formula suggesting that the theoretical possibility is open, but in the real world we must acknowledge that it has gone. That was reinforced by the Prime Minister's comments that

"The IRA and Sinn Fein should be under no illusion that they can join the process until they have demonstrated real commitment to democratic and non-violent methods."—[*Official Report*, 23 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 31-32.]

If one is to use such language, which appears to hold open the possibility of a return by Sinn Fein to the political process, it is necessary at present to spell out precisely what is meant by a

"real commitment to democratic and non-violent methods."

We do not want a repeat of the situation in 1994, when ambiguous formulas were used. The Government hummed and hawed about their response and made working assumptions, which have since been disproved by events. We need precision as to what is meant by a ceasefire in this context.

We also need to deal with the associated issue of the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. I shall not go into detail—certainly not into the detail in which the matter is being discussed at the inter-party talks in the Stormont grounds at the moment, where I think that about three whole days have been devoted to the debate and only three people have spoken.

Another three whole days on the issue have been promised for next week, so I shall not go into detail save to say that in the paper that we published on 30 September, we were careful to identify the minimum

[Mr. David Trimble]

necessary commitments to be given by the Government on legislation, establishment of the international verification commission, the procedure to be followed if Sinn Fein ever entered the process and the timetable to be observed at that point. They are minimum requirements.

I am rather disappointed by the reference in the Gracious Speech to the legislation on decommissioning. It says that the Government merely

"stand ready to introduce legislation."

I had gathered from bilateral discussions with the Government that their position was not passive, but active. I had been given the impression that the legislation would be dealt with in November. Consequently, I was disappointed at the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), when he asked in business questions earlier when the Second Reading of the Bill would be. He discovered that it would not be in the first tranche of Second Readings, and the Leader of the House was unable to give any precise guidance on when it would be. That is very disappointing and, again, is sending the wrong signals. We need that legislation to be under way as quickly as possible. I shall give way to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he wishes to comment.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Sir Patrick Mayhew): I could not resist an invitation of that character. I was reaching for *Hansard*, because I have a clear recollection of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister saying that the legislation will be introduced. I realise the point that the hon. Gentleman is making about the Gracious Speech, but I have a very clear recollection of my right hon. Friend saying in his speech in the House yesterday that it will be introduced. Further than that I will not go for the moment.

Mr. Trimble: I am glad that the Secretary of State says that the legislation will be introduced. He knows that my immediate supplementary question is: when?

This is a very important issue. In the inter-party talks, we are trying to obtain firm assurances from the Government about the timetable for legislation, the verification commission and the other matters that I mentioned.

It is important that hon. Members realise the point that we have made in this context. We are not saying that the talks should mark time until the legislation is on the statute book or the verification commission established. We have said that, depending on the quality of assurances given on those matters, we would be prepared for the talks process to move forward into substantive issues in—perhaps—even just the next few weeks. That depends on whether we obtain adequate assurances and an adequate definition of what constitutes a ceasefire. The Prime Minister's words yesterday go some way in that direction, but in view of the plasticity of language and the experiences of 1994-95, we should like things to be tied down with greater precision.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a need for not just assurances and clarity from Her Majesty's Government? We are concerned that they do not fall into the trap that previous Governments fell into, by accepting assurances from the Irish Government that things would be done that were not done.

Mr. Trimble: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To underline his point, one can only highlight the contrast between the statement made yesterday by the Prime Minister on that matter, and those made yesterday by the Irish Foreign Minister. The contrast is massive, but then, we have experience of the views of the Irish Foreign Minister in talks at Stormont, where he has not made a positive contribution at all.

I was holding open the possibility that the talks could move forward to deal with substantive issues if undertakings were given on the ceasefire and decommissioning. It is our hope that the talks will move to substantive issues, but if they are to do so, it needs to be done quickly. The election timetable will, as it were, set an end point to serious discussion, as electoral considerations come to dominate the parties' attitude. Indeed, such considerations have already dominated the attitude of some parties. If anything serious is to be done, it must be done quickly. We have made that point repeatedly to the other parties in the talks and I hope that there is a response.

If were to move into substantive talks, I would not at the moment envisage any great advantage in becoming involved in lengthy discussions on what are called strand 1 issues. They were debated at considerable length in the inter-party talks in 1992. We were very close to agreement. Although the document on which we were close to agreement is not perfect and could benefit from revision, I do not think that any party will move away from the principles contained in it. With that, as it were, under our belt, I do not envisage any great advantage in entering into substantive or lengthy discussion.

The inter-party talks of 1992 did not succeed on issues in what are called strands 2 and 3, which relate to the relationship between Northern Ireland and, indeed, the whole of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland. Obviously, what should be discussed and when, will be a matter for agreement among the parties to the talks. But it will be argued that if we are moving into substantive discussion, we should move quickly to focus on strand 2 and strand 3 issues—the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and both the United Kingdom in general and Northern Ireland in particular. We should focus on those subjects, and see whether we can make progress in dealing with the issues on which there was not agreement in 1992.

It will be no surprise to hear me say that the way to resolve those difficulties is to look at the models of good practice elsewhere in Europe that were mentioned earlier, and to consider the principles contained in the instruments of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The difficulties encountered in 1992 can also be resolved by examining them on a wider basis. In 1992, there was far too much emphasis on the narrow issue of what is known as the relationship between Belfast and Dublin. That relationship is better considered in a wider context, which is, of course, the British Isles as a whole. Within that context, the issues will be easier to resolve.

That is not simply a formal matter; the wider context is the real context. Although there are a certain number of interactions on an economic, human and social basis on

the north-south axis, east-west interactions, both between Belfast and the rest of the United Kingdom and between, say, Dublin and London, are much greater. So there is a real common interest in looking at things in the wider context.

That is not a new idea. I believe that it was my predecessor as leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux), who used the term "a council of the British Isles". My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South will remember the phrase "the community of the British Isles", with which we have both been associated in the past. That was more than 20 years ago, but it still represents the right context within which to consider the issues.

The Romanian-Hungarian treaty runs to a good dozen pages, but it does not find it necessary to start creating elaborate structures to provide for the many occasions and features of co-operation between the two countries. It merely refers, in article 5, to the parties' establishing

"an appropriate framework for co-operation".

I am fairly certain that that framework will not be an institution with political significance, and it will definitely not be an embryonic joint Romanian-Hungarian Government.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does my hon. Friend recognise that such informal arrangements already exist, in so far as the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have a common migration interest because they form a common migration zone?

Mr. Trimble: My hon. Friend is right to mention the free travel area that exists throughout the British Isles. That has implications that affect immigration control and other matters, and that reinforces the argument for dealing with such matters within the larger context. That is the way in which we should proceed.

I hope that there will be an opportunity for the parties to start dealing with the substantive issues in the coming weeks. But first the issues of ceasefire and decommissioning must be adequately dealt with. All the parties involved in the talks must be willing to commit themselves to talking on the existing basis.

That means going ahead without Sinn Fein, and we hope that there is a willingness to do that—although the comments by the Irish Foreign Minister yesterday reminded us that his close associate, one Mr. Fergus Finlay, said that talks without Sinn Fein were not worth a penny candle. The question will be whether the Irish Government still regard Sinn Fein as more important than all the other parties in Northern Ireland put together. That is a profoundly depressing and anti-democratic state of mind, and I hope that it is not representative of the Irish Government as a whole. That Government will need to declare their mind quickly, so that we can take advantage of the opportunity before us.

7.14 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) began his speech by expressing concern about the Northern Ireland section of the humble Address being included in the foreign affairs day. However, I believe that whenever the hon. Gentleman speaks he will be listened to with great attention, and it may even be to his advantage to be required to speak in a foreign affairs debate as he may be listened to with even greater attention today than would have been the case had he had to contend with social security or some of the other rather less exciting domestic issues.

It is fair to remind the hon. Gentleman, too, that today's debate is not about foreign affairs alone but also about defence and it is sad but true that Northern Ireland has greatly concerned him and his colleagues, as well as the rest of us, as a matter of defence. However, I assure him that from my point of view not only as a Conservative Member of Parliament but as a former pupil of Friends school, Lisburn, I consider Northern Ireland to be very much a domestic, British, United Kingdom issue. I hope that he will be reassured to some extent by those words, delivered from my little haven on these Benches.

When the hon. Gentleman took us off to Romania and Hungary, I was a little concerned that he had been seduced into joining my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) in a journey around the international radio dial. However, I was thankful to see that the hon. Gentleman's mind was far too subtle for that and that he was merely addressing us in symbolic terms about the concerns of his Province.

I shall concentrate on a narrow aspect of foreign affairs—the concerns involving Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hon. Members will know that these were mentioned in the Gracious Speech. In the printed version, the passage appeared at the bottom of page 1 thus:

"My Government will continue actively to support peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraging full compliance with the Peace Agreement and promoting reconciliation between the former warring parties."

The subject was also referred to, by a side wind, as it were, just above the paragraph that concerned the hon. Member for Upper Bann, in a passage which said:

"A substantial aid programme will be maintained to help improve the quality of life in poorer countries, by contributing to sustainable development and reducing poverty and suffering."

My only experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a short stay there as one of the 40 British international observers monitoring the elections on 14 September this year. I was one of eight or nine British Members of Parliament in the group. Others were what I would call professional election watchers, while yet others were local government officers. All those people had an interest in seeing that the elections which formed part of the consequences of the Dayton agreement passed off successfully and it is fair to say that as elections, by and large, procedurally they passed off reasonably well.

My experience was limited to spending a few days in Brcko, a town which sits on the crux of the two halves of the Republika Srpska, on the River Sava, pushed up against Croatia and on the northern border of the Muslim-Croat federation. Because of that geographical position, the town is seen by all the parties in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Serbia proper as strategically important. The Dayton agreement did not settle its status or say into which part of the new country it should go. Indeed, it is yet to be decided whether Brcko should be part of the federation or should remain, as militarily it now is, in the Republika Srpska.

I want to dwell not on that, however, but on the civilian, or civil, side of the former Yugoslavia problem. We must concentrate on that, given that the fighting is at an end and given the great strides achieved by IFOR in maintaining the peace since the Dayton agreement.

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

I was looking earlier at the Library paper of 9 July entitled, "The Dayton Agreement: Progress in Implementation". It contains a number of statements, and I wonder whether two of these still hold true in the post-election period. On page 30, the document says:

"The contradiction between the relative success of the military implementation of the Dayton Agreement and the relative lack of success in the implementation of the civil wing of the agreement gives rise to consideration of the future of the western military presence in Bosnia".

The second statement is:

"Although the warring factions have more or less stuck to the letter of the Dayton Agreement, they have not entered into its spirit. While the war has ceased, there is little freedom of movement, actual or even desired, between the three ethnically defined areas of Bosnia".

My limited experience has been gained from my observations of what was happening on the ground in Banja Luka—where I landed in an Italian military aircraft following a flight from Vienna—and Brcko, where I went other observers. I spent some time in the Brcko area, meeting and speaking with local people, and I would suggest that the two statements that I have quoted remain true, even though they were published in July.

The elections—as elections—were successful, but I fear that they have not so much unified the new republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina as consolidated the ethnic differences. I spoke to Bosnian Serbs in the voting queues at the 15 polling stations that I was monitoring, some of which were in bombed-out buildings and bullet-riddled schools. Two of the stations were in military tents provided by the US forces, as Brcko was in the US sector. The impression that I gained from many of the voters was that the one thing that they did not want was the proper reunification of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They wanted to consolidate the differences and make sure that the Muslims and Croats did not come back to the area to live in their former homes. That is a fact of life, and I fear that we must live with it.

That leads me to suggest that the second statement is true—that the people have stuck to the letter of the Dayton agreement, but not to its spirit. The conversations that I had with the voters of Brcko, and other evidence that I saw, confirmed to me that—as the Library paper suggests—while the war has ceased, there is

"little freedom of movement, actual or even desired".

People are not prepared to move across the inner zone that separates the Republika Srpska and the Bosnian Muslim Federation.

I had to travel on one occasion from Brcko to another Republika Srpska town called Doboj. The quickest route would have been to cut straight across the federation, but our drivers refused to cross the boundary despite the fact that the war was supposed to have ended. We had to take a much longer route because no Serb from Bosnia-Herzegovina would ever want to be seen in the federation—just a few miles across the boundary.

The fact that there is still a ceasefire and that progress is being made on the Dayton agreement is greatly due to the work of the British forces in Bosnia. I was fortunate to land in Banja Luka, the headquarters of the British division, where I met Major-General Kiszley, the general officer commanding. I was able to discuss the operation with him and with others on his staff. I was then able to compare the role of the British forces with that of the United States forces in their sector.

The comparison was stark. I do not blame the military leaders of the United States sector, who are following political orders. However, it appeared to me—and, it is fair to say, to the people of Brcko—that the United States forces resembled an army of occupation, whereas the British troops appeared to the people of Banja Luka and the north-west sector to be a quite different military force. Our forces do not go around in full military armour or in convoys with machine guns glistening out of military vehicles. Our troops look relaxed, although they are not relaxed in any sense that would suggest military negligence. But my impression was that they were there to assist rather than to confront, as I felt the Americans appeared to the residents of Brcko. As a consequence, the British forces are welcomed and are treated in a far different way from the way in which, the Americans are treated in their sector.

I do not blame the US forces. It is not their fault that the President has made it clear that he is not prepared to accept any casualties between now and 5 November. But the point is that the British forces can do things in their sector that will have a more long-lasting effect than anything that the American forces can do in theirs.

What are the British forces doing, and what can we encourage them to do, in their sector? Much has been said about the need to develop the infrastructure and the civilian economy of that war-torn country, and that is correct. The Library paper contains a chapter headed "Progress in reconstruction" which mentions the huge sums of foreign aid that were promised following the Dayton agreement. At the first international conference on reconstruction—held on 20 and 21 December 1995 after the Dayton agreement—the European Union and the World bank promised $500 million of aid, or capital

"freed up for priority reconstruction projects in the first four months of 1996".

Further promises of huge sums of money were made, and the Library paper states that

"the European Union pledged $100 million, the United States $63 million and the World Bank $150 million. France, which insisted on an equal distribution of the financial burden, pledged $4 million."

All of that is very well, but little of the money has hit the target. We hear great words at international conferences about the huge sums of capital to be used to rebuild the country, but very little of the money is doing the work that it should.

My central point is that we must contrast those promises with the rather more effective work of the British armed forces and the Overseas Development Administration in the north-west sector. In that sector, little groups of British men and women have worked with local people in small projects—not great civil engineering projects, such as building new motorways and new railways. They are doing what is required now—building new medical centres and primary schools, or rebuilding the small bridges across the little streams and rivers of north-west Bosnia-Herzegovina. They are improving education and health and improving the infrastructure on a small scale. They are improving the water and sanitation systems and creating employment.

That is happening because the British soldiers and the ODA—which has devoted not hundreds of millions of dollars, but a little under $10 million—have been able to

be direct. It is as if they have gone around with a suitcase of money, and said to local people, "Go and rebuild that school. Here is the money and the equipment to do it. If you need a tractor, here is a Royal Engineer with a tractor to help you." It is small-scale, I admit, but it is effective; it is working and it is doing wonderful things for the reputation of the British Government, the British Army and the way we do things in that part of the world. Out of that, I trust that greater things will grow, because we have regained the confidence of the people of that part of Bosnia-Herzegovina in a way that the Americans, for all the reasons that I have explained, could never do. As a consequence, I trust that we shall maintain a British military presence in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the end of the IFOR mission.

I think that most people now agree that there will have to be some form of NATO military presence in the former Yugoslavia after 1996. It may have to be smaller, but in my view it is essential that Britain remains there and remains a major force within the peacekeeping arrangements stationed there after 1996. I trust that we shall see not only that that is the right thing to do but that it will be in our commercial interest in the long term, because out of these small projects I trust that we shall have so gained the confidence of the people of that country that they will, when it comes to sorting out the bigger problems—the railways, telecommunications, big roads, canal projects, river projects, and so on—come to Britain, the country that came to their aid straight away and was effective, and give the work to the big British companies, the big infrastructure civil engineers, and so on.

The Overseas Development Administration is frequently traduced by Members of Parliament and by people outside, but today is a day to sing its praises for the work that, in alliance with the British forces in the north-west sector of Bosnia, it has quietly but most effectively been carrying out.

Before bringing my remarks to an end, I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the fact that regrettably I shall not be here for the winding-up speeches. I have informed my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and I have passed a message to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark). I trust that my absence will not be treated as a discourtesy to the House.

7.31 pm

Mr. Mike Watson (Glasgow, Central): I found the speech of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) interesting, because I have been quite close to developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the years and have heard experiences, similar to those that he reported, from a friend of mine who works for a non-governmental organisation and was there at the time of the elections. He reported great difficulty in moving around. That, perhaps, is not surprising given the events in that troubled country over the past five years or so. He also came back with a number of reports that lead me to believe that although peace has, thankfully, reigned for a year now and Dayton has largely been complied with, there are all sorts of problems. Although people are putting the war behind them and getting on with the rest of their lives, rebuilding their lives and their country, many people are still categorised as missing, their whereabouts unknown. That is particularly true of the horrific events that took place in and around Srebrenica in the summer of last year, when so many people were herded out of the town and into the countryside and have never been heard of since. One can only have the worst fears about what happened to them.

The friend to whom I referred was not allowed to go to Srebrenica or cross the river in Mostar and go into the Croatian part of that city. While such no-go areas survive and people harbour suspicions, which are inevitable after the horrific events of any war, but particularly this one, we are some way from being able to say that things have returned to anything like an acceptable level in that country. It is important that we learn the lessons from what happened there, particularly in the context of the earlier remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) in relation to Rwanda and Zaire and the actions of the United Nations. We have to look at reforming important aspects of the United Nations' work, because terrible delays have led to the deaths of thousands of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past few years, and we must make every effort to ensure that they do not occur. If we can do that by reforming the way in which the United Nations operates, we must seize that opportunity.

I shall confine my remarks mainly to Europe and the European Union—a subject that was given an airing earlier by the Foreign Secretary and his opposite number, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). Europe is now more widely discussed among the people of this country than at any other time. That does not necessarily mean that it is particularly well understood, and that situation is highlighted now that a general election is on the horizon. For far too long, the reluctance of the Conservative party—the party of government for the past 17 years—to be involved in anything to do with Europe has prevented this country from playing a meaningful role, from punching its weight, in concert with our fellow European Union members.

Over the years we have seen a succession of Ministers pursue policies but confine their efforts rather than apply pressure to the accelerator. Indeed, in defiant fashion, they have applied the brake wherever possible—quite often with evident glee. That has had the entirely predictable effect of condemning this country to the margins of the European Union. That is not a position that I and many other hon. Members believe that we should adopt. That is particularly so in the Council of Ministers.

When I visit Brussels and Strasbourg, Members of the European Parliament—from various parties, not just those from the left—cannot understand the British mentality: why the Conservative party is so anti-European. Even Conservative Members who profess to be pro-European come across in European terms as anti-European. Members of the European Parliament—indeed, some Ministers of some member states—are becoming increasingly fractious over the behaviour of British Ministers who adopt that approach and use the veto as though they were playing a joker in a game of cards. They are a bit like the child who takes his ball home if the game is not going just the way that he wants. That desultory approach was encapsulated by my colleague, Wayne David, a Member of the European Parliament and leader of the parliamentary Labour party. Writing in *The House* magazine, he said:

> "Surely, we should recognise that using the national veto is not a reflection of political virility, but a sign of political failure. To promote Britain's national interests our approach should be based on engaging with our partners and winning the argument, instead of standing to one side and shouting the loudest."

[Mr. Mike Watson]

Fortunately, we can say with relative confidence that the days when Britain and its representatives are the lone—indeed, the lonely—voice in Europe are drawing to a close. Within six months, there is a good possibility that this country will have a Government, a Prime Minister and a Cabinet who will all identify with our fellow Europeans and view them as friends with whom we can build a prosperous Europe rather than one that, it seems, is determined to rob us of our sovereignty, which is an argument with which we are continually faced.

That sea change will not come a moment too soon, but it will come just soon enough for influence to be brought to bear in the intergovernmental conference, as it draws to a conclusion. It will also be in time to set a positive agenda for the period when Britain will have the presidency of the Council of Ministers in the first half of 1998. I echo the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, who said that there was no mention in the Foreign Secretary's opening remarks about the agenda for 1998 or the fact that Britain enters the troika in the middle of 1997. I do not know, but that may simply reflect the Foreign Secretary's view that, having looked at the political scene, having surveyed it, read the runes and listened to the pollsters, he feels that neither he nor his party will be in government at that time. That might well be a realistic conclusion to arrive at, but it is remiss of the Foreign Secretary, at a crucial time in the development of Europe, to have nothing to say about what Britain might put into the troika, and its period of presidency.

Mr. Nigel Evans: This is interesting, but what does the hon. Gentleman have to say—he is obviously having a bit of fun pointing the finger at the Conservative Government—about the 15 Labour Members who are also members of a splinter group that disagrees fundamentally with the position of the leader of the Labour party? They feel that the Labour party would take them too deeply into Europe and they fundamentally disagree with the position that the right hon. Gentleman takes.

Mr. Watson: They have overreacted to the Labour party's proposals. It would be fatuous to suggest that there are no differences of opinion on Europe in the Labour party. Of course there are, but I believe that they are neither as wide nor as deep as those in the Conservative party. Not all Labour Members are in agreement, but the party policy advocated by my right hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) and for Livingston and others is accepted by an overwhelming majority of the party.

Labour party policy is arrived at democratically after a healthy debate. Party members understand that, and can live with it. That does not prevent people from arguing a different point of view. The hon. Members to whom the hon. Gentleman referred have certain fears and are prepared to argue their case, but that does not alter the position of an incoming Labour Government.

An incoming Labour Government will begin the process of bringing this country into line with the rest of the European Union. I was not poking fun at the hon. Gentleman's party. It is not a light-hearted issue, and I am not trying to score cheap political points. I have given a factual description of the way in which this country has been represented in Europe in recent years. This is a serious matter.

One of the first ways in which an incoming Labour Government would make it clear that their approach to the European Union is different would be to sign up to the social chapter. At the beginning of the debate—at this time of night, that seems a long time ago, because some of us have been here since 2.58 pm—my right hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Mr. Shore) referred to the social chapter, and said that he did not understand what everyone was getting excited about. He described it as an empty satchel. That is going over the score. I think that there is much less in the social chapter than many people have suggested, but that is not to say that it is not worth having.

Signing up to the social chapter will have an important psychological function. It will send a message to the rest of Europe, and to people in Britain, that Britain's new Government are now willing to play a more proactive role in Europe. The message will be that the Labour Government are speaking on behalf of not only the millions of people who elected them, but the millions who did not vote Labour for various reasons but none the less largely support the position on Europe advocated by the Labour party. They want Britain's relationship with Europe to be inclusive. That would be an early indication of a change in government.

Signing up to the social chapter will strengthen employment rights, although that will do no more than give British workers the same rights as workers in other countries have had, in many cases for some considerable time. Co-operation on employment policy and the creation of a level playing field will be the inevitable result of the development of the European Union. That level playing field will prevent unscrupulous employers from reducing pay and conditions, seeking the lowest common denominator and trading on the job insecurity that the Government have done their best to foster. The work force have been cowed, and in their desperation for work they will take jobs no matter what protection has been removed, even if they are part time and lack any security.

The application of the social chapter will allow fair employment practices to apply in this country as they have in other countries for many years. I cannot understand how that can be seen as a disadvantage to British industry. The Government have less faith in the ability of British industry to compete with its European counterparts than have many of its leading players.

Last week, the Institute of Management revealed the results of a survey that showed—this may have been uncomfortable, indeed embarrassing, for the Government—that three out of four British managers believed that the Conservative party's hostility to Europe had damaged British business. The scare stories about the effects of the social chapter are not borne out by many leading industrialists in this country, who are certainly not Labour supporters. They do not expect to be placed at a disadvantage by the application of the social chapter.

As has been mentioned on more than one occasion in the debate, the introduction of works councils by many major employers, despite the Government's warnings, reflects that view. I refer to companies such as Coats Viyella, United Biscuits and Pilkington. In the past two years, I have been privileged to hold an Industry and

Parliament Trust fellowship at Pilkington. When I visited its head office in St. Helens, that was one of the issues that I discussed with its senior human resources management staff. They made it clear that in its plants in Sweden, Germany and Italy, it was a great advantage to be able to bring together management and staff to discuss issues to their mutual benefit and to the company's benefit. There was no implicit threat, because both sides saw the advantages. Where works councils work effectively—as they do in many other European countries—they are not seen as a threat to management's right to manage, nor are they seen as an attempt by workers to gain rights that they do not have through the usual negotiating channels. So there are clear benefits to both sides of industry.

Evidence shows that the Government are out of touch with both sides of industry. Many senior managers in this country do not have the fears about what Labour policy on Europe would mean for them that the Government claim.

One of the major areas in which I want to see progress in the European Union in the coming years is regional policy. One of the major challenges facing an incoming Labour Government will be to make an effective response to the untapped potential of the regions of Britain. I use the term "regions", but I am only too well aware that Scotland is a country, Wales is a country and Northern Ireland is a province. None the less, they are regions within Europe, and if I use that term for convenience the meaning will be well understood.

The regions of England will be particularly important. There is an on-going debate in the Labour party about devolution of power and the decentralisation of government. People argue that no one knows what the regions of England are: they ask where East Anglia begins and the east midlands ends, and so on. I dispute that. The regions of England are clearly defined. Unemployment statistics are issued in London, nine English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government have established offices in the regions and have devolved power; perhaps that is the only example of decentralisation during four terms of Conservative government. They have recognised the benefit of bringing government closer to the people and responding to local needs. That is the most important aspect of regional policy in the United Kingdom. In the European context—the two sit neatly together—this matter is important, because the three European structural funds are allocated on a regional basis.

Equally important is the fact that it will be next to impossible to reduce the widely perceived mystique of Europe and make it relevant to the people of this country, and to the people of Europe as a whole, unless we give regions a strategic role and bring government closer to the people. We should involve people and make them feel that regions can respond to local needs.

The way in which this country is ruled puts us at a severe disadvantage, because we are one of the most centralised countries in Europe. Most member countries of the European Union either have been decentralised for some time or, like Spain and France, have made moves to devolve power from the centre.

The countries and regions of Britain have much to offer across a broad range. That is largely unrecognised. That is not a criticism of the Government, because it has not been Labour policy to take this issue seriously until recent years, but we are beginning to develop that policy now. The countries and regions of Britain have much to offer in a European context, but they are hamstrung by the lack of a strategic framework for generating regional initiatives to enable them to obtain funding that is available through the European Union. The lack of such a framework prevents local authorities as they are now from being the voices in local communities, and it will prevent the putative regional authorities that I hope will be established throughout Britain at some stage from developing regional economic strategies. That is a void, in regeneration terms, which a Labour Government will begin to fill. They will do that in the context of the participatory, inclusive approach to which I referred earlier when I spoke about Labour's attitude to Europe and European Union membership and its appreciation of the increasing importance of the European Union regions.

That concept has been strengthened. The Maastricht agreement provided for the establishment of a Committee of the Regions, which at the moment is struggling to take on any kind of meaningful role, largely because power has not filtered through in a meaningful way from the centre in Brussels. Undoubtedly, that concept will develop in the years ahead and I hope that the intergovernmental conference will provide a clear framework on how that should happen.

The development of a co-ordinated regional policy will allow a Labour Government to decentralise our state and deliver the state's services as well as maximising the benefits of our share of European regional funds. Subsidiarity is a much maligned term, but that living example of subsidiarity in operation allows it to be easily illustrated and explained with the spin-off of allowing the participation of our people in making decisions that affect their day-to-day lives. That will help to give Europe the relevance to which I referred earlier.

Without that there will be an inbuilt suspicion of Europe—I would not put it as high as hostility—in terms of who does what, where the money goes, what we put in, what we get out and why some parts of the country get assistance while others do not. It will be part of any Government's job to be as clear as possible in explaining Europe's role.

There is no doubt that in the coming years economic and monetary union will be the most controversial issue surrounding Europe, if it is not already that. I am sure that we can all recall the Maastricht treaty winding its weary way through the House in 1993. I contributed to those debates and more than once voted against aspects of the legislation. I did that despite being a confirmed pro-European. I want to see the EU deepened and widened but in a controlled way. I was primarily concerned by the agreement's convergence criteria for moves towards a single European currency. The criteria were and still are deflationary.

I represent an inner-city constituency which is already short of many of the resources that are needed to provide adequate housing, education and other benefits and I am worried that those criteria put any economy in Europe into a straitjacket, forcing it to bend to certain economic principles before it will be eligible to join the single currency. That concern was shared by many hon. Members. As a concept, a single currency has my support. In itself it is an admirable and desirable destination,

[Mr. Watson]

but under the current criteria, the route that is mapped out to get there gives me and many others great cause for concern.

I welcome the fact that the debate has moved on since 1993 and that there seems to be a wider acceptance, certainly in the Labour party, that convergence must be based on improving growth and employment and not on monetary objectives alone. That is the key to the whole matter. I recognise the necessity and welcome the moves that are being made towards flexibility in the criteria. How that will happen, if it happens, remains to be seen.

The huge protests which occurred in France at the end of last year and last week and those that occurred in Germany show that the severe public expenditure cuts in those countries to enable them to be in the vanguard of the single European currency in 1999 may succeed in bringing about the flexible approach that is needed and may even have the desirable result of putting back any idea of the single European currency coming into effect in 1999. I do not think that that wrecks the project. If we are to have such a currency it is far better to make sure that it is done at one speed so that we do not end up with a two-tier system. That would be particularly damaging because it would ensure that Germany in particular and France and perhaps one or two other smaller countries would be well ahead of the rest of Europe and that gap might prove impossible to bridge in future years.

Mr. Nigel Evans: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has given great thought to the single currency because he has spoken at length on it. He says that it is in the best interests of the people of the United Kingdom. Precisely how will a Labour Government consult the British people on whether we ought to have a single currency?

Mr. Watson: No doubt the hon. Gentleman is aware that my party will either use the general election as a guide or may at some stage use a referendum. That has not been ruled out. Labour has no difficulty with referendums. There are to be referendums in Scotland and Wales and following a Labour victory there would be a referendum on the issue of this country's voting system. My view is that on constitutional issues it is often appropriate to use referendums. Whether it is appropriate for a Labour Government will depend on developments. As I say, it has not been ruled out, as can clearly be seen from party documents. Events would be the appropriate guide in that.

The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. I have made my position clear and Labour has nothing to fear from consulting the people and saying, "Here is a fairly fundamental change. What do you think about it?" That decision will be made at the time. No one can look ahead two or possibly three years with any clarity.

The whole question of monetary union has aspects of uncertainty and that is why the policy to which I referred in answer to the intervention of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and the one that was outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston earlier are correct at this stage. In the meantime, efforts should be concentrated on trying to build as wide support as possible for the Swedish Government's proposal that an employment chapter should be added as a counterpart of the Maastricht criteria. That would ensure that we do not lose sight of the fact that while job creation may be clearly stated in the Maastricht agreement, how to get there within the confines of the criteria as it stands is not explained. That will be a priority for a Labour Government.

In a sense, on the question of enlargement I am rising to the bait in respect of comments of the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant), who spoke specifically about Turkey. As is widely known, Labour is keen to see enlargement of the European Union. That is why the party recently appointed Sir Michael Butler, who is held in high esteem for his work for Governments of different political colours, to be our envoy in dealing with those countries that are seeking to enter the EU. That is an example of how seriously we take this matter.

I am concerned about the remarks on Turkey. The hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire said that the hon. Member for Blackpool, North (Mr. Elletson) may wish to comment on that. It is unacceptable that a country such as Turkey should be admitted to the EU before severe changes of direction in its internal and external policies are effected. I am not talking only about the illegal occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, but about Turkey's appalling human rights record and in particular its treatment of the Kurds. If we allowed a country with such a record into the European Union at this stage, far from strengthening the union it would weaken the whole concept of the standards that are demanded of countries before they are admitted. Turkey falls well short of those standards.

I am pleased to say that, when I discussed the matter with Members of the European Parliament and with the European Commission as recently as last month in Strasbourg, I was assured that any application by Turkey would be vetoed. Given its current policy, I want Turkey to stay out, but I would be more than pleased if Turkey could get its house in order, reapplied and was admitted then.

The EU should be used to encourage all countries of Europe to come into line on basic issues such as human rights, democracy and the sovereignty of other countries' territory, and to abide by United Nations resolutions. Without that, there can be no question of Turkey's entry.

Overseas development aid has not, to any extent, been touched on today. The Gracious Speech says:

"A substantial aid programme will be maintained".

We could be here until a week on Tuesday discussing just what "substantial" means, but Britain's aid level is down to 0.29 per cent. of gross domestic product and falling. Recently, under the auspices of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I was in Australia. While in Canberra, I met Ministers, including the Minister with responsibility for overseas development aid, the head of AusAid, as the Department is known. In a discussion with him and his civil servants, I commented on the fact that one of the new Liberal-National Government's first cuts had been a 10 per cent. cut in the aid budget, which brought it down to 0.29 per cent. of GDP.

When I raised that with the Minister, his answer was, "Your country's aid is at that level," more or less questioning my right to raise the issue with him. I made it clear that that was not a decision of the party of which I am a member, but it is worrying that other countries should use Britain's aid level as a benchmark, as if that somehow makes their aid level acceptable.

We are about 14th in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development list of countries in terms of aid level. I have spoken at length in debates on the subject in the House and I do not propose to go into any more detail, but, again, under a Labour Government, there would be a sea change in Britain's approach to aid by the fundamental means of restoring to a Government Department the overseas aid portfolio. Labour plans to establish a Department of international development, giving back the added status of a Cabinet Minister to that Department. That would underline our approach to aid and ensure that the world's poorest people receive reasonable assistance from the developed world.

Among a list of proposals that will substantially change the way in which Britain delivers aid, we have a commitment to reverse the decline in UK aid spending. That will be generally welcomed throughout Britain by people who appreciate the work that is done with our aid budget.

I touch on Kashmir because the Gracious Speech mentions that the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference will be held in Edinburgh in October 1997. As someone with a large Kashmiri population in my constituency, who has been consistently asked to raise this issue and who has travelled to Kashmir, it strikes me that the Commonwealth offers a means of helping to resolve a conflict and dispute that has been going on for nearly 50 years.

Hon. Members may note that there is an early-day motion on today's Order Paper on the subject. That outlines the major issues, but it does not mention the Commonwealth, which has a role to play now that Pakistan is again a member. The Commonwealth could use its offices to bring together the Governments of Pakistan and of India, with a view to trying to resolve the dispute along the lines of UN resolutions, some of which have been on the statute book since as far back as 1948.

The Commonwealth is held in high regard way beyond its boundaries. Bloodshed is continuing in Kashmir. Kidnaps are still a regular occurrence. The unfortunate people kidnapped last year have still not been released and we do not know whether they are still alive. That is an example, added to the fiasco of the recent so-called election in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, of the impasse. I hope that the Commonwealth might be encouraged to try to resolve the dispute. If nothing happens before it meets, the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference might be a useful starting point, when the issue can be placed on the agenda by the British Government of the time.

It is important that, in debates such as this, where, unusually, there is the opportunity to discuss wide-ranging aspects of the Government's proposals, a broad spectrum of hon. Members from all political parties participate. We have seen that today. I cannot endorse, as the Foreign Secretary invited us to do, what the Gracious Speech says on foreign affairs, particularly Europe, but I end where I started. In the near future, we will have a different approach to Europe. It will be positive, inclusive and much more in tune with the views of Britain's people.

8.6 pm

Mr. Harold Elletson (Blackpool, North): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson), because my hon. Friends and I understood him to have opened a new area of Labour party policy. He seemed to commit the Labour party to at least three referendums on various subjects of interest to the British people. I understood him to say that he was expressing the possibility that the Labour party would commit itself, if it ever came to office, to referendums on devolution, on a single currency and on the voting system. Trotsky—not a name so popular these days in the Labour party—used to believe in an era of permanent revolution. The hon. Gentleman seems to believe in an era of permanent referendum.

Mr. Watson: I take the hon. Gentleman's remarks in the jovial sense in which, I am sure, they were intended. I have not added to Labour party policy. I have simply repeated existing policy on Scotland and Wales, which is well known and has been widely debated in those countries in the past two to three months. A referendum on the voting system has been policy for some considerable time. On the single currency, let me make it clear, if I did not earlier, that far from committing the party to that policy, or even saying that I want that policy, all I am saying is that it has not been ruled out and it will be examined at the time. The Labour party may, however, correctly conclude that a general election result has given an incoming Labour Government the mandate that they need. We will reconsider later. That is what I said.

Mr. Elletson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. It is useful for the House to have that on record and for the British people to understand that we could be involved in such a prolonged period of extensive referendums. Clearly, the Labour party is unable to trust the House with making up its mind and will commit us to extensive and unnecessary referendums.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough and Horncastle): My hon. Friend is being a bit unfair on the Labour party because it says that it wants to test the single currency issue with either a referendum or a general election. It cannot make up its mind whether to have a general election or a referendum. It is a vague policy. Why does it not simply announce whether it will have a referendum, like our party? Why be so coy about the test of public opinion? I do not understand the Labour party's behaviour. Perhaps my hon. Friend can help me.

Mr. Elletson: The Labour party is being coy. As my hon. Friend says, we have committed ourselves to a referendum on a fundamental constitutional issue—the single currency—but for the Labour party to commit itself to three referendums seems more than a little careless and utterly absurd. I hope that the British people recognise that at the next general election; however, I do not want to get stuck on the subject, but wish to move on and welcome the Queen's Speech, which outlines the Government's plans to extend opportunity against a background of continuing economic success.

The tough decisions on the economy taken by Ministers have delivered sustained growth, rising prosperity and low inflation, enabling this year's Queen's Speech to concentrate on raising standards in education and health and on fighting crime. Against that background of sustained economic growth and success, the Government can consider the UK's position in the world with confidence in today's debate on foreign policy and defence.

[Mr. Elletson]

In the recent past, the House has spent more than a little time—some people would say too much—debating European monetary union and a single European currency. The House has spent a great deal less time considering a common foreign and security policy, which is no less important and dangerous. My right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell) referred to the dangers of the UK being corralled into a narrow European regionalism, and of Britain and other European nation states being drawn into inflexible structures, which would be inappropriate. Foreign policy cannot be imposed on European nation states and to try to do so by diktat or the machinations of Brussels would be dangerous, divisive and as much a threat to sovereignty as trying to impose a single currency.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary outlined the four main pillars of UK foreign policy as he sees them. I agree that they are priorities, but our foreign policy is still primarily driven by two main engines—and I hope that will continue. Those two engines are our trading interests and a desire to create or maintain stability in areas in which Britain has an overriding national interest—and they may provide points of common interest with our fellow Europeans or they may not. In some areas, commercial rivalry makes it unlikely that we can develop a common policy, at least in the short term. I remember visiting Hong Kong when the Governor and the British Government, following Tiananmen square, were trying to take a tough line with the Chinese Government in Peking. At exactly the same moment, the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, arrived over the border—in Guangzhou—with the largest-ever delegation of German business men, to try to win the contract for the new Canton metro. There cannot be a clearer demonstration of the lack of a common European foreign policy, which Germany was understandably prepared to override in its commercial interests.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend recall that Germany's recognition of Croatia, when we felt that to recognise any of the states of the former Yugoslavia would be destructive, probably single-handedly led to the break-up of the Yugoslav republic?

Mr. Elletson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. That is an example of Germany trying to impose a common foreign policy on Europe. In that instance, Germany tried to bounce the rest of Europe into recognising Croatia, and it was a complete disaster. It helped to create the conflict in Bosnia, with all the enormous and tragic consequences that followed.

It is possible, however, to develop a common foreign policy in some areas, by virtue of shared interests. That is true of the common European response to some of the more bizarre decisions of the United States Government and of the State Department in particular. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will continue to be extremely vigilant in reacting to the outrageous American attitude to trade with Cuba. We cannot allow America to get away with victimising west European business interests. It is outrageous that the USA should seek to blackmail British and other European businesses that are trying to engage in legitimate trade with Cuba. We must stick firmly to that particular common European position.

Trade and investment provide the real engines of common foreign policy. As France, Britain and Germany begin to invest in similar emerging markets and countries, or to develop multinational trading alliances to win contracts in new markets, such activities will develop and shape foreign policy. We see that happening in some of the emerging markets of the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) pointed out, to follow the Brussels or German route of imposed foreign policy would be extremely dangerous for Europe, posing threats that could have far greater consequences than those that people might initially have imagined.

Mr. Fabricant: I intended to intervene earlier, when my hon. Friend was talking about American foreign policy on Cuba. I was going to bet my hon. Friend and the House that, after the American elections on 5 November, US policy on Cuba will be revoked by the President—if he is re-elected.

Mr. Elletson: I am not sure that it is appropriate to undertake the gambling activity of which my hon. Friend seeks to persuade me.

Mr. Nigel Evans: Not in a royal palace.

Mr. Elletson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sorry for having given way to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Staffordshire. Perhaps he did not expect me to do so. Earlier, he made an extremely good point about the dangers of trying to impose a common European foreign policy.

If the Germans want greater foreign policy co-ordination, the best way is through industrial trading and investment co-operation. Germany might like to consider the importance of large multinational defence contracts such as the Eurofighter, which are real examples of European co-operation. As the EFA is such a strategically important project and has huge export potential, it will obviously be of enormous importance. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will take that message when he next goes to Bonn. That is the sort of project that the Germans should pursue in the interests of European co-operation, rather than force Europe down the route of an imposed common foreign policy. The Foreign Secretary is absolutely right to resist unnecessary institutional attempts to impose a common foreign policy. His approach contrasts with the approach of the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), who would surrender our sovereignty to Brussels on this and so much else.

There are areas where I believe that my right hon. and hon. Friends must ensure that the United Kingdom gives a lead in co-ordinating European foreign policy. Increasingly, there are areas of the world in which Europe, particularly Britain and France because of their history, has a significant role to play. That is due partly to the fact that the United States has overstretched itself and has shown that it is not capable of taking on all that it has sought to take on recently. It is vastly over-extended and is unwilling to undertake significant long-term commitments.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) mentioned some of the strains felt in Bosnia from which it is likely the United States

will seek to withdraw following the presidential election. It is clear that the Americans are unhappy about their long-term commitment to keeping troops in Bosnia. There will be other areas in which they are equally unhappy to undertake the necessary commitment or to play a role and it is in such areas that Europe has a duty and a potential role to play.

The Americans give us some cause for concern in the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Staffordshire suggested. In some quarters in America what he described is known as the 5-11 policy—that being 5 November. That seems to be a major determinant of American foreign policy. It is ludicrous for us to go along with a foreign policy that is led primarily by a wish to ensure that the President is re-elected. It is nonsense, but it is happening. There are parts of the world where there is too much at stake to allow that to continue. It reveals the lack of United States experience and shows how important it is for us to carve a role for ourselves.

The United States is bound to withdraw increasingly from some of the areas on Europe's frontiers and to look more and more towards the Pacific rim. Over the next 20 or 30 years, that is bound to be the drift in American foreign policy. Inevitably, we will have to concentrate on some of the crisis areas, difficulties and opportunities on our borders.

We need a clear and co-ordinated foreign policy which can be led and directed primarily by Britain and France. The most obvious and immediate area on which we should concentrate is the middle east. The United States peace initiative is in imminent danger of collapse and that will create a dangerous vacuum. President Chirac has shown during his recent visit to Israel and Palestine that he is determined to ensure a French presence in the region and to intervene. The experience of the United Kingdom and France throughout the middle east and our significant commercial and trading interests in the region should encourage us to develop a role there. I would encourage the Foreign Secretary to pursue that with the French. I welcome the recent appointment of a European Union envoy to the region. That is good news which we should all welcome.

Russia and eastern Europe is another area in which we have a responsibility and where there is an urgent need for us to develop a focused European policy. The Foreign Secretary did not mention events in Russia during his speech, but what is happening there now is a cause for concern. It is clear that there is a significant problem in the Kremlin because President Yeltsin is not really in charge. He may soon be removed, either by an act of God or by the act of some of his more immediate neighbours. He would not necessarily have to die to be removed from office because, under the Russian constitution, he can be removed on the grounds of persistent instability. If he is persistently ill or incapacitated, it is likely that he will be removed.

In the past, Europe and America have made the mistake of putting too much faith in President Yeltsin and assuming that our policy towards Russia should be dictated by trying to preserve him in power. We have not thought through what will happen if he goes, with whom we should deal and whom we should be encouraging. That is a real question for us.

Yeltsin has not been the great democrat that he was supposed to be. Anybody who has walked through the rubble of Grozny and spoken to people who suffered the Russian attack on Chechnya and the destruction of civilian property and life will know that that disgusting campaign was not the action of a democratic Government, or a Government prepared to pay even the remotest attention to their own constitution. Yet we trusted Yeltsin and backed him during the election campaign, despite knowing all about his health problems. It is obvious that those who now hold power in Russia are an unaccountable and unelected clique.

That is deeply worrying, particularly for European countries such as the Ukraine, Poland and others which border Russia. It is bound to lead to an increase in demands from those countries for membership of NATO or the European Union. That is perfectly understandable, particularly given the events in Chechnya. Poles feel this particularly strongly because of their historic connection with the Caucasus. In the last century, Polish officers fought with Chechens in the northern Caucasus against the Russian occupation. The Poles feel that link strongly. They can see what the Russians have done in Chechnya and worry that, in certain circumstances, that might be their fate too. Who can blame them?

Given what has been happening in Russia and the instability there, the worst thing we could do would be to try to ignore the demands for membership of NATO and try to pretend that the problem does not exist. We must face up to the expansion of NATO, probably sooner than we had imagined. If Yeltsin is removed from power, the consequences inside Russia could be so far reaching and horrifying that the expansion of NATO will be on the agenda much sooner than we expected. We must send a clear signal now to the effect that we will not allow a Russian veto, that we will proceed with the expansion of NATO, that we want Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—to name but a few—to be full members of NATO, that we will go ahead with that process and that we are prepared to offer the guarantees that that entails.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a difference between Chechnya and countries such as Poland? Historically, Chechnya is part of the Russian federation, whereas Poland was not. Does he also accept that, if Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin were deposed, it would be wrong for us to intervene to try to decide who would succeed him? He will recall the British intervention in Murmansk from 1919 to 1922, which was disastrous for British relations—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is rather a long intervention, and the hon. Gentleman has already had half an hour and several interventions.

Mr. Elletson: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend makes another interesting and valid point.

I am arguing that we need to understand clearly what our interests in the area are. The first must be stability. Secondly, we must do what we can to encourage democracy and constitutionality. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary dwelt on the rule of law, which is extremely important. We must encourage Russia to abide by its law and Russian Governments to abide by what they have adopted as the Russian constitution, imperfect and inadequate though it may be. Our final consideration must be our commercial interests.

[Mr. Elletson]

Of those interests, in this case commercial interests must come a long way down the list of priorities. Our first interest must be stability and our second democracy and constitutionality. Much wishful thinking goes on about our commercial interests in Russia, especially in the banking community.

Most important, we must send clear signals to Russia about its approach to its neighbours. We need to stop being obsessed by Russia to the exclusion of other countries of the former Soviet Union. The Foreign Secretary mentioned some of those countries and encouraged us not to use the term "the former Soviet Union". Many countries will have been grateful for his remarks.

We must do what we can to encourage investment and support democracy and the rule of law in countries such as the Ukraine and to help them along the path to democracy and the free market.

I turn to another part of the world—Turkey. It is overwhelmingly important for Europe to develop policy, and perhaps for Britain to play a lead in helping to develop that policy, in Turkey. I am sorry that we do not have time to go into the implications of Europe's policy towards Turkey and the need for us to develop a common policy towards Turkey, because it is extremely important. I hope that it will be the subject of an Adjournment debate.

Turkey's immense geopolitical and strategic importance has increased enormously since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Turkey is Europe's bridge to the east. It retains a huge amount of experience in the middle east through its old Ottoman connections. It sits on the border of Iran, Iraq and Syria, all of which have helped to export terrorism to Turkey and elsewhere, but all of which are crucial to the future peace and stability of the middle east.

Turkey is also crucial in developing the prosperity and security of central Asia and the trans-Caucasus. We cannot underestimate those regions, because they are full of energy and mineral resources, which will transform that region and probably the whole middle east, especially the Gulf. Those resources will provide an enormous new source of energy to western Europe, so that we will no longer depend on the Gulf states. Strategically, that is massively significant.

The best way for us to approach those countries is through Turkey. We need, as Europeans, to develop a partnership with Turkey that enables us to offer the Turkish model—not ideal, not always thoroughly democratic, not always the type of regime of which we would approve, but at least a model—of progressive secular Islam, to which those states in the former Soviet Union and that part of central Asia can aspire. That is a major challenge for Britain and France. I know that we shall consider that, and I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will do what he can to pursue that initiative.

8.34 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the chance to make a short contribution to the debate on the Loyal Address. I shall be diligent to ensure that I keep my remarks to a length that will allow other hon. Members to speak.

We live in a changing world, which is much smaller than it was before the cold war thawed and the Berlin wall came down. Communism as a creed has become as unpopular abroad as socialism appears to have become at home. But it is not a safer world. Hon. Members mentioned several places where there are problems. If I were to mention them all, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and the Labour defence spokesman would have no time in which to speak, but I shall mention one or two places where, to a lesser or greater extent, this country may be, or is, involved.

During the past few weeks, our newspapers have been full of what is happening in Afghanistan, with the Talibans. Many people are extremely worried about their fundamentalist nature. In the places that they have entered, women have been dictated to. They have been told to wear a dress from top to toe and show no skin, and they have been told that they cannot work. That region has been unstable for a long time, but we have cause to worry about what is going on and I hope that the troubles of that region can be brought to a speedy conclusion.

I am extremely worried about Sri Lanka. Two years ago, I was able to go there to witness elections. For many years, there have been problems in Jaffna with the Tamil Tigers. It was thought that, as the region had become more stable and elections had taken place, things would continue to settle down, and there was great hope that the new leader would bring that about. That has palpably not been the case and, unfortunately, there have been several hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths in Sri Lanka during the past 12 months.

Sri Lanka relies heavily on tourism, much of which comes from Britain. As a result of the troubles, many British people and other Europeans have decided not to go there, which has hit Sri Lanka's economy savagely and caused suffering to many. I welcome the fact that a great deal of Overseas Development Administration aid has been given to Sri Lanka to help displaced people from the Jaffna region. I hope that stability can be brought back to Sri Lanka in the not too distant future.

Another part of the world that must cause us great concern, and to which a great deal of ODA money is going, is Rwanda and Burundi. We heard today that a third of a million people are crossing into Zaire. Many hundreds of thousands of people have already crossed into Tanzania and are in receipt of ODA money for food and water, but I read that, in the region of Zaire where the refugees now are, there is sufficient food and water for only a couple of days. That must be of great concern to us, and I hope that every effort is being made to ensure that we get vital supplies through to that region so that people do not starve.

Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia have been mentioned several times tonight. I had the opportunity to visit Belgrade and Pale. I was heartened to see the work of the United Nations agencies, which were getting food and supplies through to an innocent population who were suffering greatly as a result of the war that savaged the region.

I am encouraged by the fact that the situation seems to have become much better, although it is still extremely unstable and anything could cause another flare-up. I am delighted that we have a presence in the peacekeeping forces there and that that operation is going extremely well. We must be very careful that our presence is felt in

that region to ensure that the troubles do not flare up again, because the people who live there will be the ones who suffer.

It is obvious that diplomatic efforts are vital in preventing hot spots from flaring up. I visited Cyprus this year and last, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has said that he will visit before the end of this year. I had the opportunity to meet the leader of the northern Cypriots, Rauf Denktas, and this year I met President Klerides. We also met many officials and journalists from both sides of the dispute. Although the situation in Cyprus has been quiet over the past few years, there have been incidents and fatalities on the green line—including one only last week. Unfortunately, the situation seems to be worsening, partly because Cyprus has applied to become a member of the European Union.

Much attention is being focused on what may happen to Cyprus in the future. The Foreign Secretary mentioned that, although it may not be impossible, it would be far easier for Cyprus to be admitted to the EU if the current divisions on the island were resolved. Great hope has therefore been placed in our special envoy, Sir David Hannay, who will go to the area to do what he can to bring both sides together to find a solution. As I understand it, talks on Cyprus's accession to the EU will start six months after the conclusion of the EU intergovernmental conference.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson) said that Turkey's accession to the EU would be difficult because of its human rights record, and gave several other reasons why he thought that it would be inappropriate for Turkey to enter now. I agree that Turkey has certain problems, but I know of no fundamental, philosophical reason why Turkey might not become a full member of the EU.

A deal was made last year stating that Turkey should enter the customs union, but there have been problems—particularly those raised by Greece—establishing a full customs union with Turkey, and Turkey cannot fully benefit from it. The delay will only cause further problems for Turkey, and increase its suspicions of Greece. We should do as much as we can to ensure that the customs union agreed with Turkey operates properly.

I have spoken to Turkish Cypriots, and they, too, are concerned at the number of settlers who have come to the north from Turkey. They feel that those Turks do not have the necessary customs or roots in northern Cyprus, and believe that something should be done about the issue. The problems will have to be dealt with if a solution is to be achieved there. One problem is the settlers, how long they have been in Cyprus and how many of them will return to Turkey.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary mentioned the fact that 250,000 Cypriots are living in the United Kingdom. When there is a settlement, some of them may wish to return to Cyprus, as I was told when I visited Cyprus earlier this year. There is also the problem of the property of people who were removed from the north. They believe that, if there is to be a settlement, there must be compensation for that property.

As for an agreement, a form of bizonal arrangement should be examined, but certainly with protection for those who live in the north who are rightly concerned that they would be swamped by the Greek Cypriots to the south. I hope that the Foreign Secretary's visit to Cyprus will make some headway and that confidence-building measures will be introduced.

The European Union has been mentioned time and again. Although it might be thought that EU accession will bring security and stability to Cyprus, it has caused a great deal of discussion and debate in the United Kingdom, and not simply within the Conservative party. There is great disagreement on the issue among Labour Members. At least the Government have given a commitment that there will be a referendum on a single currency, and that the British people will decide whether we should enter a single currency.

I cannot understand why the Labour party, which has had many months to deliberate on the issue, cannot get its act together and tell the British people whether they will get a referendum. It should not fudge the issue and say that it will be decided by a general election, because all hon. Members know that, in a general election, people vote for all types of issues. A single currency is a fundamental constitutional issue, and the people should be given an opportunity, via a referendum, to decide whether Britain should be a part of it.

Another issue surrounding European Union expansion—I hope that we endeavour to broaden it and not to deepen it—is our relationship with Gibraltar. I spoke with the Chief Minister, Peter Caravana, at the Conservative party conference. He has good relations with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but we must ensure that Gibraltar's position is fully recognised in any talks with the EU and in any directives that the EU may issue. The people of Gibraltar are very proud of their links with the United Kingdom, over almost 300 years, and we must ensure that that relationship is properly recognised in EU directives.

There are many other issues to deal with in this debate, but I shall say only that we are a world trading nation and that we do not trade only with the European Union. It is important that we recognise that fact, and the importance of our trade with the United States, which amounts to about £25 billion a year. We have many links with the United States, as we do with Europe. We do not want to go down the route of a fortress Europe, although we want to have alliances.

We have an alliance in manufacturing in my constituency, with British Aerospace. No debate on defence and foreign affairs would be complete without a mention of British Aerospace, because of the thousands of workers it employs in my constituency. There are also many smaller companies in my constituency that supply British Aerospace and other defence manufacturers. They were overjoyed at the announcement of the Nimrod order at the end of the old Session.

Those workers and manufacturers were also delighted by the announcement, made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence at the Farnborough air show, of our commitment to the European fighter 2000. I hope that he will take to Germany the message that we would like there to be an equal, parallel commitment on its behalf. We understand Germany's domestic problems but, if we want there to be a future in collaborative projects with Germany, we must make absolutely certain that all the partners play their proper roles, that we all take an equal share and that we have a defence manufacturing industry for fighter jets.

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

I am speaking not only of the European fighter aircraft, but of the future offensive aircraft that will replace the Tornado. If other countries are to accede to the EU, we must ensure that our partners will remain partners, from beginning to end, and that they will not mess us about.

Mr. Elletson: My hon. Friend mentioned the defence manufacturing base. Like him, I have many constituents who work for British Aerospace at Warton and Samlesbury. Does my hon. Friend agree that his constituents' jobs depend significantly on defence exports? Does he agree that it is absolutely disgraceful that many Labour Members oppose defence exports to some of British Aerospace's most significant markets? Many Labour Members oppose the sale of defence equipment even to India.

Mr. Evans: I simply cannot understand the attitude to which my hon. Friend refers.

The problems with the European fighter and the question whether we should buy fewer of them to enable us to spend more on the World Service and overseas development were mentioned earlier. I am proud of the World Service and I want it to develop, I am proud of the Overseas Development Administration—we are spending more than £2 billion on good, targeted aid—and of our commitment, which I have seen demonstrated by the work being carried out in Africa, but we must ensure that our defence manufacturing industry, which operates not only in the north-west but throughout the United Kingdom, endures. We must back it to ensure that it has the best possible chance to win orders from the British Government and throughout the world.

8.49 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In response to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), I want to make it clear that Labour is committed to the Eurofighter; there is no difference between us on that, and I hope that that message gets through to his constituents. Like him, I have many constituents who work in the aerospace industry—in Broughton, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones). That industry remains an important part of our manufacturing infrastructure and must not be forgotten, either by the current Government or by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), who will soon take over from the Secretary of State for Defence.

It is an interesting week for the House in terms of our commitment to the world, and I am referring not only to the parts of the Gracious Speech relating to foreign policy on which we have some agreement. Everything that we say in the House is now available not only to British newspapers and in *Hansard* but throughout the world on the Internet; that may cause certain right hon. and hon. Members to think twice about their remarks.

The Secretary of State for Defence may be interested to know that one person was delighted that the Government survived long enough to ensure that a Gracious Speech could be delivered this year—my daughter Joanne, who is 18 today and who was determined that the Government should survive long enough for her to cast a vote for my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Mr. Hall) in the election.

I want to make some points following on from those that I made in the debate on the defence estimates last week. But before I do that, I heard this evening that the European Parliament had condemned British Petroleum for alleged activities in Colombia. We recently had reason to be critical of Shell—with which I work closely because it is an important employer in my constituency—over its policy in Nigeria, and now there is a similar problem with BP. Can the Secretary of State cast some light on what the Government know about BP's activities in Colombia, particularly in the light of what I intend to say about the drugs industry, which bedevils each and every constituency?

On defence, I want to concentrate on naval issues. I twice asked the Secretary of State a specific question about the batch 2 Trafalgar class submarines in the defence estimates debate. The subject follows neatly the comments of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley about the aerospace industry. We need to give confidence to our manufacturers and it would be helpful to know if and when the Government intend to place the orders. The opportunity is there, and the need has been identified, especially now that some navies in less than stable countries possess SSK submarines. I again press the Secretary of State for a clear answer on the matter.

We all know that in past engagements the merchant marine has provided sterling support for the Royal Navy. There are now concerns, in the Royal Navy and elsewhere, about the level of that support, especially in the light of the bizarre saga of the Ukrainian ship that was engaged in Operation Purple Star and was subsequently declared unseaworthy by the Americans. That is extremely worrying, and unless we ensure that the Royal Navy gets adequate support, we shall be doing the country a serious disservice.

The issue of drugs is important in every constituency. I thank the Minister of State for the Armed Forces for a positive response to my comments in the defence estimates debate. There are concerns about certain activities in the Caribbean and south American countries. The hon. Member for Blackpool, North (Mr. Elletson) made a pertinent comment about Cuba. It is clear that the real enemy in the Caribbean is the drugs industry and the way in which it is developing.

We have an important function through the West Indies guard ship, in partnership with the United States Coastguard, the Dutch navy and others who are trying to stop drug trafficking in the area. There are related questions about our relationships with countries such as Colombia, and questions that relate to other areas of policy. For example, what is to happen with the banana regime—a subject that crops up from time to time in the House? It is regarded too flippantly by some hon. Members on both sides of the House. The underlying issue is clear—if a small farming community fails to get the necessary support to maintain such crops, there will be a marketplace for the drug barons to force their way in. We have a responsibility, particularly to our Commonwealth partners, to ensure that every possible support is given.

I was pleased to be invited by the Foreign Office to attend a briefing by our ambassador in Burma a few months ago, as a result of some questions that I had raised. I formally thank the Ministers responsible, because I found the briefing very interesting.

The first paragraph of the Gracious Speech mentions a proposed royal visit to Thailand. All hon. Members are aware of some of the difficulties facing the Karen nation in camps on the Thai-Burmese border. I hope that the Government will use their best endeavours, through their foreign policy machinery, to put the utmost pressure on those two Governments to develop democratic rights for the people in those camps, who are wrongly regarded as stateless citizens.

The Karen nation has a long and proud tradition in the area, and many of its elders, including Bruce Humphrey-Taylor in my constituency, fought for the British Army in the second world war. They are getting a raw deal. I hope that we shall exert the maximum pressure on those regimes, particularly bearing in mind the recent pronouncements of the Burmese Government on the lack of freedoms granted to Aung San Suu Kyi.

I listened carefully to the thoughtful remarks of the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and his definitions of the role of foreign policy, but he missed out the important issue of our humanitarian responsibilities in the development of our foreign policy. Burma is a good example of an area in which the Government could take a lead and give real assistance. The problem is not specifically British, but it relates to the issue of the oil companies, which I mentioned earlier. As the Secretary of State for Defence knows, the freedom movement in Burma has expressed concerns about the role of some foreign oil companies in supporting the regime as a result of deals that have been struck.

We must consider those matters. We have important potential trade links with such countries, but we must put the human rights of the citizens uppermost in our minds before we commit ourselves to any deals.

9.2 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): It is appropriate to spend the first day of the debate on the Gracious Speech on foreign affairs and defence. Those two intertwined policies are critical to the existence of our country. That is reinforced in the short sentence at the beginning of the substantive part of the Gracious Speech, which says it all:

"National security continues to be of the highest importance."

The whole House concurs with that. The Gracious Speech goes on to refer to the future of NATO, Britain's nuclear deterrent, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the early ratification of a comprehensive test ban treaty. On all those key points there is a consensus between the Conservative Government and the Labour Opposition—a consensus which, I am sure, also includes the Liberal Democrats. I shall return to that later.

We have had a good debate, because every right hon. and hon. Member who has sought to contribute has been successful. I was puzzled and somewhat disappointed by the Foreign Secretary's speech. Having had the honour of shadowing him for several years, I know the capabilities and incisiveness of his legally trained mind. Today I thought he was below par. For too long he gave us a tour d'horizon, but certainly not a tour de force. Only towards the end of his speech did he begin to address the real problems facing Britain and British security—problems involving Europe, Hong Kong, Bosnia, Cyprus and the middle east. However, once that speech was over, we began a constructive and positive debate.

Once again my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) drew the attention of the Foreign Secretary to all his omissions and widened the debate. He spoke about issues of serious concern to British citizens and exemplified the Government's shortcomings in such issues as bovine spongiform encephalopathy. The Government have let down not only the farmers, but the consumers very badly.

Six years ago, the Labour party produced a set of proposals which, had the Government accepted them, would have avoided our present difficulties with Europe and would have averted the need for a major cull. It is a pity that the Government would not listen to our proposals for the selective slaughter of calves from infected cows, a proper tagging system such as exists in Northern Ireland and restricting the use of offal in animal feed. Had the Government followed our advice then we would not be in such a mess and many farmers would not be in their present difficulties. That is just one shortcoming in the Government's foreign policy.

The right hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, rightly addressed the role of diplomacy. I did not agree with everything that he said, but he was right to draw to our attention the necessity of diplomacy.

I enjoyed the thoughtful speech of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), who made a useful contribution to the debate. Although the hon. Member for Blackpool, North (Mr. Elletson) is not in his place, the House benefited from hearing his opinion about Russia. He probably knows more about that country than any other hon. Member and I agree with most of the points he made. I very much agree with what he said about the expansion of NATO. Although we must take the Russians with us as far as possible, we must not let them dictate the shape of our security framework.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) made some excellent points about Bosnia. As for the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant), I listened to his discourse on habeas corpus and I am sure that all hon. Members share his concern about the constituency case that he raised.

I could not but listen with care to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson–Wickes). I always listen to him with great respect when he speaks on military matters as he knows a great deal about them. Once he had got rid of the central office brief, he made an excellent speech. He spoke about overstretch and put a view that the Labour party has continually argued.

Mr. Fabricant: As the hon. Gentleman believes that there is overstretch in the Army and I know that a number of my hon. Friends would share that view, what commitment is he prepared to make if there were a Labour Government for extra expenditure to ensure that the overstretch is overcome?

Dr. Clark: I hope that the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question.

Mr. Fabricant: I do not.

Dr. Clark: If he does not, I am rather surprised.

[Dr. Clark]

We have argued that it makes no sense to cut the defence budget by more than one third and increase our commitment to the armed forces. The only way that the Government can overcome the problem is to sit down with professional advisers and the experts—as virtually every country in the western world has done—make an assessment of the risks and the threats facing Britain and reshape our forces to meet those threats. It is only by having a strategic defence review, with the painful consequences, that that problem can be addressed. We of course make the point that a strategic defence review is not a cost-cutting exercise. It is an attempt to match our capabilities with the threats to ourselves and our neighbours.

I should like to take the debate forward a little. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) again gave us the benefit of his considerable knowledge of the middle east. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson) exposed the Government's weakness on Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) showed the benefit of the armed forces scheme. He was able to bring to the House a certain hands-on knowledge of the armed forces, especially the Navy. I hope that the Defence Secretary is able to give him a satisfactory answer on the batch 2 Trafalgar class submarines.

I said that I thought that the right hon. Member for Guildford had taken the debate forward. His points on the need to build diplomacy into a security strategy represented the right approach. Indeed, we have argued—it is very encouraging that the view is taken up by the only remaining super-power in the world—that preventative defence, as Defense Secretary Perry called it, is a very important part of the armoury in trying to achieve security not only in the west but throughout the world. His speech to the JFK school of government in May on the subject is well worth reading and studying. As he says,

"The story of preventative defense is not merely one of preventing threats from weapons of mass destruction. It is also the story of engaging military and defence establishments around the world to further the spread of democracy and to further trust among the nations."

He talked about the way in which we are engaged in trying to help three of the four former Soviet Union countries that still hold nuclear weapons to rid themselves of those weapons. Decommissioning has been going on in Kazakhstan, Belarus and the Ukraine. He gave other examples of how we try to defuse situations before they emerge into points of conflict. In a sense, Secretary Perry was merely repeating in a more sophisticated form the words of General Marshall—who did so much in the post-war years to build economic stability in Europe—who said when wearing his military hat:

"The only way to win a war is to avoid one."

He was suggesting not appeasement but preventative diplomacy and preventative security measures to try to ensure that the conflict did not occur.

I referred earlier to the Opposition's belief in the importance of seeking a consensus with Her Majesty's Government on defence and security matters. I have been trying to follow that approach since undertaking the defence portfolio more than four and a half years ago. It seems obvious to us that we ought to be able to agree across the Chamber on the basic principles governing our national security. The fact that the lead times for development and production in the procurement of defence equipment often stretch across decades and different Governments adds to the need for consensus if possible. For example, there is a need for a joint-strike fighter, to which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley referred. We are talking about an aeroplane for the second quarter of the next century.

The revolutionary frigate that we saw on television at the weekend, which will be difficult to track by radar, is another example. It is hoped that that will be developed by a British company. We are talking about long-term projects, which increasingly cross national boundaries, so if we could achieve a consensus in the House, that would be the right and proper thing to do.

If we are honest, there is considerable agreement on many such matters already. On NATO, for example, which was very much a creature of the Labour party under Ernie Bevin in its early years, we agree with the Government. On the idea of the Western European Union's becoming the European pillar of NATO, we agree with the Government. On the United Nations, on retaining our permanent seat on the Security Council and on the development of professional peacekeeping operations, we are in agreement with the Government.

On British troops in Bosnia, too, we agree with the Government. On Desert Storm, on operation Provide Comfort and on Southern Watch over Iraq, we agree with the Government. On retention of the British nuclear deterrent, we agree with the Government. On the restructuring of the reserves, we agree with the Government. On the need to modernise our weaponry, so that it will be characterised by reach, flexibility and accuracy, as epitomised in Eurofighter and the attack helicopter, we agree with the Government.

When there is so much agreement, it came as a grave disappointment to us to hear our attempt to build on a national consensus dismissed by the Minister of State for the Armed Forces. It augurs ill for our nation when such a senior Minister is incapable of overcoming party prejudice in the national interest.

It is not only the hon. Gentleman's prejudice that concerns us, because during the 1996 defence estimates debate on 15 October he said:

"We do not regard the Government as having any consensus with the Labour party on any single defence issue".—[*Official Report*, 15 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 627.]

Not only is that factually incorrect, but it is unhelpful to the defence of this country. The Minister has become blinded by his limited prejudice.

Although we are prepared to try to reach a consensus with the Government as far as we can, that does not mean that we slavishly accept all the details of Government policy. Far from it. We believe that in many areas the Government's approach is harmful and destabilising to our armed forces and our security.

At times the Opposition have led the debate, and we shall continue to do so in the few months before we take over responsibility for the governance of our country. We repeatedly led the debate on Bosnia. It was the Opposition who suggested ways forward for Britain's participation in UNPROFOR and IFOR, and the Government followed. On 7 August 1992 we called for troops to be sent to help

in the humanitarian effort. Six weeks later, the Government agreed. In December 1992 we called for a no-fly zone to be established. Four months later, the Government agreed.

The latest example arose on 11 June this year. When I returned from my fifth visit to Bosnia I urged that British troops should participate in a successor to IFOR. We could not fail to do that, because we could not afford to throw away all the good work that we had done. Only last week, the Secretary of State finally agreed on the line that we had taken.

Now we hear the Secretary of State acclaiming the expansion of NATO. We were arguing from the Dispatch Box in favour of that in January 1994, and I am pleased to hear that it is now the policy of Her Majesty's Government. I was also delighted to hear President Clinton's announcement in Detroit only last week that new members would be admitted to NATO by 1999—appropriately, as that will be the 50th anniversary.

We believe that it is right and proper to try to take those arguments forward, and that is what we have done in our attempt to achieve a consensus. However, there is still a lot of work to do.

On the subject of land mines, the Government have been laggards. During the past year, I have been to Cambodia and Bosnia and seen the effect of anti-personnel mines on civilians—and, indeed, on soldiers. In north-east Cambodia, I was struck to find that about 70 per cent. of military casualties had been inflicted by mines. Anti-personnel mines are the enemy of the soldier as well as the civilian in many cases. For that reason, many American military commanders—including Norman Schwarzkopf and General John Galvin, the former NATO military chief—have urged President Clinton to introduce an embargo and, of course, the President has accepted that.

Despite that pressure, progress towards achieving a world free of land mines has not been good. This year saw the virtual collapse of the inhumane weapons review conference in Geneva, where only a small number of limited changes were accepted. This simply was not good enough for the men, women and children—and the soldiers—who have suffered so cruelly from anti-personnel mines.

There are those who say that nothing can be done, but they are wrong. Our Government must be at the centre of multilateral talks and taking a positive line. I must admit that, for one brief moment at the end of last year, I thought that they had decided to make a positive move. It appeared that the Government were prepared to support a ban on anti-personnel land mines, and there were headlines in the newspapers to that effect. But when the details of the Government's policy came out, the reality was exactly the opposite.

The Government had announced that they would destroy half their stocks of anti-personnel land mines—a welcome move. However, they then announced that they would modernise the other half of their stocks. As British firms have not manufactured such land mines for more than a decade, we will either have to develop the manufacturing capacity in Britain or import mines from countries such as China. In taking either of these options, Britain will be actively encouraging the trade and manufacture of land mines—something that the Government claim to oppose. I hope that we can persuade the Government to change their mind on land mines.

One of the advantages of having this debate so soon after the debate on the defence estimates is that we can pursue some points that were not clear before the Gracious Speech. Last week in the estimates debate, I highlighted the issue of overstretch in our armed forces—an issue initially raised by the hon. Member for Wimbledon. I remind the House that although we have cut defence spending by more than a third, our armed forces are more committed than at any time since the end of the second world war. Frankly, many of our units left in Germany and at home are virtually hollow, and we are getting by only because of the dedication and commitment of the personnel in our armed forces.

Having made up to one third of armed forces personnel redundant, it is unbelievable—yet true—that the Government now have a shortfall in all three services and have not been able to recruit to the full. It takes a special kind of genius to achieve that, but the Government have that. During last week's debate, I was interrupted by the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, who argued that the Army and the military are

"in a difficult position because they are trying to recruit the high-quality young men and women who are also being sought by the burgeoning British industry".—[*Official Report*, 14 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 494.].

When the Minister of State for the Armed Forces interrupted, I had been making the point that I could not understand why the Army could not recruit in the traditional recruiting areas for the infantry, especially the counties of northern England and in Scotland. I have since discovered that, in my constituency, on Tyneside, about 26.5 per cent. of young men between the ages of 17 and 25 are unemployed. These are the traditional recruiting grounds, so why are the Government unable to recruit?

The truth is that the issue of overstretch, referred to by the hon. Member for Wimbledon, who has considerable military experience, has got through to young men and women. I am afraid that I must tell the Defence Secretary that morale is being affected, and he needs to look at this issue much more seriously. Indeed, he needs to look at training once we have recruited people. A systematic study should be conducted at a high level within the Ministry of Defence to establish a rigorous system for deciding how much training should be conducted centrally and how much at a more diffuse level in the field Army.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am listening to the argument being advanced by the hon. Gentleman and I have a great deal of sympathy with what he is saying about overstretch, which was reflected by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson-Wickes). The hon. Gentleman did, however, say earlier that the Opposition would consider a strategic defence review. If it became apparent from that review that additional resources were necessary to enable Her Majesty's forces to undertake all the functions and responsibilities that they have throughout the world, which, as the hon. Gentleman said, are now greater than at any time since the second world war, would his Government provide the money?

Dr. Clark: I understand the sympathy that the hon. Gentleman has for me, because I remember the fight that he had on behalf of the Cheshire regiments.

Mr. Miller: And others.

Dr. Clark: My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston was also very much part of that campaign, and I know how hard they both fought to try to ensure that the regiments were maintained.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) makes a fair point. We have said that we will provide whatever resources are needed for the defence of Britain, but it is important that we match our commitment with the resources available. That will be the role of our strategic defence review.

I have tried to argue that there are areas on which there is consensus and areas on which there is potential consensus. There are, however, some things that we believe the Government have got completely and utterly wrong. Their obsession with privatisation really is bizarre. No other country in the world would sell off the strategic asset of the married quarters of its military, especially to a foreign country. It is just bizarre. It not only imposes a great deal of uncertainty on thousands of Army and military families but it imposes a real limitation on the flexibility and deployment of our forces and has placed a financial albatross around the necks of successive Secretaries of State for Defence for decades to come.

What is worrying is that the Government's privatisation mania knows no bounds. They really are sell-off mad. The Defence Secretary's dogma has overcome his common sense. We have seen what privatisation leads to when Tornado aircraft are refitted. Airworks Ltd., a company at St. Athan's, actually wrecked a Tornado. It was only because of the skill of RAF technicians and personnel that we found the damage that had been done. It was not only financial damage, running into tens of millions—or even hundreds of millions—but RAF pilots were expected to take those wrecked aeroplanes up, all in the name of the mania of privatisation.

Today's news was the final straw. Cowies, the major bus company in the constituency next to mine, made its fortune by buying second-hand military motor cycles, repainting them and selling them back to the public. It is interested in buying Challenger 2 tanks and leasing them back to the Army on a monthly basis. That may amuse the House, but it is the Government's latest ploy, and it is plain daft.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps being a little hard on the Government over this sale and lease-back proposal. We had exclusive responsibility for our tanks immediately prior to the Gulf war, but it took three armoured divisions in Germany to enable us to put one armoured division in the field to assist the allied effort in that war.

Dr. Clark: The hon. and learned Gentleman is right. The military effort of the Warsaw pact was poor, but to be frank, ours was not much better. Thank God it was that much better, and we were able by other means to destroy the Warsaw pact.

I used to think that privatisation was a bit of a joke. I also used to joke that the Government should take their arguments to their logical conclusion. Why do they not go the whole hog and privatise our armed forces? The Navy could go to P and O and operate under flags of convenience: that would be the best way. The RAF could be franchised to Virgin Atlantic Airways, although I fear that this Government would choose Freddie Laker. The Army could go to Securicor or Channel 4—[HON. MEMBERS: "Group 4."] Group 4. Tragically, as each day passes those jokes turn into reality. A future Government may be so desperate that they will have to take such action.

The Government have mismanaged change since the end of the cold war, leaving our armed forces grossly overstretched. Only the dedication of our armed forces has allowed us to get through. The Government have failed to undertake a strategic defence review. We have had no assessment of the threats facing our country, and we have no way of matching those threats. The new Labour Government will do just that and in doing so will not only give our service men and women a fairer deal, but provide a more secure Britain in a more secure world.

9.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Michael Portillo): This is the second time in 10 days that we have heard the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) make that speech. It did not improve with time. He requires a little more rehearsal on the punch lines if he is to get his jokes in. On the whole, however, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson–Wickes), this has been an extremely civilised debate. It has included some very distinguished contributions.

I was not present for a short period, so I did not hear all the contributions, but my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North (Mr. Elletson) made a distinguished speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) toured the world in 15 minutes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. Howell) has the talent of being able to step back from the world scene and observe the trends. He sees the way in which our world is developing and the shifting centres on our globe. He can perceive the advantageous position that Britain occupies in that world: a Britain playing a global role; a Britain with a language that gives her a particular advantage, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary said in his opening remarks.

We had the good fortune to hear from the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross), who is a governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. I join him in paying tribute to that organisation for its good work.

The hon. Member for Dundee, West and my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley asked important questions about Rwanda and Zaire, which is an area of great concern to the House. Both Governments deny beginning cross-border shelling. We have appealed bilaterally to Rwanda and Zaire to calm the situation. We have received assurances from both sides and the situation seems to have calmed.

Hon. Members spoke about refugees in southern Kivu. Our posts in Kingali and Kinshasa are closely monitoring the position and keeping in touch with UN agencies and the non-governmental organisations. We are concerned by reports of a large-scale internal displacement at Kivu, but so far there has been no major refugee flow across the borders.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary met Zaire's Prime Minister Kengo during his visit to London on 22 October and discussed the recent escalation of conflict in eastern Zaire. He encouraged him to remain

in close contact with all the regional leaders and to do all that he can to defuse the tension with Rwanda and among the different ethnic groups in eastern Zaire.

The hon. Member for Dundee, West was concerned to know what part we would play in making sure that the elections were free and fair. They will not be held until May but we are considering what help the United Kingdom can give to ensure that they are free and fair. We are supporting the work of the Ligue des Electeurs, which is a Kinshasa-based NGO promoting democracy in Zaire. Experts from the European Union and the United Nations are also assisting in the work of the national electoral commission.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon said that he had unfashionable views about the enlargement of NATO. His remarks seemed to find an echo in the interventions of my right hon. Friend the Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Lindsey (Sir P. Tapsell). The subject was also mentioned in a distinguished way by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant).

I should make it clear that NATO enlargement is part of a number of processes that are going on within NATO. It is obviously adapting to the post cold-war world and is restructuring, planning for new missions and welcoming France and Spain into a new integrated military structure. Therefore enlargement should be seen as one of many changes that will produce a different alliance. NATO does not see itself as being hellbent on its own expansion. It is not an aggressive organisation wishing to take in more and more members—rather the initiative has rested with the applicants who have made a strong moral appeal to NATO. They have put it to us that they would have been members of the western family of nations decades ago if they had not suffered for such a long time under communist regimes. We must acknowledge a moral obligation towards them.

NATO is certainly not a political club: it is a military alliance, but the process by which nations try to reform themselves and their procedures to qualify for membership of NATO has a strong effect on entrenching their democracies and, of course, NATO will insist on clear evidence that these are permanently established, pluralistic societies before it can admit them to the alliance. Military alliance it is, but one cannot deny that there is also a political dimension to accession.

We are conscious of Russia's attitude. Of course it has security concerns. We want to make it perfectly clear that there is nothing aggressive about NATO's expansion. We certainly want to build with Russia a new European security architecture. Some believe that we should delay the process of enlargement during the period of difficulty in Russia while President Yeltsin suffers bad health. My view is rather that, in an uncertain position, the obligation on NATO is to inject whatever certainty it can. By sticking to the moderate, but clear and certain timetable that we have developed, we inject certainty into that position.

None of us is able to define precisely what the new European security architecture involving Russia will look like. We cannot describe the finished product, but we can distinguish the first steps that should be taken. In particular, with Russia's work alongside the implementation force in Bosnia, we have found that we have had to establish certain liaison arrangements between Russia and NATO. Those arrangements have been working well. They can be extended and made permanent. Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting Colonel-General Shevtsov, the Russian representative to IFOR, at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons.

NATO has also gone out of its way to explain its policies to a succession of Russian Ministers. I have met Minister Grachev, the former Defence Minister. Minister Rodionov recently attended a meeting with NATO Ministers. General Lebed was recently in Belgium to receive a briefing on the way in which NATO viewed the future. NATO generals stressed to him that NATO has a firm mission for peace enhancement.

A coherent strategy now forms an important part of NATO's day-to-day work, which is about co-ordinating exercises and activities under "Partnership for Peace" to extend security in Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals. NATO clearly does and must retain the article 5 responsibility in the NATO treaty, and ensure that we are prepared to exercise that responsibility, but in its day-to-day work, NATO is strongly engaged and absorbed in the peace enhancement mission. That strikes a chord with Russians.

Mr. David Howell: My right hon. Friend is extremely interested in this issue and has obviously thought about it deeply, but will he reassure us that the peace enhancement concept developed by the generals does not include, contrary to anything said in the House today, any question of buffer or non-aggression zones between Russia and the rest of Europe? Russia has its own back yard in central Asia, but the region should all be eligible for inclusion in the European security system under NATO.

Mr. Portillo: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can imagine nothing worse for the countries concerned than to be regarded as a buffer zone. That terminology, that concept and that idea play no part in NATO thinking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon discussed the new role that has been given to the Western European Union. It is worth dwelling on that. At the North Atlantic Council meeting in Berlin this year, a historic decision was taken that it would be possible in future for there to be European-only operations, which would use NATO assets, in particular NATO headquarters, which would include Americans. They would, however, be European-only operations and the political authority would rest with the WEU. That puts the WEU on the map in a way that has not been true before. It also, by the way, increases the importance of ensuring that the WEU is not subordinated to the European Union.

For all the reasons that my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary gave in his opening remarks, the EU, which has members with an honourable tradition of neutrality, but which are not committed to collective defence, is not a suitable body to oversee the WEU's task. The WEU will remain a body whose full members are both members of the EU and NATO members.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North that a common foreign and security policy cannot be driven by institutional change. It would be impracticable and inconceivable to decree an institutional arrangement that had the effect of obliging countries in Europe to adopt foreign or security policies in which they do not believe.

[Mr. Portillo]

The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier)—who made a most distinguished and polished speech based on his experiences as a monitor—the hon. Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson) and other hon. Members referred to Bosnia. I reiterate that we must put the horse before the cart. We must begin with an overarching political strategy devised by the international community, which must put in place its support for the democratic processes, suggest ways of helping to improve the quality of policing, define the role of the international financial institutions and discuss how rebuilding the country's infrastructure and other work will be co-ordinated.

All that must be done before we can decide whether there will be a follow-on force to IFOR, its size and objectives. I understand the impatience felt in the House and elsewhere, but I have described the right order in which to proceed. Meanwhile, nothing was lost at the meeting of Defence Ministers at Bergen at the end of September. We tasked the military authorities with preparing a series of contingencies, so that the necessary planning is ready in any eventuality. Since we last discussed Bosnia in the House 10 days ago, the decision was taken by Mr. Frowick to postpone the municipal elections. There were strong arguments for postponement. There were fears about the adequacy of registration and of holding an election in the depths of winter—when the roads would be bad and the nights long—involving places that have no electric light. There were considerable difficulties.

That decision has implications for force levels in Bosnia. It was anticipated that the drawdown of the implementation force would be postponed substantively until the municipal elections had taken place. We will now see a different shape of drawdown, but still nothing will be done during the course of it that would prejudge the decision about any follow-on force.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley made interesting points about the threat to peace, which need to be carefully assessed. About 35 countries outside NATO are equipped with up-to-date tanks and artillery. Many of them have armies numbered in hundreds of thousands. There are 40 air forces outside NATO with modern offensive aircraft and 30 countries have submarine forces.

I may say in parentheses to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) that the Government are in negotiations with GEC Marconi, which is the preferred bidder for the Trafalgar class batch 2. If we can achieve an acceptable price, we hope to place the prime contract early next year. Although delays are always frustrating, the Government's record over the past year or two of placing orders for the British Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy makes me feel proud. We have recently placed orders for three frigates, and for two assault ships to replace HMS Fearless and HMS Intrepid. We have ordered the Apache attack helicopter for the Army, confirmed that we want to go into production with the Eurofighter, and ordered the cruise missiles and anti-armour weapon that will be deployed on the Eurofighter, as well as the Nimrod 2000. I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friends how welcome those orders were.

On the question of threat, there are 20 countries outside NATO which possess ballistic missiles now. Some of them have crude technology, but it is improving fast. Even today, some NATO territory is within the arc of threat of some of those missiles fired from the middle east. North Korea is exporting missiles. If it exports its more advanced systems, more NATO nations will be brought within range. There is a risk that, despite our best efforts, stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction will grow and spread. Over a dozen countries have either the capability to deploy chemical or biological weapons or have development programmes which are at an advanced stage. Some of those countries can already produce a warhead for a ballistic missile for those weapons systems.

The likelihood of conflict in our world is, if anything, increasing. We have seen how, with the end of super-power tension, others have been emboldened to push their territorial and ideological ambitions. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary talked about moving away from the bi-polar world. We have seen recently overt aggression by some states and the covert export of terrorism by others.

We cannot even relax our vigilance over nuclear weapons. The international community was surprised to discover the progress that Iraq had made with its nuclear weapons programme. We will need to sustain in Iraq an intrusive monitoring regime to prevent it from reviving that programme. We will need to monitor North Korea's compliance with the nuclear commitments that it has entered into.

We have been shocked by the discoveries we have made about the weapons of mass destruction programme in Iraq. The United Nations Special Commission has discovered more and more evidence of the extent of that programme and Iraq has failed to co-operate with those investigations. It has made every effort to hide the extent of what it has been doing.

Russia's armed forces are clearly not what they used to be during the cold war. Russia's forces have grave problems, but they are large and have a considerable quantity of sophisticated weapons, both conventional and nuclear. Russian capability in strategic nuclear missile submarines has not diminished. That, alongside the reform process in Russia, is one of the factors that we must take into account when assessing the potential security needs of Europe.

Our planning needs to take account of all the places where conflict could occur. I have looked at an assessment of the potential crisis points around the globe. The last assessment I read had 53 entries of potential crisis points, including the Balkans, the Transcaucasus, Algeria, Libya and Iraq. Seventeen of those potential trouble spots are within just 200 miles of NATO's borders.

There is no reason to believe that territorial or ethnic disputes are on the decline—quite the contrary. We must add to that potential disputes that could occur over natural resources such as oils, minerals and even water. A common feature where such regional tensions exist is arms proliferation. Dictators impress and intimidate their populations and their neighbours by acquiring weapons of mass destruction. The more responsible nations respond by matching those countries if they can, so as to build up their deterrents. Even where Governments are currently well disposed to us, we need to consider the potential impact of political instability.

With the end of super-power tension and the spread of democracy there is the potential for a better world. However, the world has not become good overnight and it is at present no less dangerous. As the risk of global catastrophe has reduced, the risk of geographically limited conflict has increased. We are not in a position to abolish extremism, greed and intolerance, but we can deter them and we can stop them winning.

All that makes me believe that it is extremely important that NATO should remember that it is a military alliance. There is a tendency for some people to believe that the future for NATO is likely to consist largely, or even exclusively, of peacekeeping operations. Although I recognise that there may be many more Bosnias to come, I would caution against believing that that will be the template for the future of the world.

As recently as 1991, we were involved in a high-intensity conflict against Iraq—an aggressor with very large amounts of artillery and armour and fairly capable modern aircraft. In the event, we overcame that aggressor, with mercifully few casualties. But even Iraq in 1991 should not be our yardstick for what may come in future. Weapons are becoming more sophisticated, and it is conceivable that we would meet an aggressor, a dictator, much more capable than Iraq was in that year.

We therefore need to ensure that our military alliance, NATO, which has been so successful in the past, which has had credibility, and which has been able to maintain its deterrent capacity, retains its interest in, and its commitment to, hard defence.

I make this point vis-a-vis enlargement. It will be important that countries that wish to become members of NATO recognise the responsibilities that are placed on them by membership. Although they wish to benefit in part from the political aspects of NATO membership, the full benefit will come to them if they are part of a military alliance that is as credible and effective as NATO is today.

Some of my hon. Friends who do not support NATO's expansion may fear that the rigour in that alliance will be loosened. Although that is a reasonable suspicion, we are determined to ensure that it is not realised.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I suspect that the Secretary of State has the support of the whole House for what he said, but are we not also required to be anxious about—to use a word of the moment—the drift downwards in defence expenditure among many NATO members? If we are anxious about extending rigour to those who wish to join, should we not be similarly anxious to ensure that the existing members are still able collectively to fight the high-intensity warfare that the Secretary of State rightly mentioned?

Mr. Portillo: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes a good point.

If I may say so in response to the hon. Member for South Shields, it is not only Britain whose defence expenditure has been reduced. Since 1985, the European average has reduced by a third in real terms and today, European countries spend a good deal less of their gross domestic product on defence than does the United States.

I was reading some of the figures yesterday. Seven European countries spend less than 2 per cent. of their GDP on defence. The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East makes a valid point, but what has been remarkable about Britain is that we have been willing to take tough decisions, we have taken out the numbers in the armed forces and in the civil service, we have not held on to redundant estate and therefore we have been able to achieve great efficiency.

The fact that I was able to tell the House that, in the past year, we have ordered cruise missiles for submarines and for aeroplanes and all the other assets that I mentioned earlier, shows that Britain, at her present level of commitment, is capable of engaging successfully in high-intensity conflict if necessary.

That is because we are a country with global responsibilities. We are an island, but we have never been little Englanders. We have always had to trade with the four corners of the globe. That has made us very outward looking. Today we are still a global trading, global investing, globally conscious country, dedicated to the spread of democracy throughout the world; dedicated, through free trade, to the spread of wealth, which, as was well observed during the debate, underpins democracy, drives up living standards and makes the terrorist less welcome.

We have a responsibility for security in the world. We play our part, as we demonstrated in the Gulf and in Bosnia. We are a highly deployable country. Britain will go on playing its part in world affairs, by deed as well as by words. As long as there is a Conservative Government, we will be a reliable ally.

It is difficult to arrive at a consensus with the Labour party, because many of its Front Benchers were supporters of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. They made a fundamental misjudgment about the key decision of the second half of the 20th century, and I, for one, simply cannot trust Labour on defence.

Debate adjourned.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Thurnham be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr. Charles Wardle be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith and Mr. Doug Hoyle be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and Sir Archibald Hamilton and Mr. Ernie Ross be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

Hospital Services (Newbury)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

10 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am delighted to have the opportunity today to raise the issue of hospital services in Newbury, and I am grateful to Madam Speaker for giving me the opportunity. Before I start, however, I feel that I should make my position clear—to avoid any possible accusation of sleaze—by saying that my wife is a general practitioner who works in the health service in Newbury. Therefore, I have a personal, if somewhat indirect, interest in the matter, which I hope that the House will accept puts me in an even better position to speak up for the interests of all those who are concerned about the future of hospital services in Newbury—whether as patients, staff or in some other capacity.

I shall begin by setting the scene. Newbury currently has two small hospitals. The first—Newbury district hospital—was originally built in the 19th century. I should repeat that fact, because it is hardly credible: Newbury district hospital was built in the last century, more than 100 years ago. It has, of course, been developed in fits and starts since then, and not all the buildings are quite that old. The original buildings, however—the heart of the hospital—are more than 100 years old.

Within that heart, the hospital has two wards: one for men and one for women. The wards are used to treat some 2,000 in-patients and day case surgery patients each year. Perhaps more important, however, the hospital also treats 24,000 out-patients each year. It also provides X-ray and pathology services, and a minor injuries unit.

The other hospital in Newbury—Sandleford hospital—is even older. It was originally built as long ago as the 1840s, and one can get some idea of what the hospital is like when I say that it was built as a workhouse. Sadly, it used to provide many more services than it does now, but gradually it has been run down in the constant expectation that the new Newbury hospital was about to be built.

Sandleford hospital is now used primarily to care for elderly patients, for rehabilitation or to provide for those who, sadly, have enduring mental health problems. The hospital also contains a more modern block—the Charles Clore Macmillan day unit, which is the most modern block of any of the hospital services in Newbury—which serves cancer patients and those who have life-threatening illnesses.

After hearing about the current situation, it will not surprise the House to learn that hospital services in Newbury have long been an issue of great concern to everyone living in west Berkshire. As a result, in election after election, the Conservatives have promised the people of west Berkshire that a new hospital would be built. They promised it in 1979. They promised it in 1983, and they promised it in 1987. They promised it in 1992, and they promised it again during the Newbury by-election, in 1993. By that time, of course, not many people still believed the Conservatives' promises—as the people of Newbury showed in that by-election.

Our concern for west Berkshire's health services was greatly increased in the mid-1980s when the town, loyally supported by the local paper, the *Newbury Weekly News*, had to fight off plans to close the existing Newbury district hospital without any replacement. We were delighted to win that battle. Localised hospital services are a crucial part of any health service built round the needs of people, rather than the convenience of bureaucracy. However, that win was by no means the end of the long-standing struggle to secure modern hospital facilities to serve west Berkshire.

On a recent visit to the current hospital, I spoke to a senior nurse. She began her training at the hospital in 1960, and is now nearing retirement. She told me that she hoped that she could still look forward to working in the new hospital before she finally retired. Amazingly, she also told me that she remembered that when she started training in Newbury 36 years ago, the trainee nurses were even then being assured that a new Newbury hospital was due to be built shortly.

In case anyone should think that that nurse was exaggerating, let me quote from today's edition of the *Newbury Weekly News*. One article in the section called "Old Memories Revived"—often the most interesting and revealing part of the newspaper, where articles taken from previous editions are reprinted—refers to a joint meeting of the Newbury town and district councils that took place exactly 30 years ago today, on 24 October 1966.

The article, headed "No New Hospital for 10 Years", says:

"Newbury must make do with its much-criticised district hospital for at least another 10 years,"—

I remind hon. Members that the article was written in 1966—

"members of the Newbury Town and District Councils were told at their first joint meeting on Monday. A letter from the secretary of the Regional Hospital Board informed them that there were long-term plans for a new 400-bed hospital at Newbury,"—

would that the hospital currently planned had anything like 400 beds—

"but it was not expected to be built until 1975-76.

The news was given to the meeting by the Town Clerk who had asked the board what proposals there were for improving hospital facilities.

Dr. R. Warwick-Brown of Thatcham, added that a new hospital in Newbury was so far down the priority list that it might not be built before the 1980s."

I only wish that the very worst predictions of the 1960s had come true—that is, the construction of the new hospital in the 1980s.

People in Newbury are patient; we are used to waiting. The one thing that everyone now knows about Newbury is that we have had to wait for more than 30 years for relief from chronic traffic congestion—we are still waiting—but 36 years, a whole generation and more, is far too long to wait for a new hospital. Even now, there is no end in sight.

The excellent health service staff work wonders to provide the level of service that they do and they are greatly appreciated by the people of Newbury, but our doctors and nurses have their hands tied behind their backs. Day in, day out they strive to overcome the problems of working in 19th-century buildings. Inevitably, it is impossible for them to work as efficiently and as effectively in their patients' interests as they could in more modern buildings.

The fact that patients and visitors have to cross a busy main road to get from the car park to the hospital is not good enough; the fact that hospital services are split

between two sites is not good enough; and the fact that 18,000 trips a year have to be made to the Reading hospitals because of insufficient facilities in Newbury is not good enough. That is a huge number of unnecessary journeys, often made by people in considerable pain, and even those figures ignore the visits that may be made by patients' relatives. When one adds to that the fact that Battle hospital in Reading is due for closure, one can see that the pressure on the other main hospital in Reading—Royal Berkshire hospital—will become acute. That is also an excellent reason why the new Newbury hospital is needed so soon; it would relieve much of that pressure.

The number of both in-patients and out-patients due to be served by the new facilities is roughly double the number who can be treated in the present Newbury district hospital. What is more—I should have thought that even the Government would accept this point—the cost of treating Newbury people in Newbury hospital is far less than the cost of treating them in Reading.

In case there is any doubt about the effect on service standards of the ancient facilities that I have described, I shall report briefly what happened when I took up a complaint from a constituent with the Nuffield orthopaedic centre. In its response to my letter, it put the point simply:

"The facilities available to us at the Newbury District Hospital are of a poor standard, which does not allow the Orthotist to provide the standard of service that he/she would like to."

But of course the Government accept that the facilities offered by the aging hospitals in Newbury are not good enough. The case has been made and it is clear for all to see. Indeed, before the Government introduced their health service reforms and transferred the hospitals to the new Priority Care trust, it had long been agreed in principle that a new hospital should be built.

But the agreement in principle was not enough for this Government. Although in every other part of the country it is accepted that it is the job of the national health service to provide facilities for the health care of local people, the Government decided that in Newbury's case, a large chunk of the necessary finance would have to be provided by the people of Newbury themselves.

The Newbury Hospital Helpers League, of which I am proud to be a member, was persuaded to pledge the proceeds of a very generous bequest from a Miss Rook towards the cost of the new building. Not only that, but the Government then insisted that the value of the land was not sufficient and that it should, therefore, be given planning permission for development to enhance its value. A green-field site which, in all likelihood, would never otherwise have been developed, was sacrificed by the local population, desperate as we were to make sure that the Government had no further excuse for putting off the hospital any longer. That very precious green-field site makes up part of the strategic green gap between the towns of Newbury and Thatcham. That site would never have been given development permission were it not for the very special community need that the new hospital represents.

I suggest to the House that the people of Newbury have already more than played their part in making it easy for the Government to go ahead. In fact, had the health service reforms to which I referred a moment ago not put the whole question of what to do and when to do it back into the melting pot, there is little doubt that the new hospital would have been built by now.

Even under the new regime, the proposals for a new hospital were accepted by Berkshire health authority in December 1995. They were then accepted by Anglia and Oxford regional health authority in June this year. That is not exactly great progress in 36 years, but at least it is something. We are getting closer. But the frustration felt by the people of Newbury is now met by another brick wall—the private finance initiative. It has already become abundantly clear that the PFI has been a failed attempt to privatise by stealth. However, it has also been a smokescreen for cuts in capital investment.

There may well be some areas where the PFI has a role to play, but when public health needs have been established, the PFI must not be allowed to introduce additional delays, as has happened in this case. Public health is just too important for that. So the health service is not the best place for the Government to experiment with private funding.

What the people of west Berkshire want from the Government is a cast-iron assurance that funds to build the new hospital will be forthcoming now. What the staff and patients of Newbury district hospital want are decent, modern facilities that afford the best available standard of care.

The country is crying out for investment in its infrastructure. When will the Government put aside their ideological insistence on private finance and provide that infrastructure? The whole point of the public purse is to fund public benefits. There can be few greater public benefits than first-class hospital services.

I look forward to the Minister's assurance that the people of Newbury will have their hospital by the end of the century and, I hope, in good time before that long-suffering nurse, whom I referred to at the start of my speech, retires.

Newbury has more than fulfilled its side of the bargain. It has provided a very special site and granted a special planning permission to raise the £2 million of charity funding that the Government have demanded. Newbury has permitted the health authority to redevelop the current hospital sites. It has been patient beyond all reasonable expectation.

It is now time for the Government to fulfil their half of the bargain, and I call upon the Minister to do so tonight.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): I was grateful to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) for choosing as his subject for tonight's Adjournment debate "Hospital Services in Newbury". The debate has brought to my attention yet another local picture of an NHS that not only is providing high-quality care but has real ambitions for the future.

The West Berkshire Priority Care Service NHS trust runs two small hospitals in Newbury. In both hospitals, a range of quality community services is provided, albeit from ancient buildings.

Newbury district hospital has a core of late Victorian buildings, with a typical hotchpotch of development throughout the century. Sandleford hospital occupies a building with a familiar history in terms of NHS building—a former workhouse now transformed to provide around 50 beds. It houses the much-valued

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Charles Clore Macmillan day unit for patients with cancer or other life-threatening illness, and has a broad range of clinics.

Between the two hospitals, sterling work is done for the people of Newbury, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree. Consultants from the Royal Berkshire and Battle hospitals in Reading provide services in Newbury, giving local access to first-rate acute care. Out of hours, the hospitals are in the safe and familiar hands of the local general practitioners.

It is a credit to all the staff who work in the area that patients charter and waiting list standards are consistently achieved. The current NHS performance guide shows the trust obtaining a clutch of five-star awards for the services that it provides.

I was particularly pleased to learn of the improvements which the trust has recently been able to make in the provision of a nurse-led minor injuries clinic in Newbury, which has also brought some relief to the GPs in the area, including the hon. Gentleman's wife. Meanwhile, patients requiring full-scale accident and emergency services are well cared for in Reading at the Royal Berkshire and Battle hospitals. Next year, the introduction by the Royal Berkshire Ambulance NHS trust of a priority dispatch system—one of only four in the country, as Berkshire was chosen as a pilot area—should also mean more rapid transfer for those whose need is paramount.

Newbury GPs are in the vanguard of the development of GP fundholding, with the latest wave of applications from GPs who wish to become fundholders. The benefits of the scheme, which puts GPs in direct control of the care that their patients receive, will be extended to some 70 per cent. of people in Berkshire.

That is the current position—what about the future? Berkshire health authority's purchasing plan for 1997-98 holds much that is of great interest to the people of Newbury and I hope that the hon. Member for Newbury will read it carefully, and offer his comments to the authority.

Among the plans of particular interest to the hon. Gentleman's constituents is the agreement which has just been reached on the re-provision of services for those severely mentally ill adults who are currently living at Fair Mile hospital. As part of the agreement, discussions will be taking place about the model for local community services.

GP fundholding has, for the first time, given general practice a central and powerful role in shaping local services. To extend the benefits of this fundamental change, health authorities are required to involve GPs in their own planning processes. Since 1 April, Berkshire health authority has worked in conjunction with local GPs to establish six localities—including one for Newbury—to consider how all GPs can become fully involved in the commissioning of local services for local people. In Newbury, the locality group has settled on its priorities for change, and they are reflected in the health authority's purchasing plan.

Newbury stands on the verge of its biggest leap forward in hospital services since the creation of the NHS. The plan to build a brand new £16 million community hospital to replace both Newbury and Sandleford hospitals would give local people the facilities that they certainly deserve for the 1990s and beyond. A new hospital between Newbury and Thatcham would improve access to services for many people. It would provide the full range of current services. Through the use of the latest medical advances, it would allow the number of patients enjoying the considerable benefits of day case surgery to rise to around 4,000 each year. In all, the amount of care provided locally would almost double. For a great many people—the hon. Gentleman referred to the number of journeys—journeys to Reading and back for examination and treatment would become a thing of the past.

Not only will local services improve with the building of the new hospital but the overall running costs to the health authority will fall, as the hon. Gentleman implied, since services in Newbury can obviously be provided at less cost than those in Reading.

As with any building project, of course, planning issues have had to be resolved before the business of building the new facility could begin in earnest. The sale of the Wash Water site will provide some £2 million towards the cost of the new hospital. The project has been thoroughly discussed at the appropriate planning forum and I certainly do not propose to dwell on such planning matters now. Suffice it to say that the trust has been willing to scale down development plans for the site in accordance with local concerns, and there certainly will be no development at Wash Water unless and until the new hospital becomes a reality. That is a commitment.

As the hon. Gentleman has made clear, the proposed new hospital for the people of Newbury is to be financed through the private finance initiative. The Newbury scheme benefits, however, from the experience of those who have already trodden the PFI path. As we now know, the scheme is precisely the type for which the benefits of the PFI will be most readily available. It is relatively small, on a green-field site, and benefits from a high level of contributions from land sales and the support of the health authority and local GPs. It is also based on sound activity assumptions and is unencumbered by further major land or planning issues.

The hon. Gentleman said that the private finance initiative was delaying the building of a new hospital for the people of Newbury. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, under the old system of "public funding or nothing", the new hospital, which, as he said, has been an aspiration for many years, received precisely nothing. Now he suggests that the hospital should return to its place in the queue for public money. As he says, it was low on the list of priorities—so it would be low in the queue. Such an approach would simply set things back.

Under the PFI on the other hand, the plans have achieved approval in the outline stage from the health authority and the NHS executive. A steering committee including local GPs has been established to drive the project forward. It will work closely with everyone else who has an interest to ensure that the hospital is built on target. With those advantages, there is no reason why the scheme should not progress smoothly and swiftly through the PFI process and present the people of Newbury with a new hospital fit for the new millennium. The present estimate is that the building will begin in 1998 and be completed in 2000.

The Government's commitment to modernising the NHS is second to none. The NHS building programme is the largest of its kind in the world. Even excluding the

£500 million-worth of PFI schemes that have already received final business case approval, the programme includes more than 275 projects, each valued at more than £1 million. I remind the House that every £1 saved, whether by use of the PFI or by any other means, is £1 more available for patient care.

The hon. Gentleman commented on the PFI in adverse terms, but when the National Health Service (Residual Liabilities) Bill was before the House earlier this year, it was his hon. Friend the Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) who said that the real issue was

"ensuring that there is an accountable way of getting value for money irrespective of whether projects are in the public or private sectors."—[*Official Report*, 12 March 1996; Vol. 273, c. 841.]

I agree. That is exactly what the PFI process is all about.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the only time NHS spending was cut was when the Liberals last had a say in government. Health spending has increased in each of the past 17 years, and will continue to do so under this Conservative Government and future Conservative Governments. This year, that has meant an extra £13.5 million for the NHS in Berkshire—a rise well ahead of inflation. Indeed, it is the 10th biggest rise in the country. That strong record of investment means that the hon. Gentleman's constituents can look to the future of local hospital services with confidence.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 25 October 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BILLS PRESENTED

CHANNEL TUNNEL RAIL LINK

Secretary Sir George Young, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Rifkind, Mr. Secretary Lang, Mr. Secretary Gummer and Mr. John Watts, presented a Bill to provide for the construction, maintenance and operation of a railway between St. Pancras, in London, and the Channel Tunnel portal at Castle Hill, Folkestone, in Kent, together with associated works, and of works which can be carried out in conjunction therewith; to make provision about related works; to provide for the improvement of the A2 at Cobham, in Kent, and of the M2 between junctions 1 and 4, together with associated works; to make provision with respect to compensation in relation to the acquisition of blighted land; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First, Second and Third time, pursuant to the Standing Order of 15 October, and passed.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (SCOTLAND)

Mr. Secretary Forsyth, supported by Mr. Secretary Heseltine, Mr. Secretary Howard and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, presented a Bill to make provision as respects Scotland in relation to criminal appeals, the disposal of offenders, criminal procedure, evidence in criminal proceedings, the treatment and early release of prisoners, offences committed by newly released prisoners, criminal legal assistance, the police, confiscation of alcohol from persons under 18, sex offenders and the payment by the Lord Advocate of grants for the provision of forensic medical services; to enable courts in England and Wales and Northern Ireland to remit offenders to courts in Scotland in certain circumstances; to make amendments consequential upon the provisions of this Act to the law in other parts of the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Monday next and to be printed. [Bill 5.]

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[THIRD DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 October],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—[*Sir Norman Fowler.*]

Question again proposed.

Social Policy

9.34 am

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Stephen Dorrell): It is good, in a crowded House on a Friday morning, to see two of the three Opposition health spokesmen whom I have faced as Secretary of State for Health in the past 15 months. Perhaps group therapy will lead to greater clarity of health policies for the Labour Front Bench this morning.

The purpose of today's debate is to examine the social policy measures in the Queen's Speech, which contains a wide variety of different aspects of social policy. The Bill to be presented by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is at the heart of the development of social policy; the various Bills promoted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary are at the heart of the delivery of a stable society and of social policy; and the Bill that I and my hon. Friends from the Department of Health will present to the House to develop primary care within the national health service is a key part of the Government's programme for the last Session of this Parliament.

First, I shall set out the background to the introduction of that primary care Bill, the approach that we take to developing NHS primary care and why we regard it as a key element of the totality of the national health service. As I have said many times, I regard NHS primary care and, within primary care, the family doctor service, as the jewel in the crown of the national health service. It is one of the success stories of the NHS—

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Does the Minister intend to speak to the Bill?

Mr. Dorrell: It is a success story, and I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would agree with that. It is a widely held view within and outside the health service, and abroad, that NHS primary care is one of the national health service's success stories. It is a success because it has been built on some key principles: first, that patients choose the GP with whom they register. The service is available universally to any patient who wishes to use it, but which practice delivers it to an individual patient is a matter of patient choice. The second principle is that, once a patient has chosen the practice with which he or she wishes to register, the patient becomes the

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responsibility of that practice. That important principle underlies all the reforms to be set out in the Bill that we shall introduce and the policy papers that will follow it.

NHS primary care is not simply a service available to people who walk through the door. When a patient registers with a general practitioner, a GP accepts responsibility for health promotion and health advice, and general responsibility for the health of that patient. That is why we have introduced cervical smear programmes targeted on a GP's whole patient base; that is why we have introduced targets for childhood immunisation; and that is why last autumn I renegotiated the arrangements for delivering health promotion to patients registered with a general practice. The principle that, having chosen a general practice, patients are on a register and the practice recognises its responsibility for the whole practice population, is an important principle of NHS primary care.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so early in his speech, but this is a matter of cardinal importance. He rightly emphasises the importance of the patient. Does he agree that the changes envisaged in the White Paper will encourage competition between health practices, bringing in new sources of finance, perhaps under the private finance initiative or through borrowing? It will turn practices into businesses of which doctors must take account. Some of us feel that that would be to the detriment of patients. Does the Minister agree?

Mr. Dorrell: May I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that we shall have a more structured argument about that proposition, which I know some of his hon. Friends will want to advance, if he lets me develop my argument a stage further first? I do not accept what he says.

General practitioners already operate their practices and, as I emphasised at the outset, patients have absolute—or virtually absolute—freedom of choice on the practice with which they register. The principle of patient choice of practice already exists. I should have thought that the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing), who represents an inner-city constituency, would agree with the Government that the variation in quality of general practice between some of the easier, fashionable areas and some of the more deprived areas should be addressed. We plan to introduce more flexible models for the delivery of NHS primary care precisely to address some of the problems that the hon. Gentleman will encounter in parts of his constituency—the inadequate development of primary care in some inner-city areas, particularly in parts of the east end of London. We seek to address that concern.

Let me develop my argument. We have a system that is based on patient choice. Once patients have chosen a practice, they are registered with the general practitioner. The GP is then responsible for delivering a wide range of health care to those registered patients. The range of care has grown exponentially over recent years and that growth partly reflects changing medical practice. Change has come about through medical advance and the availability of new diagnostic and therapeutic techniques, which make it possible to offer diagnosis and therapy within the surgery in a way that was not possible given the state of medical knowledge and technology a generation ago.

A broader range of services within the surgery, at the front line of the NHS, is the third principle on which NHS primary care is built. The fourth principle is that when a patient needs health care that is not available in the primary care context, the NHS general practitioner is the most important gateway into the secondary and specialist care services of the NHS.

I have stressed that I regard general practice within the health service as a success. I have no doubt that that is true. That success is not new: it has been built over half a century. During that period, we have seen better trained GPs, the availability of a broader range of medical treatments, a wider range of non-medical professional staff working in a primary care context, and better buildings and facilities to allow those professionals to deliver care to their patients.

The result of the development of primary care is that the patient has greater access to what modern health care can provide. Critically for anyone interested in the sustainability of a tax-funded model for the delivery of health care, the development of primary care offers not only better access to health care, but the discipline of more efficient use of health care resources to ensure that the resources committed to health care are used efficiently and effectively and contain the cost burden inevitably entailed in delivering a modern health service.

NHS primary care is a success, but even the best system can be improved. The Government have made it clear year by year from 1979 that we are committed to the continued development of NHS primary care because we regard it as important for the interests of the patient that health care should be accessible. We regard the development of NHS primary care as the key to maintaining the efficiency lead that the NHS has, compared with health care systems elsewhere in the world. The success story must be continually improved.

When we considered what was good in the health service in 1990 and what needed to be further improved, one thing was clear to anyone who took a dispassionate interest in the NHS primary care sector. Although the services that were available within the primary care sector were developing and were of high quality, there was a frustrating failure to communicate between the primary and secondary care sectors of the health service. Large numbers of general practitioners were frustrated because they considered that resources were being inefficiently used—used in a way that did not represent best value for their patients—in the secondary care sector. They also saw, from the patients' perspective, how the secondary care sector was failing to respond as effectively as it should—*[Interruption.]* That is another example of modern technology, but it should have an off switch.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. Madam Speaker has strong views about modern technology—it should not be heard in the Chamber.

Mr. Dorrell: I am sure that the hon. Member for Dulwich (Ms Jowell) will find the high-tech, off switch.

The development of primary care has resulted in a wide range of services being provided in the surgery, but no proper linkage or accountability within the secondary care sector to the views and priorities of the primary sector has been established.

The idea was not partisan, it was not invented in 1990 and it is not recognised only by Conservative Ministers. Every one of my predecessors, from both Labour and Conservative Governments, made that speech about how it was important for the hospital sector to respond to the views and priorities of people in the primary care sector, who saw more patients every day than the hospitals. Every one of them—from Lady Castle to David Ennals and all my predecessors—going right through the 1990s, said that it was important to make secondary care more responsive. It was such a commonplace that it was seldom reported and never listened to—it was simply regarded as conventional orthodoxy. Every Health Minister said it and no one listened—people thought that it had merely come off whatever the predecessor to the word processor was at the Department of Health in the 1960s.

This Government then introduced fundholding—

Mr. Frank Field: What is the Bill about?

Mr. Dorrell: The Bill is about the development of primary care—building on the success of fundholding. The Government gave general practitioners the opportunity not simply to continue to deliver services and be frustrated by the failure of the secondary care sector to back them up in the way that they felt it should, but to help shape the secondary care services that their patients needed. That opportunity has been taken up by doctors who cover 58 per cent. of all national health service patients. We have given general practitioners that choice and more than half of them have opted for fundholding.

Not only have more than half of all GPs opted for fundholding, because they think that it is in their patients' interests—more fundamentally, that objective of making the secondary care sector more responsive to the wishes of primary care, which was consistently articulated by Labour and Tory Ministers for more than 30 years, has been delivered.

The relationship between primary and secondary care has changed and not merely for the benefit of fundholders. The majority of GP commissioners—certainly their leaders—recognise that they are using the changed relationship between primary and secondary care that came in with fundholding to develop their ideas for GP commissioning.

The question that anyone who is seriously interested in primary care must ask themselves is whether the fact that that changed relationship—which every one of my predecessors sought—arrived when fundholding was implemented, was a result of that implementation or of a massive historical coincidence, whereby people expressed that ambition for 30 years and it was realised on the day that fundholding was implemented, but the two are unrelated. I simply suggest that there is, to put it mildly, circumstantial evidence to support the Government's assertion that the changed relationship between primary and secondary care, which we have in the health service today and which benefits the patients of both fundholders and non-fundholders, is the result of our introduction of the fundholding scheme.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): I do not disagree with anything that the Secretary of State has said so far, but I wish to ask him a question that he has not yet answered, which is on the controversial issue that arises from fundholding. I shall give an example. I was told yesterday that the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS trust put out a notice in August, as a result of its contract with its health authority, which stated:

"The Trust has a fixed price contract for its work for North and East Devon Health Authority. Because of this, if we need to do more emergency work, it is necessary to do less non-urgent work. Patients will continue to be treated as before if they"—

it gives a list, including—

"are the patient of a fundholding GP and the procedure is a fundholding procedure."

Does the Secretary of State accept that fundholding has also brought advantages in speed of treatment to the patients of fundholding practices which other patients do not have?

Mr. Dorrell: I do not accept that point, because the basis on which funds are made available for the care of the two groups of patients is the same. I could understand the argument—although I did not agree with it—in the first days of fundholding, when the scheme was developing and not every general practitioner had the opportunity to join. Now that we are six years into the scheme, every general practitioner has exercised a choice. Presumably, some GPs have opted for fundholding because they think that it is in the interests of their patients, and other GPs have opted to be non-fundholders because they think that that is a better way to deliver care to their patients. I am sufficiently humble about the expertise of the Government to think that it is possible, in the different circumstances in which those professional people work, that both groups are right. The idea that everybody has to operate under the same model is absurd.

I seek to offer GPs a choice. They may opt for whichever of the options they think offers the best national health service care to their patients. On the track record so far, the GPs who cover 58 per cent. of patients have opted for fundholding and those who cover the other 42 per cent. have opted for non-fundholding. I am sure that both groups are motivated by the interests of their patients. Some 42 per cent. think that, in their circumstances, non-fundholding—including GP commissioning and other connections with their health authorities—offers the better model, and 58 per cent. of patients are covered by GPs who have chosen the other option. I am prepared to believe that both groups are right.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Eltham): My right hon. Friend's argument is convincing, but it leads to a further problem. If all GPs were fundholders and the same increase in emergency treatments took place during a year, what could be done to bring the resources through so that non-emergency treatments, which may be just as important to many people, could be met by the fundholders and the hospitals? That is not an attacking question, but a logical question.

Mr. Dorrell: Whether GPs are fundholders or not, the health service must choose its resource commitments to emergency services and non-emergency services, and indeed to all the other services that do not fall neatly into those two categories. It is not as simple as a straight choice between emergency and non-emergency services. Is a maternity service an emergency service? The service is clearly needed—and without delay. It needs to be demand led, but it is not what would normally be defined

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as an emergency service. Obviously, choices must always be made, within a tax-funded budget, between relative priorities.

Under the present fundholding arrangements, emergency services are outside the fund and are the responsibility of the health authority. The fundholders deal with the rest of the package of care. In the total purchasing pilots, the GPs make choices across the whole range of hospital secondary and tertiary services for their patients. The introduction of a right for GPs, if they so choose, to be the decision makers—in consultation with other GPs, the health authorities and other providers—and not simply consultees, has delivered the change in the relationship between primary and secondary care that every Health Minister from the 1960s onwards has argued for but was unable to deliver, until my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer did so.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I do not disagree with anything that the Secretary of State has said, but he did not answer my specific question. Like him, we would not abolish fundholding—unlike the Labour party—but fundholding, although it has given choice to GPs, has caused disadvantage for some patients. Does he accept that some patients do not now get the same speed or standard of treatment because of the choice given to fundholding practices?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman approaches the issue from an odd point of view, because he considers only the difference between the pattern of care provided by a fundholder and that provided by the health authority, but every health authority makes different choices in its use of resources.

Mr. Hughes: I asked a specific question.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman asked about the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS trust. People who live in Exeter are close to the eastern county boundary of Devon. On the other side of the county boundary, the health authority in that area will make different choices on the use of resources for its patients.

Mr. Hughes: That is not a direct answer.

Mr. Dorrell: It is. The hon. Gentleman seeks to distinguish between two groups of patients—those covered by fundholding and those who are not. Of course, there are differences between the care delivered by one fundholding practice and another fundholding practice, because that is the purpose of introducing the scheme. It allows the fundholding practice to improve the care available to its patients and, by definition, that means that the better care provided by the fundholders—in their opinion—is different from the care provided by the neighbouring practice. Otherwise, there is no point to the scheme.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a difference, because that is the purpose of the scheme. As a result of the scheme, the fundholder improves the efficiency with which resources are used to meet his patients' needs. Once the fundholder has shown how resources can be used more effectively, that creates a pressure on the health authority, non-fundholding practices and other fundholding practices to match the advances that the fundholder has made. The proposition that we cannot do anything unless we can do it for all 40 million people who live in England on the same day is patently absurd. We have to give people the opportunity to improve care for their patients, and that automatically creates pressure on others to match that improvement.

Mr. Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Dorrell: I shall give way once more, but then I must get on. I am still on my introduction to the terms of the Bill.

Mr. Hughes: This is a long warm-up. I still agree with everything that the Secretary of State has said and he is bright enough to understand that he has not yet answered the question. If I exercise my right in Exeter or in that part of Devon to be on a doctor's list and that doctor chooses not to be a fundholder, is it not the case that today, in October 1996, I shall be at a disadvantage in receiving non-emergency treatment from the local NHS trust as opposed to those who are the patients of fundholding practices? That is a two-tier system, to the disadvantage of patients of non-fundholding practices.

Ms Harriet Harman (Peckham): If it is a two-tier system, why do the Liberal Democrats support it?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Lady has always made it clear that she would abolish fundholding. It is nice to hear her being so clear and direct on the subject. She always sought to persuade me previously that abolishing fundholding was different from the concept of replacing fundholding. I never quite understood the difference, and I am glad to hear confirmation from the hon. Lady that she never really understood the difference either.

Ms Harman: That is sexism. The right hon. Gentleman thinks that women do not understand anything because they are stupid.

Mr. Dorrell: No. I am merely picking—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It does not make for good debate if there are sotto voce comments, especially from a seated position.

Mr. Dorrell: I resent the proposition that, because I pick up a comment that the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) lets slip, which everyone knows to be her view, that makes me sexist. The hon. Lady is claiming a protection from normal and legitimate debate which anyone who wants to see equality of the sexes would not wish to claim on her behalf.

I have twice answered the question posed by the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). The hon. Gentleman is focusing on one specific aspect of patient care. It is my case that we provide resources on the same formula to both fundholder and non-fundholder patients. Every practice has a different experience, of

course, of the NHS. I am not talking about 42 per cent. or 58 per cent. The purpose of the scheme is to create pressure for improvement.

Mr. Frank Field: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way.

Mr. Dorrell: The only trouble with that is that I am not going to give way, but I am always happy to accept the hon. Gentleman's gratitude. I wish to make progress, or we shall spend the whole morning on fundholding. I have been on my feet for more than 20 minutes and it is probably time that I moved on to the Bill that we intend to put before the House.

I wished to stress by way of introduction to the Bill that the fundholding scheme—more than half the doctors have chosen to be part of it, and it was based on the introduction of an idea by means of a pilot scheme—has delivered significant change and benefit to the NHS. The hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) will have to avoid the fudge that has recently been revealed by the hon. Member for Peckham. There is no fudging possible of the Labour party's policy on fundholding. Those interested in primary care will want to hear from the Labour party whether the hon. Gentleman agrees that replace and abolish in these terms amount to precisely the same policy.

The Bill that we propose to introduce will build on the success of the fundholding scheme and primary health care more generally. I shall outline the objectives that lie behind the Bill, but I shall begin by making two points about what it is not. First, there is speculation in some parts of the professional press that the Bill will constitute big bang in the primary health care sector. I have made it clear repeatedly, and I do so again, that the Government's approach to the implementation of new bases of contract is explicitly a pilot-based approach. It is an incremental approach to change in the primary health care sector.

I do not understand how a big bang can be piloted. We have either a big bang policy or a pilot incremental policy. I have made it explicitly clear that we have a pilot incremental policy. It has not yet been explained to me how I can pilot a big bang. That is the first thing that the Bill will not be.

Secondly, the Bill will not represent a policy for introducing a huge range of new general practitioners based on supermarkets. I have made it clear already that I am in favour of NHS primary care, by which I mean a service delivered by NHS practitioners, NHS staff and the NHS generally. I set out the principles at the beginning of my speech. The patient chooses the general practitioner. Critically, the patient then goes on the GP's register. It is not a reactive service. The GP delivers the range of care that we expect of the modern NHS primary care GP. General practitioners act as the gateway and as the patient's advocate for the rest of the NHS. I am not interested in developing a new competitor idea of what general practice means. Instead, I am interested in developing the present system, which in the sector that we are discussing I believe to be the best in the world.

So far as I know, no supermarket operator has evinced the slightest interest in developing his own primary care sector. I find it difficult to understand why much of the commentary so far has concentrated on those who have never expressed any discernible interest in primary care. That commentary has avoided discussing the group for which there is real interest in extending opportunities for developing primary care, which is NHS community trusts.

Having made those comments by way of introduction, I come to the real options that we shall be introducing in the Bill.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I imagine that the Secretary of State is aware of Mr. Roy Lilley, a former Conservative councillor and currently the chair of the Homewood NHS trust. The right hon. Gentleman may be aware also that in 1994 Mr. Lilley said that general practitioners had three duties. One was to themselves, one was to the organisation within which they worked and the third—it was interesting that it took third place—was to their patients. The right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that GPs could become the employees of trusts, including, I assume, acute trusts—

Mr. Dorrell: That is unlikely.

Mr. Burden: If the Secretary of State is saying that the suggestion is ruled out, that is fine.

Mr. Dorrell: No.

Mr. Burden: If he is not saying that it is ruled out, how can it be said that there will be a primary health care-led NHS if the GP—as the right hon. Gentleman said, the gatekeeper—is employed by the secondary sector?

Mr. Dorrell: The secondary sector includes community trusts. My sedentary reaction to the hon. Gentleman's proposition that acute trusts could be included was that it was unlikely but possible. There are two reasons why I am not ruling it out. First, there are many trusts that are both acute and community in a single trust. In that instance, it would be the community sector typically that would be most likely to be the employer of a salaried GP.

Secondly, if we reflect on some of the ways in which we manage pressure on an accident and emergency department, for example, some acute trusts are providing a proper, high-quality GP-based primary care sector as a front-line service, close to where the acute trust is. That is already being done within the existing contract scheme. It has been widely recognised as an improvement in the quality of care and in the management of the work load in inner-city accident and emergency departments. It may be that some trusts will find that approach—the salaried option—a more efficient means of delivery. For both reasons, I am not ruling out the proposition that an acute trust could put forward a suitable proposal.

There is no point in our constantly being taken down a cul-de-sac. As far as I know, Sainsbury, for example, has never expressed an interest in those matters. When we ask, "How do we address the failures of general practice in areas such as east London?" the answer, repeatedly, turns on the inability of the community trust to employ salaried GPs. It is thought that that is a significant difficulty in the development of NHS primary care.

If a young GP is contemplating going into NHS general practice on the basis of the present national contract, he is in reality required to make a substantial commitment, if not a lifetime commitment, to the area in which he

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wishes to practise. That has led to NHS GPs gravitating away from the most difficult areas. As Secretary of State, I regard it as part of my responsibility to set up systems that allow us to create a countervailing pressure against that tendency.

Mr. Burden: Again, the Secretary of State is not answering the question. If he does not rule out a GP being employed by an acute trust that is a secondary care organisation, how is that GP, being responsible to the acute trust, to act in the gatekeeper-advocate role, which the right hon. Gentleman said was perhaps the most important role of the GP?

Mr. Dorrell: I thought that I had answered the hon. Gentleman's question at some length and quite specifically. I gave two examples of why I am not ruling it out. I also made it clear that I do not regard general practice as the core responsibility of an acute trust. Nor, critically, do health authorities. We are talking about a pilot-based scheme, under which proposals will come from health authorities for the approval of the Secretary of State.

If the hon. Gentleman is concerned that all GPs will be subsumed into a hospital and that a patient will have to go to a hospital to see his or her primary care physician in future, I can give him an assurance that that is the policy neither of any health authority nor, certainly, of this Secretary of State. That is not what we are talking about, and the hon. Gentleman is raising an Aunt Sally.

Let us return to the real options, which are based on the listening exercise that was led by my hon. Friend the Minister for Health. My hon. Friend spent the first six months of this year going round listening to primary care practitioners, patient groups and other interested groups as well. There is broad agreement, and that has been revealed in the House. Hon. Members have questioned me on whether I plan to continue to deliver the objectives on the development of primary care, but those objectives are agreed throughout the House and in the primary care world. The questions are essentially agreed. My hon. Friend was engaged in looking at how we can address the weaknesses—the areas that need to be improved—in NHS primary care.

It is true that we have good general practice, but there is too wide a variation around the country, particularly in inner cities. It is also true that there is an unhelpfully rigid distinction between GP services and secondary services, which is preventing the development of the range of services that are available and which could be made available in the community, in the GP's surgery. It does not in every circumstance make it impossible, but it is inhibiting the development of what I might term a "super-surgery"—a surgery that can do things beyond what was imagined as a definition of GP services a decade or two ago.

Furthermore, that rigidity is inhibiting modern ideas about the distinction between the service that is delivered in the hospital and the service that is delivered in the community. It is engaging one of the more unhealthy aspects of NHS primary care, the introduction into health care of a rigid distinction between the role of the community primary care physician and the hospital doctor.

A general practitioner might want to be engaged more actively in sub-acute hospital care or in establishing hospital-at-home schemes—ensuring that there is proper support with general practitioner input—for recovery at home, to enable beds in hospital to be used for those whose needs are more acute. The development of hospital-at-home schemes is not impossible, but it is inhibited by the present rigid distinction between primary and secondary care in the contracting system. The development of primary care has been inhibited in the sense of the divide not just between primary care and hospital services, but between primary care and community health. That is particularly true in mental health.

The contract has demonstrated itself to be a powerful instrument for developing high-quality primary care, but it is rigid. That has led to another characteristic—that it has not been possible to respond as flexibly as we should to the different circumstances and different priorities of different parts of the country.

Furthermore, it is important in primary care to talk not only about general practitioner services. There is also dentistry. We need to ensure that we continue to have not just the growing NHS dentistry service that we already have, but more equitable access. We want more flexible systems to ensure that access is available to NHS dentistry around the country. Pharmacy and optometry are important parts of NHS primary care. We need to allow more flexible development of the pharmacy service and more active integration of the optometry service into the rest of the national health service.

Those are not issues that were invented by the Department of Health, still less by Conservative central office. Those are matters that are raised whenever one has intelligent discussions with practitioners about the development of NHS primary care. In June, we set out our approach in a document that details the things that we can do without legislation. It also recognised that there are key legislative bars to the development of those ideas.

The purpose of the Bill that will be introduced this Session is simply stated: to pilot different, more flexible types of GP and primary care contract, to allow us to address some of the issues in today's primary care. As the House knows, every NHS primary care principal is currently employed on a national contract. There are different national contracts with individual professions, but it is a national contract framework.

What we plan, on a pilot basis, is an opportunity to develop a more varied basis of contract between local health authorities and local primary care principals, to address more precisely the specific needs of the health service in the district for which they are responsible. The document sets out the range of options that we have in mind: practice-based contracts; contracts with organisations such as NHS trusts, which may employ GPs, in the way that we have already discussed; and contracts that target money on GP services that may be weak in a particular area, and make that possible by flexing the boundary between primary and secondary care, which is currently defined in statute. There is also development of super-fundholding, to allow fundholders the same freedoms across the primary and secondary divide as would be available for those who are not operating a fund.

The Government plan to proceed on the basis of pilots proposed from the field. We would undertake to assess and evaluate the results, which would be made available. Critically, every pilot would be voluntary. The status quo remains open to any clinician who wishes to continue to operate within the existing structure on the same terms, and any clinician who engaged in a pilot that proved not to be successful would have the opportunity to return to the existing basis of service delivery.

To describe that as a big bang is nonsense. What is true, however, is that it represents the Government's clear commitment to continue the development of NHS primary care. I regard the primary care sector as a key part of the NHS. We want high-quality NHS services to be available on an accessible basis in the community, and the primary care sector offers us the opportunity to do that.

The Bill will build on the success of GP fundholding, and it shows critically that it is the Conservative Government who continue to lead the health agenda in Britain. The challenge to the Opposition is to catch up, at least to the extent of acknowledging that they were wrong about fundholding. More than half of Britain's GPs have rejected the Opposition's advice and chosen the option that the Government have created. Labour must begin the debate on the Bill by acknowledging that they were wrong on the debate about the last major phase of primary care development.

10.18 am

Mr. Chris Smith (Islington, South and Finsbury): Perhaps we can begin with what we agree on. The Government tell us that they are introducing a primary care Bill, and that is the only subject that the Secretary of State spoke about. We presume that the contents of the Bill will more or less follow the outline in the White Paper published last week.

There is much in the White Paper that the Opposition welcome. We welcome, for example, the fact that the Government now endorse the approach of piloting—the incremental approach, as the Secretary of State called it. That contrasts with the approach that they took when they brought in the internal market: the then Secretary of State for Health, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said then that the Government would make all the changes immediately and would not consider pilot schemes because the demands for piloting were merely an attempt to obfuscate, filibuster and delay. I am delighted that the present Secretary of State has learnt from that mistake.

In its response to the primary care White Paper, the British Medical Association said:

"The voluntary nature of the proposals, which are to be piloted and evaluated,"—

I note in passing that even now the Government have conducted no proper evaluation of fundholding—

"is a welcome change from the Government's previous dogmatic initiatives which were imposed on an unwilling profession."

I am pleased that the Government have seen how wrong they were the first time round and have chosen a more incremental approach.

We welcome the idea of an enabling Bill that will permit a variety of models of progress in primary care to be developed, fostering diversity, trying out different ideas and enabling the health service to pick the best, to see what works and to develop from there. We welcome that pragmatic, commonsense approach.

The Secretary of State got rather bogged down in the part of his speech about the relatively new-found strength of primary care in its relationship with secondary care. I accept entirely that the balance has changed for the better over recent years, putting primary care in the driving seat. However, the Secretary of State claimed that that change was entirely a result of the Government's introduction of fundholding. There is a grain of truth in that; the introduction of fundholding has given some GPs extra power in their dealings with hospital providers, but the Secretary of State conveniently ignored the fact that the additional funds allocated to fundholders and the relative freedom given to both fundholders and non-fundholders, which is evident in the commissioning groups now being established, were rather more important factors.

Far from demonstrating that single-practice fundholding is the be-all and end-all, as the Secretary of State wants us to believe, the proposals in the White Paper show that there is a growing demand in primary care for a development away from that.

We support the proposal to develop super-surgeries. That will be important for the development not so much of surgical procedures by GPs but of a recuperation service for people coming out of hospital; it will offer them care and support nearer their home, in their community, so that they need no longer take up acute beds in acute hospitals.

I welcome the Government's new-found reconversion to the principle of the cottage hospital; it would have been happier for everyone if they had not closed 245 of them in the past five years. I welcome the Secretary of State's acceptance that there is a continuum between primary and secondary care, that there need not be a rigid division between two separate parts of the health service and that we need to facilitate flexibility in the system.

I welcome the proposal—the Secretary of State did not even mention it—to reform the way in which single-handed practitioners are replaced. The absurd existing rules stipulate that as long as there is a candidate, that candidate, however poor, has to be appointed; that is clearly nonsense and it will be good to do away with it.

I welcome the proposal that salaried GPs should be employed by community health trusts. A serious problem of GP recruitment is developing in our inner cities. People in practice after practice tell us that they cannot find new partners to join them in providing high-quality primary care in inner-city areas. To have salaried doctors employed by community trusts is a possible solution. Anything that we can do to tackle the problem is welcome.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) pressed the Secretary of State on whether he envisaged GPs being employed by acute trusts—by hospitals—the reply was that that option had not been ruled out. If that option is to be countenanced, what price now the purchaser-provider split? If a GP is employed by a hospital and is ordering care for his or her patients from that hospital, the purchaser and the provider are the same. I would have hoped that the Secretary of State would have ruled that out.

Mr. Dorrell: Will the hon. Gentleman speculate on how we could rule that out when many NHS trusts have both acute and community facilities?

Mr. Smith: I am coming to that. I was about to point out that the Secretary of State ruled out in the

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White Paper the idea of GPs being salaried employees of the health authority. Why has he ruled that out, when it is surely the solution to the problem of trusts that are both community and acute trusts? That would maintain the purchaser-provider split on which the Government are so keen and which we accept as a sensible division. The Government have given no reason for ruling out that option and the Secretary of State has offered no explanation today. We would be delighted if he would amplify the matter.

There is much to welcome in the White Paper, but we have one serious disagreement with the Government. I warned about this last week, and since then there have been various articles and reports in confirmation, yet the Secretary of State is sensitive about the possibility floated in the White Paper that GP services could be provided by commercial companies. He did not tell us that he had ruled out that possibility; he spoke of his belief in the GP service as part of the national health service, which is fine, but he has not disavowed the two paragraphs in the White Paper that clearly spell out the possibility. Chapter 2, paragraph 2.4 of the White Paper deals with

"a salaried option for GPs, either within partnerships or"—

and here is the crucial phrase

"with other bodies, such as NHS trusts."

We have already dealt with that NHS trusts point but the White Paper clearly says "with other bodies", which are unspecified.

Paragraph 8 of appendix A of the White Paper deals with contracts and states:

"Ordinary contracts would be used when services were provided outside the NHS."

Therefore, in two places the White Paper envisages the possibility of GP services being provided outside the NHS by commercial companies. They may not necessarily be supermarkets. For example I suspect that some pharmaceutical companies may be interested in establishing GP services. If the Secretary of State goes down the road of allowing commercial companies to establish primary care GP services it would pose a serious threat to the importance of the doctor-patient relationship.

In his speech the Secretary of State was right to praise the role of GPs in the British health system. They are the cornerstone of everything good about the NHS over the past 50 years. The GP is an independent, professional person. He is the patient's advocate and friend and if he is answerable not just to his patient but to a commercial company, the independent professionalism of that relationship will be in danger. If that possibility remains in the Bill we shall take a very severe view of it.

Mr. Dorrell: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that every NHS pharmacist or every NHS pharmacist employed by a company is incapable of offering a professional service to patients?

Mr. Smith: Of course I am not saying that. In case the Secretary of State did not listen to the last two minutes of my speech I repeat that I am talking about the general practitioner and the relationship between the GP and his patients. That is the crucial point that the right hon. Gentleman has so far ignored.

Mr. Dorrell: I listened to every word. The pharmacist and the general practitioner are professionals and in some circumstances pharmacists are employed by a commercial outfit. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that such pharmacists are not delivering professional services to their patients?

Mr. Smith: Of course I am not saying that. The Secretary of State has fallen straight into the trap that he has created because he is saying, "Why cannot a GP provide a professional service?" The implication of that is that he would be perfectly happy to welcome GPs being employed by commercial organisations. That is the logic of his interventions. If that is in the Bill he will have a hard time justifying it.

There is much to be welcomed in the primary care Bill that is flagged up in the Gracious Speech but there are some dangerous loopholes which we shall examine carefully. The Gracious Speech is remarkable more for what is not in it than for what is in it. For example, what has happened to a measure on adoption on which there was a White Paper and a draft Bill? The Secretary of State knows that it is supported by hon. Members in all parts of the House and provides a golden opportunity to put right some of the anomalies in adoption procedures. However, it is not in the Gracious Speech and that seems to suggest that the Gracious Speech is more about trying to embarrass the Opposition parties than about sensible, constructive legislation.

The draft Bill on adoption contained some entirely sensible and welcome proposals. They were a new welfare checklist for adoption agencies and the courts to assess the child's interest when adoption is being considered; a new complaints system to include independent assessment and easier procedures to allow step and foster parents to adopt. At the heart of the White Paper and the draft Bill on adoption was the simple and sensible proposition that the crucial matter in adoption procedures is the ability of the prospective parents to parent—to nurture, love, cherish and bring up the child. It put the child's interests first and had an entirely commonsense approach to adoption issues.

Under pressure from the Opposition saying, "Go on, do it—we agree with it and we will support you," it has become the fashion this week for the Government to pop up and say, "Yes, we will do it." If the Secretary of State presents the Bill on adoption in the same form as the draft Bill and on the lines of the White Paper he will have the Opposition's full support. He can get it through quickly and earn himself a place in the history books for doing the right thing for once. I make that offer and wait in anticipation for a letter from the Prime Minister tomorrow stating that he will do that.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Is my hon. Friend aware that a former Secretary of State for Health set up a working party in July 1989 to consider the Bill on adoption? As my hon. Friend has said, the previous Secretary of State published a White Paper three years ago. Can my hon. Friend shed some further light on why it has taken the Government so many years to come up with precisely no legislation although a measure on such an issue would be widely supported and welcomed throughout the country?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend has put the main points of the answer in his question. I look forward to hearing the Secretary of State trying to defend the Government's inactivity on this matter when so much has already been

published and much of the work has already been done. I am sure that civil servants have a Bill in the top drawer waiting to be presented. We should be told why it is not in the Gracious Speech.

Not only legislation on adoption but measures on long-term care seem to have fallen through the net. We have not had the Bill that was promised or the legislation that the Prime Minister at last year's Tory party conference and at the one this year said would solve the problem of elderly people having to sell their homes to pay for long-term care. What is the Government's solution to a problem that affects many thousands of people? We are to have a draft Bill. How it will differ from the White Paper I am not sure. That may mean that the Government are having sensible and serious second thoughts about their daft insurance scheme which they said was the big solution to the problem.

Mr. Dorrell: It is a U-turn.

Mr. Smith: It is not. If the Secretary of State looks back at everything that all of us have ever said about long-term care, he will find that we have always criticised the Government's policy of a 1:1, a 1.5:1 or a 2:1 insurance scheme to try to protect the assets of people who are approaching retirement. The scheme is daft because it assumes that people who are approaching retirement will have £5,000 or £10,000 in cash available to put down as payment for an insurance policy premium. If the Government seriously believe that the many hundreds of thousands of people in Britain who are worried about the prospect of losing their homes because of their payments for long-term care are in a financial position to make such a commitment, they are examining the wrong problem.

That is all that we have in the Queen's Speech. It is not much from the Secretary of State for Health. At the same time, he is running around Britain producing White Papers and consultation documents and doing surveys. All sorts of things are happening. Some of them are welcome; some are not.

Let me take just one example: Insight, the firm of management consultants that is considering the role of community health councils. Its draft report makes alarming reading. Among its proposals are that

"CHCs should consider moving away from monitoring local services towards specific projects agreed with the Health Authority",

that

"CHCs should consider moving away from information provision to the public"

and that

"CHC involvement in supporting complainants should be scaled down".

Clearly, this draft report envisages changes to the patient advocacy role of CHCs, which is one of the most important things that they do. It is clear that the agenda that is being prepared by management consultants for the Government is to get rid of CHCs' patient advocacy role. I hope that the Secretary of State will quickly say that Insight's proposals are no part of the Government's agenda.

We have hardly any legislation, but a series of reports producing alarming ideas that fundamentally and adversely change the health service in Britain. The health service faces a serious crisis this winter. Just a week ago, the British Medical Association consultants' committee set it out clearly. Its chairman, James Johnson, said:

"From the reports I have heard today, I fear that the hospital service will be close to collapse this winter. Elective procedures will virtually cease in many parts of the country. What purchasers need to recognise is that you cannot simply open and shut wards at will to control the money flow. When you want to re-open services, you find that the skilled staff are no longer available. In the meantime, patients who are not emergencies but who genuinely need treatment are waiting in pain and distress."

That is the verdict not of the Labour party, but of the BMA's consultants' committee. That is the prospect facing the NHS in the coming winter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing), who I am delighted to see with us, flushed the Government out on this matter with a parliamentary answer that he managed to extract from them just a week ago. The Government's inadequate figures—but at least there were some figures—showed that, if we took all the health authorities in England and added up their likely surpluses or deficits by the end of the current financial year, for England alone, there was a gap in funding of £120 million. My hon. Friend has done the House a great service in flushing out from the Government the admission that what the BMA and the Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales have been saying is true.

Mr. Spearing: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments, but is it not even worse than that? Is he aware that on 22 July I asked for the figures and that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, who happily is here, said that they were unsuitable for publication?

Mr. Frank Field: That is not surprising.

Mr. Spearing: Indeed. It was only after the recess and the happy chance of coming up in the ballot and of securing the Adjournment debate last Wednesday, the Session's last debate, which lasted 50 minutes, that we managed to extract the promise that the Minister would supply some figures. Some came last week, but not all the ones that I asked for.

Mr. Smith: It was noticeable that the Government's figures were produced the day after my hon. Friend's Adjournment debate, so that the figures could not form part of the debate. Not only were they unsuitable for publication on the Government's part; they were somewhat embarrassing on the Government's part.

Perhaps the clearest evidence in recent days of the crisis facing the health service comes from the discussions currently under way in London on ways in which accident and emergency services should respond to the likely pressure that will face them this winter. The Greater London accident and emergency co-ordination protocol group is drawing up emergency plans for what A and E services facing intolerable pressure should do in London. Those plans, which I have here, give the options that will be available to A and E services when they are under extreme pressure. They are divided into complete closure of an A and E department, agreed diversions and rotas. Those categories mean that, this winter, A and E services in London will close completely to taking emergency admissions, either on a temporary or a semi-permanent

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basis, because the pressure will be so great. Small wonder that the accident and emergency consultants to whom the proposals were put yesterday unanimously rejected them.

Those discussions revealed that NHS emergency services in London are having to accept as normal not occasional but regular bouts of intense pressure, causing temporary diversions or closures. That speaks volumes about the pressure to which not just accident and emergency services but, as a run-on consequence, elective acute surgery will be subjected.

Any sensible person putting together procedures for dealing with emergency services will devise a simple formula. I will entertain the House by quoting a paragraph that describes how such a rota system is supposed to operate:

"To implement a Rota, the Responsible Person at each hospital will fax Form 1 to the London Ambulance Service CAC, who will implement the Rota once the requisite three or more forms have been received. Each Responsible Person will also fax the form to all hospitals that their hospital is listed as 'Covering For' in the Cluster list, whether or not they form part of the Rota. This is to alert those nearby hospitals that may be affected by the Rota diversions. Form 1 will also be faxed to the EBS, Host Purchaser and any other ambulance service that may be affected. The form will specify the category(ies) of patients included in the Rota."

Mr. Frank Field: The Minister, thank God, is against issuing parliamentary nasties.

Mr. Smith: As my hon. Friend says, but that is precisely the way that the internal market leads to disaster in the health service.

A crisis is looming this winter across the accident and emergency services in London and elsewhere in the country, elective surgery has been abandoned in many parts of the country and difficulties are facing health authority after health authority, yet the Government come up with a Queen's Speech that does not address the many real issues affecting the NHS and the patients who depend on it.

The Government are busy trying to pretend that they love, cherish and believe in the health service. We were expecting a White Paper on the NHS next week, but I gather that the Government are delaying that demonstration of love and belief in their cherished health service for a couple of weeks.

The Government claim that the health service is safe in their hands, but the competitive internal market continues to do its damage, accident and emergency services are heading for crisis, the Anglian Harbours NHS trust has gone down the pan, patients have to wait on trolleys in corridors and the British Medical Association says that the service is close to collapse. It is time that the Government made way for a Government who really care about the NHS and who will set about rescuing and renewing it for a new century.

10.52 am

Sir Rhodes Boyson (Brent, North): I welcome the Gracious Speech and want to give my views on three issues—two of them concerned with social security and one with education, on which I shall speak at greater length.

The same social security issues arise time and again because human nature remains consistent. One may try to solve problems but 10, 20 or 30 years later, they arise again. Social problems that were covered by Acts of Parliament in 1601 and 1834 are recurring today, to be dealt with again.

One such problem is the breakdown of the family, which is threatening social welfare, education and behaviour, and which poses a real challenge to our society. When any new Bill is proposed, one must ask whether it will strengthen the family or weaken it. So much that has been done—with the best of intentions—in recent years has weakened the family. Of that there is no doubt. For example, the cut in the married person's tax allowance, by which it was decided that we should all be treated as individuals, hampered the family. Before any Bill is introduced, we should be told not just the financial implications, but the implications for the family. If the family breaks down, social welfare will be in a massive mess.

In certain parts of the country, the family is already breaking down. One boy in three grows up without a father figure. That has a serious effect on discipline in schools and on many other matters. So we must buttress the family, because otherwise we shall be in a massive mess in social welfare, education and many other areas.

My second point is also a financial matter. Long-term care has been mentioned this morning. How can long-term care be afforded, particularly bearing in mind the fact that people now live so much longer than before? Nobody is really dealing with the issue of long-term care—we are just playing around with it. I know that the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), for whom I have great respect, has considered the issue, but society, the Government and the Opposition in general do a bit here and a bit there without considering it as a major issue.

Long-term care is a moral issue. It came up in 1601, it came up in 1834 and it is coming up again. Should a person spend their money on a cruise abroad every year, knowing that the state will look after them at the end—and it will—or should they save for their old age so that they will have independence? Those who are spent up when they reach 65 or 70 will be looked after in the same way as those who have saved throughout their lives. A saving society is being destroyed.

The issue is not a party one. The hon. Member for Birkenhead is pointing in certain directions, but the issue of what should be done is a problem for the whole House, not just for one party. A case in 1871 showed that if it is seen that people who have put nothing towards their care are as well looked after as those who look after themselves, certain sections of society will break down.

As we are considering social security today, I shall leave those two points and go on to a third issue, which I shall take by the neck. I cannot imagine any dispute on what I have said already, except on whether we are really facing up to the issues. I do not think that we are. However, there is dispute between hon. Members on both sides on my third issue—selection in education. The Government have grasped the nettle on selection in education and I must commend their actions and the contents of the Gracious Speech on that issue.

For a long time, the Labour party did not believe in selection and the Conservative party apologised for it, as though it were an evil aspect of human nature, but we

were born that way. Selection was not considered to be necessary. I am not a Darwinist on this, but selection is necessary. We are selecting all the time. We have been selected here. Some hon. Members may wonder why other hon. Members have been selected, but we have been selected and elected to the House. We have been through a series of selections. A candidate is put on a list and is interviewed time and again. If one is liked by a panel one day, one gets the chance to be elected to the House. Then, 50,000 to 70,000 people make their selection. The House lives on selection, and any party that does not like selection should not be in the House.

Mr. Frank Field: It is not so much selection as deselection that worries hon. Members, is it not?

Sir Rhodes Boyson: If the hon. Gentleman is under threat of deselection, most Conservative Members will hire a coach, go to his constituency and temporarily wear red roses to help him gain re-election to the House.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: That will help.

Sir Rhodes Boyson: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment.

There is selection in many spheres. The tone-deaf are not encouraged to take up music. I am slightly tone-deaf, and in church my wife always tells me to shut up if suddenly I feel an urge to sing at the top of my voice. Perhaps in church I should be selected to be placed with others who cannot sing in tune. In music, someone who has a part 1 certificate does not play with someone with a part 6, because they are not so selected. Everyone is good in some spheres and not in others.

Selection takes place in sport. There is no mixed-ability football. I shall believe in mixed-ability football when there is a centre forward with a wooden leg. We shall have mixed-ability football when there is such a player. There is no mixed ability in other spheres, but there certainly has been in education in recent years.

The question is how the selection is made, and whether it is fair. We have selection in many parts of the United Kingdom. There was an authority in the north-east that had 5 per cent. selection, whereas in Wales and in other areas there was 40 or 50 per cent. selection.

What happens to people who are selected out? Every time one person is selected in, someone else is not. What happens to them? Let us consider the situation in Halifax, in the north of England. The mess in comprehensive schools in dealing with lower ability pupils is worse than ever it was in secondary modern schools. Secondary modern schools never broke down like the school in Halifax has, because they took account of children's interests, interested them in what they should be doing and attached the school's image to achieving that goal. The system of merits and demerits in that school in Halifax, and bringing together two schools, illustrates the fact that comprehensive schools do not work in themselves. We must realise that pupils have different abilities and that they should be in separate classes.

Mixed-ability teaching is evil—that is a good four-letter word. Mixed-ability teaching makes the very able arrogant, because they think that they are the answer to everyone else. The poor little beggar who is in a mixed-ability class and cannot get on will put a brick through the window—or he should do. If I were such a pupil, I would do that. It is an insult to such a pupil to have to go to school every day and never be able to shine in the classroom. At its worst, mixed-ability teaching is evil.

Let us consider some examples from abroad. Apart from Sweden and some places in the United States, there has always been some form of selective schooling. Sweden is about the only place in the world with lower abilities in mathematics than the United Kingdom, and one can draw one's own conclusion from that fact. The situation in America is also very messy. There is, however, selection in the rest of the world. There are three types of schools in Germany, and students can move easily between them. One school is academic, one is technical and one is general. General schools in Germany usually have better standards than most British comprehensive schools.

Before the collapse of the Soviet empire, I was visited by the headmaster of a school of mathematics in Moscow. Each year, after an examination, that school admits only 50 pupils in mathematics, out of a population of 5 million people. I believe that that is still the situation. The exams are called "the Olympiads". I do not suggest that we go to that extent here, but I know that Russia did quite well in getting to outer space—or perhaps it was inner space; I get mixed up about that, not having flown up there. That school did very well in the mechanics of what they were doing, and it worked very well.

At last the Government have grasped this issue. As I said earlier—I will say it again to remind hon. Members—the Labour party took the baton of non-selection and ran with it, and Conservative Members tried to slow down that drive. We now offer the alternative philosophy that selection is best for children. Children should be selected fairly and they should be able to move if their abilities blossom or decline. They should be given a fair chance in life.

There will be selection in grant-maintained schools, which even some Labour Members believe in. When I hear them express that belief, I raise my eyes to the stars. Grant-maintained schools can select, as can the so-called "general" and specialist schools.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) is not in the Chamber, because I have great respect for him. I disagree with him, but there is no one for whom I have more respect. The only way in which we can have comprehensive schools is with selection. It must be done. The ultimate selection is practised by comprehensive schools—because they must contain an equal percentage of each ability group—although the Labour party has never realised it.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Obviously the right hon. Gentleman is very experienced in these matters, but I am a little confused, because a day is allocated next week for a debate on education policy—*[Interruption.]* This is a serious point. Today we are supposed to be debating health, social security and social policy. I wonder whether a debate on education is appropriate or in order, as no education Ministers or Opposition spokesmen are in the Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The allocation of subjects for days is for guidance, so that the relevant Ministers can

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

be present in the Chamber, but that does not prevent an hon. Member from dealing with an issue within the ambit of the Queen's Speech, which is quite broad.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There cannot be one intervention immediately following another.

Sir Rhodes Boyson: I will give way.

Mr. Bottomley: My right hon. Friend was making a very important point. Most hon. Members who have represented inner London constituencies, and perhaps those in other areas, remember a time when children could not enter the school their parents chose because they had done too well in the hidden 11-plus examinations. All children in inner London were required to take the 11-plus, and if they did too well they could not get into the school of their choice. That practice struck me as being deceitful to those children and their parents. It also provides completely the wrong incentives for parents, given that the Plowden research studies of primary schools, published in 1967, stated that the most important aspect in a child's education was appropriate interest and encouragement.

Sir Rhodes Boyson: I agree that parental involvement is vital but in addition children must be taught at the level of their ability.

I will explain why I am speaking on this subject now. I know that the Liberal Democrats have many narrow objections—that is probably why the country does not like them—but the debate on the Queen's Speech should be a wide one. It should not deal only with bits and pieces—we can do that at any time—but should address Government policy as a whole. The hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) may raise his eyes to the skies if he wishes, but he should have some vision and not count paperclips.

We were discussing comprehensive schools. During the many years when I was a headmaster, London tried to make comprehensive schools work. Ability groups were divided in an attempt to secure the same spread of ability in every school, but it could not be done. People would not stand for it and used every means to outwit the system. Human nature always outwits systems that it dislikes. People moved house or gave other people's addresses and the system broke down.

Anyone who wants selection should want comprehensive schools, because in theory they represent the ultimate in selection. Twenty per cent. of a comprehensive school's pupils should be from the top 20 per cent., 40 per cent. from the next 40 per cent. and 40 per cent. from the bottom 40 per cent. That was attempted in London, but it simply did not work. It has never worked anywhere in the country except in rural areas which have only one school. In rural areas, there is a general feeling that comprehensive schooling works.

Grant-maintained schools which have become some of the most selective in their areas have done very well. To introduce grant-maintained schools was an imaginative gesture by the Government and formed a bridge to enable the return of selection as Conservative policy and, I hope, Labour policy. In my constituency, I did not interfere in parents' wishes for their children, whether they wanted local authority or grant-maintained schools, but now all but one of the schools in my constituency are grant maintained and they have been transformed. At the general election, I shall not hesitate to remind my constituents of the Labour party's intentions for such schools. The Labour party has delivered voters into my hands by saying that it would return schools to local authority control, without selection by interview or examination. Five grant-maintained schools serve my constituency: Claremont school, Preston Manor, Kingsbury school, Copeland school and St. Gregory's. Only one secondary school in my constituency is not grant maintained.

I wish to conclude on some broad themes. First, the role of the family in our society must be restructured. We must ensure that every piece of legislation that we pass helps the family and does not hinder it. Secondly, as a society we must decide how we will look after our aged citizens, of whom there will be more in every generation. We must find ways of encouraging people to save for a contented old age. Thirdly, we must continue the return to selection and ensure that it is carried out fairly and well.

All schools have to teach a basic curriculum in English, mathematics, some science, geography and other subjects. The current national curriculum is too narrow, but it is a start. However, every school should have a specialty—a subject for which it can fly the flag and of which it can be proud. I want there to be a vast number of specialist schools. We are basically a city people and, as I have said, the comprehensive system really worked only in rural areas. We could have classical or foreign language schools, sports schools or music schools and children would want to go the school that specialised in the subject that interested them. Each school could offer two hours daily tuition in its specialist subject.

We do not want schools ranked in order from one to 20—we want different schools doing different things. I hope that the grant-maintained schools will move over to such a system, so that there are no sink schools, only schools offering the national curriculum plus a specialty. If we could marry the two sides of the House in the cause of that sort of selection, we would have a chance to get education right in our country again.

11.16 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Brent, North (Sir R. Boyson). I strongly agreed with his last point, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will adhere to that wisdom. I also agree that the Queen's Speech offers us the chance not to carry out a sectional analysis of society, but to take a broader view of Britain and its place in the world. There were powerful themes in the right hon. Gentleman's speech—the role of human nature in our society and the folly of politicians who think that, with their schemes, they can outwit human nature, which is a lesson we should all learn. Although I do not normally disagree with my friends on the Liberal Benches, I do so today because, as the right hon. Gentleman said, we must try to be visionary in our approach.

Listening to the Secretary of State for Health, who spoke for 48 minutes, I thought that the media had, for once, undersold the content of the Queen's Speech, because we learnt that the Government's strategy was to take out all controversial measures and spend the next six months piloting through the remaining few Bills on which there was substantial agreement. For the first 45 minutes of his 48-minute speech, it appeared that the Health Secretary had hit on another strategy: although he had a Bill, so to speak, hinted at in the Queen's Speech, I thought that he was not even going to comment on it and that it would be kept secret for as long as possible. I was, therefore, pleased when he managed to spend the last three minutes of his 48-minute speech telling us what would be in that primary care Bill, which acts as a suitable starting point for my speech.

The measures that the Secretary of State said that the Government would introduce and the medley of themes in the Queen's Speech that are designed to establish greater order in our society will strike a chord in most constituencies, not least in Birkenhead. However, the way in which my constituents will judge the Queen's Speech may differ from that of the Treasury Bench. The vast majority of voters in Birkenhead, decent people, are attempting to hold the line against a new form of barbarism that is sweeping through inner-city and other areas. It obviously relates to primary health care, which the Secretary of State said was the jewel in the crown of the NHS, because, in the poorest areas, those services are under enormous pressure and some are being withdrawn.

I cite what was my own doctor's practice in Birkenhead. Obviously, any decision is taken for many reasons, and therefore the reasons that I give are not the only ones that led to the loss of that primary health care centre in the centre of Birkenhead, but the behaviour of a very small minority of constituents played its part in the closure of the practice. The doctors were fed up with being physically threatened by a minority of my constituents. The receptionists were fed up with being stoned by very small minority of my younger constituents. Unbreakable glass was not enough to protect them against such behaviour.

When the Government lightly talk about a Queen's Speech that restores order, people will ask why there is such disorder, and whether the measures do much to protect the vast majority of my decent constituents, who are trying to hold the line against that new barbarism. They will ask whether it will deal effectively with the minority who plague the majority who want to continue to lead a decent life and adhere to civilised standards.

The Home Secretary's proposals in the Queen's Speech for successive law and order measures, although increasingly draconian, will be widely supported by many of my constituents among others; but are the root causes of the disorder in our society being tackled? In that context, it was important for the right hon. Member for Brent, North to speak about education.

In Birkenhead, as in many other places, unskilled jobs have been wiped out like snow disappearing in sunshine, so it is crucial that our schools do not continue to produce large numbers of school leavers who are suitable only for unskilled jobs. We must go further than even the right hon. Member for Brent, North advocates to cut the supply routes to the underclass.

If people leave school—as they do even in some of the best schools—unable to read and write, their chances of ever holding a job are almost nil. It is criminal, therefore, to allow people to leave school unable to read and write, let alone to acquire other necessary skills for the fast-developing labour market. Instead of a statutory school leaving age, there should be a school leaving period, defined by a person's skills.

We should not be prepared to condemn people to a life of unemployment, for that is what we do if they do not have basic skills. As a society, we should make a pact with them, telling them, "We shall not put you into the labour market if there is not a fair chance of your acquiring a job." I am not saying that there are enough jobs, but figures show that a person with skills has far less chance of being unemployed than a person without skills. That applies in my constituency as it does in the Secretary of State's constituency, which is, thank goodness, much better off than mine. I wish that my constituency were as well heeled as his is.

I welcome the chance that the Queen's Speech gives to bring various aspects of Government policy to bear on the law and order issue as the Government define it. Although some of the moves are welcome, they will prove inadequate for the vast majority of our decent constituents, who are trying to hold the line and defend civilised values against what they regard as the spread of a new barbarism, which engulfs and destroys their lives. It is easy enough for me to speak; I do not suffer the incessant gang warfare that is unleashed against them for trying to hold the line. They seek much more imaginative measures from the Government to help them to do so.

Like the right hon. Member for Brent, North, I shall comment on social security and the part that it plays in destroying decent civilised life, but I shall also welcome some of the Bills that the Secretary of State for Social Security will introduce this Session.

I believe that I can fairly draw the attention of the House to the special relationship that the Select Committee on Social Security has developed with the Secretary of State. If they are lucky, other Select Committees receive Government responses published as White Papers. The Social Security Select Committee now expects Bills to follow its reports. We ask for a major inquiry into pension law reform; we get it and we get a Bill. We look critically at the compensation recovery unit; we get a Bill. We suggest that the Government talk a lot about fraud in benefits, but not nearly effectively enough; we receive an inadequate response, a holding reply, and now, if we are lucky enough to have read the *Financial Times* this morning, we shall have read a great deal about the fraud Bill, about which I am sure the Secretary of State will tell the House later.

I shall welcome that Bill, as, I am sure, will the Labour Front-Bench spokesmen. We shall aim to strengthen it by adding to it, for, if the *Financial Times* report is correct, it is an inadequate measure for one of the major issues that confront us. Although I do not blame the Secretary of State for putting a spin on the Bill, he is trying to move the debate about fraud back to claimant fraud and away from organised serious criminal fraud, which is where the Select Committee pitched the debate. The Bill will be judged not only on the extent to which it tackles claimant fraud but on the extent to which it tackles fraud by gangs who take large sums from the social security fund.

[Mr. Frank Field]

Although it may be important that, as I learn from the *Financial Times* today, the Secretary of State will have powers to gain information from local authorities in the administration of housing benefit, we shall note whether similar powers are sought to gain identical information from landlords, who may be behaving in a way that allows serious loss from the social security fund into their bank account, not into the right people's pockets.

Even giving the Secretary of State the benefit of the doubt, which of course I always do, and assuming that the report in the *Financial Times* is only partial, I want to suggest how inadequate the Government's response on fraud will be.

We do not have a standard form for housing benefit. The Secretary of State speaks about computers in one borough talking to those in another, but they cannot have much of a conversation if different boroughs collect different information. The Secretary of State could, in two weeks, insist that a standard form is introduced, and that no local authority gets its rebate unless it agrees the form—although I hope that he has the humility to ask local authorities how best to design that form. Then, when identical information is collected and fed into computers, perhaps the measures that he will take to enable a computer in one borough to talk to computers in Wirral will be a necessity.

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Peter Lilley): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his remarks. I can go farther; we are ahead of the Select Committee. We have informed the Select Committee that we are consulting local authorities on the possibility of a national computer system to overcome the problems that he talks about and provide a coherent national service to all local authorities, and a national validation process to ensure that all local authorities use uniform minimum standards.

Mr. Field: The rhetoric is fine, but we should examine the Department's ability to get its computer system right, never mind the computer systems of the Child Support Agency and other agencies. When the Government say that they are going to establish a national computer system, I hope that we shall not hear hollow laughs in the rest of the country. Let us be modest and begin by producing a standard application form that can be used by existing computer systems throughout the country in our fight against fraud.

No one doubts that the Secretary of State is keen to counter fraud, but that requires co-ordination between Departments and not just at local authority level. If we read the paper on child benefit fraud that was submitted to the Select Committee and then read the Home Office's letter to the Committee, we can see that, never mind about introducing a national computer system, it would be good if the Secretary of State for Social Security occasionally spoke to the Home Office on this key matter. The paper on child benefit fraud says that either a passport or the standard acknowledgement letter for child benefit can be used to identify an individual for child benefit purposes. The Home Office told the Select Committee that on no account should the standard acknowledgement letter be used as an identification document.

The Home Office issued a statement saying that on no account should there be identity documents, whereas the Secretary of State for Social Security told the Select Committee that, when there is a doubt about the children of asylum seekers, child benefit will be paid on production of either a passport or the standard acknowledgement letter. Before we embark on the grand strategy of sweeping the country with a new computer system, will the Secretary of State occasionally talk to the Home Office about preventing benefit fraud?

Even if we had a wonderful computer system, it would be of little value if we continued to have a national insurance system—a number system—that was clearly overrun in the 1980s. I referred to the standard acknowledgement letter—the Secretary of State may mumble, but this is the crucial point—because during the 1980s hordes of people went to Croydon to pick up that letter, which was accepted by the Secretary of State's Department, to show that they were genuine asylum seekers. They were issued with national insurance numbers, which accounts for the discrepancy in the number of national insurance numbers. Until we clean up the national insurance system, all the fine talk about the fight against fraud will, sadly, be just that, and the measures taken will be less effective than they should be. I hope that the Opposition will massively strengthen the Bill to fight fraud.

I want to return to the most important theme of this debate, which was raised by the right hon. Member for Brent, North—the impact of the massive social security budget on not only the operation of government but the character of the nation. I hope that we have now gone through the long, dark tunnel. Many of us worry about whether there should be advertisements that promote smoking, because we believe that that affects people's behaviour, yet at the same time we believe that a Government can spend £95,000 million on social security and it will have no effect on people's behaviour. It certainly will.

When the Secretary of State replies to the debate, I hope that he will show—at least on these criteria, and perhaps on many others—whether the Government can present a proper face to the electorate. Spending on social security constitutes the largest part of the Government's budget, so the first thing we want to know from the Queen's Speech is whether we are spending that money in a way that supports people's natural, decent instincts. If there were no welfare state, how would people behave? How would they survive? We should mould our welfare state so as to encourage decent instincts, rather than, as at present, use so much of our money to destroy those instincts.

Secondly, we want to know whether, for the first time, the Secretary of State has got a grip of his budget. Every year that he has been in office, he has pleaded with his Cabinet colleagues, saying that he needs more money. His Cabinet colleagues regard him as a tough right winger, so he must find it easier to deal with them than some others. He has always obtained more money—usually about £3,000 million extra. He has presumably promised that he will be a good boy and will control his budget, but he is usually over budget by another £3 billion. He then goes back to them the following year, and so the process goes on.

The Secretary of State says that this year, for the first time, the rise in the social security budget will be below the increase in gross domestic product. He might manage that this year thanks to the Chancellor, who has his mind on when the election may be held. The growth rate in GDP this year is about 4 per cent., so if the Secretary of State does not keep social security expenditure growth below that level, matters are very serious indeed.

Thirdly, we will be looking at the Queen's Speech and the measures that flow from it to see whether the Secretary of State is putting in place—he cannot do so immediately—effective measures to combat social security fraud. Fourthly, we want to know whether the measures that have been enacted under his stewardship in the past four years, and those that will be enacted in the last period of his stewardship up to the general election, will reshape our social security system to fit the country for the new millennium. The Secretary of State can take credit for enabling public discussion of the massive changes in the labour market, so that people are aware of how the social security system can help them to survive more effectively under those much changed conditions. The question will be whether he has gone far enough in those big changes.

11.36 am

Sir Roger Sims (Chislehurst): The House always enjoys listening to the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). He invariably presents us with thought-provoking arguments, which he expresses with clarity, and today was no exception. This is a broad debate, so I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and the House will understand if I do not deal with the topics that he covered.

I was particularly impressed by the penultimate passage of the Gracious Speech, which states:

"My Government will also publish Bills in draft for consultation".

The concept of draft Bills was explained by the Prime Minister in his speech on Wednesday. It is not an entirely new idea—reference has already been made to the draft Bill on adoption—but it is not a familiar device. After 22 years in the House as part of the legislative machine, I am not satisfied that the process that we use is without imperfection. It is unfortunate that a Government of whatever colour introduce a Bill determined that it will go through the House and emerge in almost the same state as when it was introduced. It is a principle of the Whips that they discourage their hon. Members from altering a Bill. The assumption is that Ministers and their civil servants have produced a perfect Bill that is incapable of improvement, but I do not think that that is helpful.

The other difficulty is that organisations and individuals affected by that legislation may find it difficult to have an input into the contents of the Bill. Once the Bill is published, the only way in which they can have any influence is by finding an hon. Member who is on the Committee and who can be persuaded to take an interest in their concerns. That is a somewhat limiting factor, to put it no higher. Many of us have a range of interests outside the House and seek to represent those interests during the legislative process, but some organisations, companies and charities have no such voice. Now, thanks to Nolan, even if a commercial organisation or similar body comes to an arrangement with a Member to look after its interests and ensure that its voice is heard, if any money changes hands, the Member is debarred from speaking in the House or in Committee. That, I think, is unfortunate, but I have made clear my views on Nolan before. It is a serious limitation on the ability of Parliament to reflect the views of those whom it is supposed to represent.

It was a step in the right direction to introduce the concept of Special Standing Committees, under which—albeit to a limited extent—people with a particular interest in the Bill under consideration could appear before the Committee and express their views. I sat on one or two of those early Committees and thought that they were very successful for certain types of Bill.

The idea of a draft Bill that would go out to consultation seems a considerable improvement on those Committees. If, as the Prime Minister implied, draft Bills are to be published in each parliamentary Session for consideration in the subsequent Session, there will be ample opportunity for all those likely to be affected by the legislation to put their points of view, whether on policy or on technicalities.

We all know how, so often, we in Parliament pass a clause that becomes part of the law of the land, then a problem arises, the matter eventually goes to court and the judge says, "When Parliament decided so and so, it obviously meant such and such." The fact is that on the Tuesday morning when the Committee passed the clause, no one visualised the particular combination of circumstances that produced the case that went to court. The more people who can go through a draft Bill and put forward their views before it is presented to Parliament, the better the chance that the Bill will achieve what is intended and will be understood by those responsible for implementing it and by the courts. I therefore welcome the idea of draft Bills.

One of the draft Bills that we are to consider will be

"on measures to help people make better provision for their long term care needs in old age."

I am not sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether under Nolan I should declare an interest, as in a few months I shall be a retired pensioner in my late 60s. The long-term care of the elderly is clearly a matter of concern to us all. The House will be aware that the Select Committee on Health has been carrying out a detailed inquiry and published a first report about a year ago and a second report in July, which dealt with the issue of meeting the costs. We anxiously await the Government's response.

In my view, insurance has a part to play, especially—as the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) implied—for those who are relatively comfortably off, are approaching retirement and can pay a lump sum to insure against the costs that they might incur in a nursing or residential home. The main purpose of that insurance, as I see it, would be to safeguard people's assets for their own benefit and that of their children. In any case, insurance will be of value only to the relatively small section of our community that has that sort of money available.

We must face up to the fact that not only are people living longer but, happily, more of them have assets in their old age which previous generations did not possess—assets on which they are expected to draw if the need arises. We have a twofold task. First, we have to educate people that the state cannot meet in full the cost of those whose age makes them frailer and in need of what is described as social care—indeed, it has never done

[Sir Roger Sims]

so. Secondly, we have to deal with the problem that many people feel that it is unjust that they are expected to pay for care in a nursing or residential home which would previously have been given in a hospital, under the national health service, at no cost to themselves.

People do not feel that that is fair, which is understandable. There are people whose state of health is such that they need some care, although it is not reasonable for them to occupy a hospital bed needed by others. I am attracted, therefore, by the proposition put forward by the Royal College of Nursing that nursing care should be free wherever it is given, be it in a hospital, nursing or residential home, whereas the cost of social care should be met from the pockets of those with the means or by the local authority for those whose income or assets are small.

I look forward to seeing the draft Bill and hope that it will lead to widespread consultation and debate, not simply on insurance, but on the wider issues. I hope that that will be another issue on which we can reach consensus.

I welcome the sentence in the Gracious Speech referring to the introduction of legislation to help and

"develop primary health care services."

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made a statement last week and issued a White Paper on the subject, the theme of which is to encourage

"local flexibility so that services can be delivered in a way which is better attuned to local needs and circumstances".

This morning, he explained his thinking on that. Increasingly, general practitioners are able to and want to offer a wider range of treatments in their surgeries, which obviously benefits the patient, who does not have to go to hospital. As we have heard, there has been speculation that that will lead to GPs setting up surgeries in supermarkets. My right hon. Friend commented that it would be by no means impossible for there to be a doctor's surgery in a pharmacy.

We should recognise the desirability of medical services being easily available to all. People who may be considering whether they should consult their general practitioner might think twice about having to make an appointment and a special trip to see the doctor, particularly if he is not conveniently situated, and may well be inclined to put it off until the next day. If they can have such a consultation while they are out shopping, they will be more inclined to do so.

Yesterday, I visited the private, walk-in surgery set up in Victoria station a couple of months ago. Already, 25 people a day walk in for medical advice and treatment. They are able and willing to pay for that treatment, and the surgery is conveniently placed for them. If those people are willing to do that and to pay for it, might there be a greater demand for similarly situated NHS surgeries? It is, of course, important that patients should be registered with their own GP and that, if they do pop into Victoria station or anywhere else, there is proper liaison between that doctor and the patients' usual GPs.

Primary care depends on an adequate number of well-trained doctors now and in the future, so we have to ensure that we are training good doctors. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who is in his place, will be aware of the present impasse in making pay awards to clinical academic staff, which has led to a serious shortage of lecturers and professors at medical schools. If we are to have continuous quality training of doctors, it is essential that we continue to have professors and lecturers of a high calibre. I urge my right hon. Friend to resolve the issue of academic pay for medical staff without further delay.

If primary care is to be developed, the role of district nurses, health visitors and practice nurses is bound to have to increase. Four years ago, Parliament approved a private Member's Bill, which I promoted and which had Government support, to allow appropriately trained nurses to prescribe a limited range of drugs and dressings. The measure was, needless to say, embraced enthusiastically by the Royal College of Nursing and nurses generally, although they recognised, as I do, the need for careful trials and evaluation before such a scheme could be introduced nationwide.

In a letter to me on 1 August, my hon. Friend the Minister for Health told me that the evaluation of the eight pilot sites would be published this autumn and that the evaluation of a district community trust pilot was to be reported in late 1997. I raised the point again last week with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he made his statement on the White Paper, and I have to say that his response was rather vague and general. That does not suggest that the Government are pursuing the matter with the enthusiasm and vigour needed if nurses are to play their full part in developing primary care. I strongly urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to pursue the matter with far more energy than they have shown hitherto.

A measure that was not in the Gracious Speech, but which has rapidly popped back into the programme, is the register of paedophiles. I am glad to see that restored as it reflects one of the recommendations of the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, whose report was published this week. I sat on that commission, which was chaired by Lord Williams of Mostyn. We did two years' work on it, and that work, and the compilation of the report, was far more extensive than anything that I have done as a member of several Select Committees.

The thinking behind our inquiry was the pattern of events after instances of child abuse: so often an inquiry has been set up, a report issued, recommendations made, some implemented and some not and then little more seems to happen until the next incident of child abuse. We started with the question of what can we do to prevent child abuse as a community, as a Government and as local authorities. We can never prevent child abuse completely, but we must be able to take steps to prevent it. Our report is a substantial volume, and a similar volume will be printed containing some of the paperwork and submissions made to us. We made some 85 recommendations and I hope that at some point an opportunity will be found for the House to debate the report, when hon. Members have had time to digest it adequately.

However, I wish to make a few brief comments, if only to correct some of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that have been put on the report, perhaps inevitably, given its size and attempts by certain people to reduce its details to a paragraph or two or even a headline. We have been criticised for our definition of

abuse and for the statistics that we produced. We devote a whole chapter in the report to seeking an appropriate definition of child abuse and another, even longer chapter to trying to assess its extent. We are not saying definitely that 1 million children are seriously abused every year, but we are saying that that number are harmed, whether by isolated incidents or by systematic and long-term maltreatment.

The truth is, of course, that we do not really know the extent of child abuse. Much of it is concealed. In a fascinating exercise as part of our work, one of our number, Deirdre Sanders, who will be known to some hon. Members as the so-called agony aunt of *The Sun* and who also speaks on television, put references in her column, as did several of her agony aunt colleagues, to the work of the commission. They invited readers to write in if they had had experience of child abuse. More than 11,000 adults wrote to tell us about their experience of child abuse, many of them writing for the first time about their experiences. We derived some valuable material from what they said about what had happened, the circumstances, why they did nothing about it and what they thought could be done to prevent abuse. Their responses make my point that abuse happens and we know nothing about it.

In trying to make an assessment of the extent of abuse, we drew on a range of official statistics and also on a number of surveys to try to provide an estimate. Indeed, one of our recommendations is that the collection of appropriate data should be carried out so that we know the extent of the problem.

Another of our recommendations is that the Secretary of State for Health should have his title expanded to Secretary of State for Health and Children, and we suggest also that the junior Minister who at present has responsibility for children should be upgraded to a Minister of State and given the specific title of Minister for Children. I was sorry to learn that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary who at present has that responsibility seemed to dismiss the proposal out of hand. It is a little surprising that, having been offered such promotion, he should reject it in such a manner, but I wish to emphasise that that recommendation is not simply a gimmick or cosmetic, or an attempt to catch a headline.

The members of the commission believe that children's needs should be given a higher profile. Changing the titles of the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary would spearhead a public awareness campaign on children's needs. An opportunity would be provided to enhance co-ordination between Government Departments and departments at local level. There are now eight Government Departments that have some involvement in children's welfare. It would be the specific responsibility of the Minister for Children to head up a committee that would not merely co-ordinate activities, but ensure that any activity of any Department that impinged upon children was carefully examined to ascertain its effect.

The commission felt that it would be very much in children's interests and to the benefit of those who care for them to have a professional regulatory body for social workers. I am disappointed that last week my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rejected the proposal for a general social services council. I have had first-hand experience of professional self-regulation as a lay member of the General Medical Council. Most professions have some form of self-regulatory body, and surely the social services profession should, too.

I hope that the commission's report will be carefully studied by Ministers, Members and those further afield. I hope also that it will stimulate a national debate that will be based on the consideration of facts rather than headlines. I hope again that it will focus especially on the commission's contention that child abuse is a matter not only for social workers, charities, the police and the courts, but for us all. It is an issue that should be the concern and responsibility of every one of us.

12.2 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): I am happy to start by taking up some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Chislehurst (Sir R. Sims). I wish to endorse some of them. My colleagues and I welcome, as the hon. Gentleman did, the idea that we should have Bills in draft. It is a good idea and I hope that it will become the normal established practice of this place from now on. The proposed Bill on long-term care for the elderly is one of two measures referred to in the Queen's Speech which is especially suitable for the House to receive in draft.

If Parliament is to legislate anew for long-term care for the elderly, it is essential that we seek to get that legislation right on a cross-party basis, as the hon. Member for Chislehurst rightly said.

I endorse also the hon. Gentleman's comment that we have a different responsibility in dealing with those who have made arrangements in the past from our responsibility towards those who, like some of us in the Chamber who are slightly younger than the hon. Gentleman, have time to make arrangements for our own long-term care when we become elderly. It is inevitable that the goalposts and rules will be changed.

The welfare state has to adapt and move on but we must not change it to the detriment of those who will find it too late to make alternative arrangements. Our first concern must be for those who are now in or approaching old age who do not have the assets and facilities to look after themselves in any new way that Parliament might decide for the future.

It seems clear that in future there will have to be the assumption that, as people earn, the employer and the employee together will help to make arrangements for residential provision in old age. There will be a different and more complex debate on who takes responsibility for health and social care provision. I vote for the health service and its funds to look after health care. I recognise, however, that there will always be a grey area when it comes to determining where health care ends and social non-health care begins. Such a debate should be conducted carefully and conscientiously on a cross-party basis.

The hon. Member for Chislehurst also rightly alluded to the commission of inquiry upon which he sat, which published its report this week. I had the benefit of reading it on its publication and, as my party's spokesman on such matters, I was alerted to its findings shortly before publication. Like the hon. Gentleman, I was encouraged by the seriousness of the report and by the commission's careful deliberative method. It sat for two years and it did its job extremely thoroughly. I was encouraged also by the broad range of its recommendations.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

One finding complemented the rather alarming fact that, within a broad definition, there are 1 million youngsters who are the subject of abuse—which is extremely worrying. Even if we break down that figure into sub-categories, including those who are clearly abused in various forms, abuse takes place at a horrifying level. It is encouraging, however, that the report concludes that most child abuse is preventable. It appears that most child abuse is committed by those who have a close relationship with the children concerned. It often happens, however, that those outside that relationship do not blow the whistle as early as they should. I hope that, before there are any further knee-jerk reactions, we can have a debate on the report in Government time during this Session.

Like the hon. Member for Chislehurst, I was disappointed to hear the Under-Secretary of State who has recently assumed responsibility for these matters so summarily and, it seemed, grudgingly, reject both the report and some of its recommendations. That did him no credit. Similarly, it did the Government, the report and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which commissioned the report, no credit. If we can have a Minister with responsibility for disabled people and a Minister with responsibility for the youth service—who in my view should be the Minister with responsibility for young people—surely we can have a Minister with responsibility for children's issues. It is nonsensical that we do not have a Minister responsible for co-ordination in this area.

I accept, of course, that we are participating in a wide-ranging debate. However, the right hon. Member for Brent, North (Sir R. Boyson) talked specifically about education policy, which I know will be the subject of debate next week. That is why I raised questions about his speech earlier. But the themes to which he drew attention, and those referred to by the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), are clearly both among those that underlie how we respond to the social issues of the day.

One of the great social concerns is the future of the NHS. It is an overwhelmingly held view that the NHS represents one of the most civilised acts achieved in this country since the second world war. We created the NHS and we have sustained it. It is something that makes us all more equal, or it should do. It makes for the better health and welfare of our nations, and many of us want to ensure its secure future. For it to be in the Government's programme, for there to be a large degree of consensus about proposed legislation and for there to be a willingness to make primary care better and more accessible are all good things. My colleagues and I, subject to finding that the Bill does not say what we expect, will vote for the Second Reading of the Bill that has been announced. We shall support it and generally welcome it, as I said last week.

Two particular issues, which were touched upon earlier, will be important in relation to primary care. First, if we do not improve it, we shall be desperately short of GPs. I have one figure to illustrate that. Until about five years ago, when practices advertised for trainee GPs they would often receive between 10 and 20 applicants. Today, many practices are lucky if they have one applicant. General practice should be built up, as it is already in some places, to become a viable, valuable and valued part of the national health service so that trainee medics—and trainees in other allied professions—want to enter primary care as much as they want to enter the acute sector. There will be a great GP crisis ahead unless we do something, because many of the large number who started to practise in the 20 years after the war are coming up to retirement, and because GPs around the country are demoralised.

Next, there is a smaller issue to do with registration. The Secretary of State rightly said that we have a system based on the fact that it is the right of every citizen to register with a GP, who is then the person principally responsible for his or her care. When GPs say that somebody can no longer remain on their list, which happens increasingly, finding another GP who will take them is not always easy. Some patients are difficult, but by definition they are probably the ones who need a GP the most. We need to ensure that the procedures for re-registration and finding another GP work properly. They certainly do not at the moment.

On the specifics of the Bill that we anticipate—we are all working on the basis of the White Paper of last week rather than anything else, other than one sentence in the Queen's Speech—I accept and endorse, as the White Paper does, the fact that the purchaser-provider split should be retained and that health authorities should therefore not employ GPs but should exceptionally be responsible for appointing them where no other GPs are willing to do the job.

Secondly, it is nonsense to appoint an incompetent person to be a GP in a single-handed practice. When I was elected, I was told by the local health authority that more than half the practices in my area were below standard. Sadly, that has been the case in the inner city for far too long. We need to ensure that single-handed and multi-GP practices have GPs of a decent standard. Our patients must not be prejudiced by anything else.

There is another concern. Here I need to deal with the point that was in dispute last week and today between the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith). There is a difference between a commercial employer employing a general practitioner and a commercial employer, such as Boots, employing a pharmacist. The general practitioner is the personal professional with whom someone registers for their general health care. The GP is their gateway and point of access. The pharmacist is not. I am not signed up to one local pharmacist, to whom I go for all my pharmacy requirements. I go to Boots the chemist in Westminster Bridge road if I need something while I am here, but I will also go to any other pharmacist throughout the land. That is the difference. Just as the hospital—I see that the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) agrees—to which someone goes when they are suddenly taken ill or need an acute service has to deal with all that person's acute needs, so a GP or practice—it may be a practice nurse—has to deal with a whole range of needs. They really cannot have a double loyalty to the patient and a commercial employer. Of course, GPs are private practitioners and have a contract with the national health service, but their loyalty is to their profession, their ethical code and their patients, and not to anybody else who might be pulling the strings. That is why we want some reassurance.

I am in favour of pilot schemes, and we welcome the provisions in the Bill, but I cannot believe that the Secretary of State does not understand the difference—there is a big difference—between privately employed general practices and general practitioners and GPs who are employed by local community trusts.

Having a general practice in the high street or in Victoria station is a good idea. I am absolutely not opposed to it. Indeed, I am positively in favour of putting practices where the people are. I see no reason why GP practices should not be in shopping malls and shopping centres. In Victoria station there is a private practice. That is the difference. I hope that, in time, we may have public practices in main line railway stations, shopping centres and elsewhere. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Miss Hoey) and I, who share responsibility for Waterloo—her constituency includes the station itself—would like one in Waterloo station, but run by the national health service. We had better consult our local GPs before we get too enthusiastic about it, but we would be happy to pilot a scheme there.

We also welcome the imminent measures on social security, which will be supported by my colleagues and me as the Bill passes through the House. Reforming the compensation recovery unit is a good thing, and shifting the burden of benefit recovery from the victim to the person responsible for the accident makes more sense.

We welcome too the Government's attempts to clamp down on housing benefit fraud and social security fraud. It must be right that people should not receive money to which they are not entitled—as long as the big fish as well as the little fish are caught and there is not an imbalance.

There are more Bills in the Queen's Speech for which there is cross-party agreement—certainly now that the two belated arrivals have been included—than there are Bills that can be perceived as "intended to flush out" the Opposition parties. We should be honest and say that, in a small programme, the majority of measures are not party controversial. I suppose that that was the only way in which the Government could get a significant number of Bills through the House between now and the prime ministerially endorsed date of 1 May.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: That is not what he said.

Mr. Hughes: I heard the interview. The Prime Minister certainly said that it would not be later than 1 May and he indicated general support for the idea that it might be 1 May. Of course he did not commit himself, but I think that we can all work on the assumption that if it were after 1 May it would be a disaster for the Tories because of the local government elections on 1 May, and they would not want that as a trailer to their general election.

There was not much in the Queen's Speech that was controversial, although we will give all the Bills proper scrutiny. As the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury said, often it is what is not in the Queen's Speech that is equally the subject of debate. I shall briefly identify the missing issues that for us need to be flagged up. The Secretary of State for Health heard my question and understood it, but failed on three occasions to answer it. What does he intend to do about removing the two-tier consequence of fundholding in the health service? He must be honest with the House and accept that, as evidenced in the example that I gave him from the Exeter and Devon Health Care trust document, which was sent on official paper, someone who is a patient of a fundholding practice will get non-emergency treatment more quickly than the patient of a non-fundholding practice. There is a two-tier health service for many non-fundholding practice patients. The Government could and should change that.

The health service does not treat people equally in all parts of the country. We sometimes have much better service in some parts than in others. Of course, to a degree, that will always be the case, but there is a serious issue about ensuring that the allocation of moneys is fair if we are to avoid significantly different waiting times in different parts of the country.

The health service is clearly also not properly co-ordinated. It is not only me who says that. It is the answer given to the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing), who asked a question about what the deficits are this year and was told that no information was suitable for publication. The reason why it was not suitable for publication was that it showed the fact that there is a large deficit. My colleagues and I calculated it at £133 million. The Government have conceded that it is £122 million. There is a significant shortfall of money this year.

The third special report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration—as objective a body as any—was published yesterday. On the responsibilities of the NHS executive, it said:

"We are concerned that public and parliamentary accountability are being ignored. If management is being devolved locally, we believe that one of the prime duties of the NHS Executive is to ensure that Parliament is not thus deprived of information by which it can judge the overall performance of the Health Service."

The King's Fund annual health care report contains a significant and weighty article by Sean Boyle and Anthony Harrison, who conclude that there should be much greater clarity and that

"current national policy is inadequate because it fails to state clear primary targets . . . and to monitor policies in a way which would allow swift, effective reactions in order to avoid crisis management."

The article continues:

"Nationally there has been no clear responsibility for ensuring that there are sufficient intensive care facilities to meet the needs of the whole population."

There will be a crisis in the health service this winter, partly because the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and the Secretary of State and the NHS executive do not seem to know what people are doing either. There are endless examples of hon. Members being told in response to parliamentary questions that information is not available or is not held centrally.

My office and I undertook a wild paper chase in September to try to obtain information about health authority deficits. The Secretary of State said, "Don't ask me"; the NHS executive said, "Don't ask us"; the local NHS regional chairman—such chairmen chair nothing these days—said, "We don't know"; and in the end we had to collect the information ourselves. Having telephoned six different ports of call we had collected two horrifying quotations. A fax from one regional office said:

"Please be advised that you should address this query to the Minister."

[Mr. Hughes]

When we did so, the Minister of course said, "Don't ask me." The second response was extraordinarily direct and honest. It said:

> "There is actually no one collecting that sort of information at the moment. At the end of the day it will hopefully all get sorted out. God knows how."

If that is all the information that a health service official can provide, we are at a pretty sorry pass.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North–West): Safe in their hands.

Mr. Hughes: Indeed. It is hardly evidence of a health service safe in their hands.

It is some consolation that the Government have now seen fit to publish the deficit figures, even though the figures that we have are for only the first three months of this year. They confirm that some authorities are in deficit by up to £10 million and that co-ordination and control in the health service are not working. We do not have a national health service in the true sense, because nobody is properly nationally responsible for it any more.

Leaving aside the questions of health promotion, improving public health, restoring free dental and eye checks, banning advertising and sports promotion of tobacco and ensuring that we have properly independent health education authorities and public health commissions, all of which should be covered in the Queen's Speech but are not, there are two other specific matters that have not been addressed.

The first is the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy. I will defend NHS managers, but not a system that requires annual contracts and forces people to renegotiate every year or a system whereby people in 488 different places have to negotiate their own pay. Even now, six months into the financial year, people are being called away from looking after their patients to attend pay negotiation meetings. The sooner we get back to nationally negotiated NHS pay, the better.

The second question that was not addressed—the Secretary of State may say that it is a matter for the Budget, but all legislation has implications to do with money—is where the resources are to come from. There is no guarantee that the primary care part of the NHS will have the resources that it needs and that they will not be taken away from the acute and hospital sector.

These concerns about the Queen's Speech come not only from politicians but from professional bodies, including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts. They are all concerned about the resources.

The Prime Minister made a commitment at his party conference that if the Tories are re-elected—I hope that they will not be—they will provide at least enough money for the NHS to keep pace with inflation for the next five years. A sub-question arises about how inflation is defined and whether it is NHS inflation—which is higher—or general inflation, but, assuming that we are talking about NHS inflation, the health service is still in deficit already. To make up for last year's funding shortfall, £178 million was taken out of this year's money, and there are already projections of big deficits for this year and the year to come.

The health service needs catch-up money to enable it to do its job. That means extra money: much more than the £100 million to which the Labour party is committed and much more than the Government have committed. There was silence on that in the Queen's Speech, in the Prime Minister's speech and in the speech made by the Secretary of State today. Unless we find more resources, the closures and the reduction of services that we are experiencing will not be stopped, the new staff that we need will not be recruited, the increasing waiting lists will not start to decrease, necessary health promotion initiatives such as free dental and eye checks will not be restored and the unnecessary bureaucracy will not be cut.

My party has made a commitment and a budgetary allowance for an extra £350 million a year on top of necessary growth money. I challenge the Government to do the same. If Ministers cannot respond to that today, we look forward to a positive response in the coming Budget.

12.26 pm

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): I listened to the Gracious Speech with some surprise and much satisfaction. I certainly did not recognise the description of it given by the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) because I consider that there is a great deal in it.

It would not be surprising, in the last six months before a general election, if a Queen's Speech was thin and offered no more than some tidying up legislation, but that was not the case: it was large in quantity and in substance. That is welcome and demonstrates the Government's commitment to continuing in their clear direction for as long as possible. That is true on health, with which we have been concerned today, and it is excellent that there is a commitment to legislation on extending primary health care reform.

The commitment reflects two important principles that have powered Government policy on health. First, there is an unshakeable commitment to the national health service and to the provision of free basic health care facilities for all. Secondly, there is a continued attempt to improve quality as well as quantity of provision, with an important emphasis on achieving better value for money. Those reforms have involved an emphasis on primary health care. I very much welcome that, because primary health care is the pivotal point of a good national health service.

Why is a greater concentration on primary care so important? First, because it emphasises—this is an emphasis that most people want—the role of the patient's own doctor and the personal relationship between the patient and their general practitioner, providing choices that may be impossible at other levels of the national health service. Secondly, it reflects a welcome development in health treatment: the availability of ever more forms of treatment from the GP—the lowest possible level closest to the patient. Thirdly, primary health care offers a flexibility and efficiency that is more difficult to achieve at other levels.

For all those reasons, I welcome the greater emphasis being placed on primary health care. It has been an important part of the reforms and the success of widening

the base of primary health care has been evident. It is certainly evident in my constituency, where many more services can be provided than was possible five years ago. Of course, that is possible for non-fundholding GP surgeries and for fundholding surgeries, but it is clear that the fundholders have set the pace and led the way.

One surgery in my constituency—the Elm Road surgery, to which I have referred before in the House—has provided a massive extension of services. I am glad to say that I recently gave successful support to the surgery's plan for a physical extension to its health centre, which has made the provision of even more services possible. The former—now retired—principal partner of the practice, Dr. Ken Scott, was one of the first and leading advocates of GP fundholding. He is now the president of the National Association of Fund Holding Practices. I compliment him on the great work that he has done on the principle and the practice of GP fundholding.

All those advances are very welcome, but there are still several severe problems linked with primary care, particularly in inner-city areas. The Government's attempt to tackle those problems in the new Bill is therefore welcome. From what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said this morning, it seems that the Bill will cover all the issues that I intend to raise, but if, when all the details of the Bill emerge, any of those issues are not covered, I hope that means can be found to tackle them.

The first difficulty is faced by single-handed practices, particularly those in inner-city areas. For historical reasons and reasons relating to premises, the proportion of single-handed practices in inner-city areas tends to be greater than that in outer areas. That is so in my constituency, with the practices in the less urban area to the south and east tending to have more doctors—sometimes a large number—attached to them, whereas in Penge and Anerley, which abut inner London and where there is much greater deprivation, with properties built closer together and a higher population density, the majority of practices are single-handed.

I have nothing against single-handed practices, which can often provide a worthwhile and efficient service, but if we are to expand primary health care in the direction in which I believe it should be expanded, inner-city areas need more health centres of the sort seen elsewhere. Such centres can provide a continuity of service—with longer opening hours—and a breadth of provision that single-handed practices find it difficult to provide.

I hope that creative means will be found to encourage the development of multi-doctor health centres in such areas. Bromley health authority has led the way in the creation of what are called multifunds. I also strongly support the prospect of bringing together single-handed practices to share some services in the smaller local hospitals. I will return to that in a few minutes.

A second concern is the level of liaison between health authorities and newly set up practices. There is an anomaly in that, when the ratio of population to GPs rises above a certain level, it is possible for any GP to go into an area and, after going through the appropriate application process, more or less set up a practice straight away, without the local health authority even knowing and without its say-so. That does not make for good and efficient co-ordination. It would be wise to amend practices to involve the health authority more and, where necessary, to give it a more proactive role in ensuring that there is adequate provision.

Linked with that is the fraught issue of the doctor-population ratio itself. It is a set ratio throughout the country. Consideration should be given to adjusting it to take into account some of the greater pressures that increasingly come to the fore, particularly in deprived and urban areas. For example, in fixing the regulations, the additional services that doctors have increasingly provided since the 1990 contract should be taken into account. At a certain trip point, as it were, practices can take on assistance or part-time assistance. I believe that the figure is around 2,500 patients per GP. Perhaps it would be wiser, certainly in some regions, for that figure to be lower to take into account the extra strain on some GPs, particularly single-handed ones.

In the Bromley region, only 78p per patient is allowed to follow a patient to a GP if his existing GP retires. That needs to be adjusted to enable quick and adequate provision to be given to patients if they have, sadly, lost their GP's services and until such time as they can find a new and permanent practice.

No locum payments are permissible in an urban area such as the one covered by my constituency. They are possible in rural areas. Some attention needs to be given to making the regulations more flexible in relation to that matter. All those suggestions will, I hope, help to deal with the rigidity and perhaps the now outdated regulations that govern the way in which GPs can set up and operate.

Recruitment is the fourth well known concern. It is especially difficult in some parts of London and in the Bromley region. Just in the past few months, doctors' practices have raised two cases with me about the difficulty of obtaining new GPs to replace ones that have either retired or moved on for other reasons.

I took up those cases with my hon. Friend the Minister for Health, who told me that the Government had launched initiatives, which I welcome, to deal with the matter. They include the London initiative zone, which has enabled extra payments to be made where flexibility allowances are needed and encourages medical schools to take on new students to train as GPs to increase the flow. It also encourages people who have left the profession to return—they are described by that awful word "returnees"—so that the NHS benefits from people who were trained, who still have much to offer and who could be encouraged, if conditions were right, to return to the profession. There is also a role for salaried GPs, particularly when a health authority identifies a problem and urgently needs a solution that is easy to implement, and which may be temporary or not because of traditional recruitment pattern difficulties. I welcome that additional flexibility.

I mentioned my keenness for linking single-handed practices and others with local secondary facilities, particularly small hospitals, where no health centre exists. Beckenham hospital is an excellent example. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister mentioned that he would like to see the encouragement of cottage hospitals in Bournemouth. Beckenham hospital meets that description, although health professionals do not like to use the phrase any longer. Three or four years ago, Beckenham hospital appeared to have no future. There was grave concern about its likely closure and the suggestion that all

[Mr. Piers Merchant]

secondary health facilities would be concentrated on one central location in Bromley borough. I am glad that that did not happen, but the reverse.

After a while, the health authority recognised that such hospitals have an important role, for which there is a strong demand in the community. The authority adjusted its plans and made a long-term commitment to Beckenham hospital's future. Over the past 18 months, that has produced investment of £1 million, new diagnostic facilities, out-patient facilities and a range of specialist clinics, a new pharmacy, a range of health education facilities, minor treatment suites and other facilities best provided in the community but not always available at a surgery—an intermediate stage. That innovation has proved extremely popular. The number of people using the hospital has increased dramatically, with a 5 per cent. jump in the number of out-patients over the past two quarters. A new stroke clinic has also been opened.

Doctors unable to provide at their surgeries the range of facilities available at larger fundholding practices could collaborate and use the services available at hospitals such as Beckenham. Day surgeries, and even short-term overnight stays for patients who could benefit from them, could be supervised by the GPs—an arrangement that both they and their patients would probably prefer.

I am keen to see the provision in Beckenham and elsewhere of a minor injuries unit, which would take the pressure off larger, centralised accident and emergency units and those GPs unable to offer an appropriate service. Constituents with a minor injury often feel aggrieved when immediate treatment is not available from their GP and they are referred to an accident and emergency unit. It would be better if they could receive attention at the minor injuries unit of a smaller hospital, possibly at the hands of a duty GP. Such provision presents great possibilities in primary care, and I should very much like to see it implemented in my constituency.

I end my speech by moving on to issues other than primary care, because primary care can hope to work only if we know its limits and if it is backed up by good hospital facilities. Clearly, GPs cannot be expected to deal with the entire range of health problems, and they must have back-up when necessary.

There is a desperate need in my constituency for a new district hospital to provide such facilities. The need arises not because the Bromley hospital system is not manfully trying to provide the best possible level of support to the local population—it does—but because, for historic reasons, provision is split between four sites in the borough, which is inefficient and means that running the system is more expensive and difficult. The current system creates unnecessary duplication and overheads, and makes it difficult—in some cases impossible—for a patient's entire treatment to be conducted at one hospital. A patient may present at the accident and emergency department, but after stabilisation will probably have to be moved to another hospital across the borough to receive specialist or long-term care.

The local hospital structure has been working very hard to overcome that problem, and it now has a clear plan in place. Only yesterday, it announced its private finance initiative preferred bidder—a group called United Healthcare, which is an equal partnership between Taylor Woodrow and the Healthcare Group. That group will provide a new £120 million hospital, which will overcome all the problems that I have described.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Ministers in his Department, in co-ordination with the Treasury, to reach as hasty a decision as possible on that hospital's future. I very much hope to see—and I am reasonably confident that I will see—bricks and mortar in place in the near future, which will help to complete the balance that the reforms have brought in my constituency.

The new hospital will build on the excellent work that Bromley hospital has been able to deliver over the past few years to the people of the borough. By March 1995, waiting lists at Bromley hospital were brought down to a maximum of 12 months. In the year to June 1996, there has been a 25 per cent. reduction in the size of the waiting list, and there has been a 4 per cent. reduction since then. That achievement should be considered against a background of increasing demand in the form of referrals from GPs and from accident and emergency departments. There have been other spectacular reductions, such as a 44 per cent. reduction in urology waiting. In 84 per cent. of cases, people requiring orthopaedic treatment are now seen within 13 weeks, whereas, a year ago, the figure was only 48 per cent.

Some real progress has been made, although I should like to see further action taken. I expect that there will be further results from planned legislation to improve and diversify primary health care and by the provision of a new hospital, which I hope will be approved in this Session. The achievements to date demonstrate the real progress that has been made in the health service, which has been made possible by the health service reforms implemented by the Government. The reforms are very welcome, as is the commitment to pass new legislation to improve the health service, and I am sure that those successes will now be carried forward.

12.48 pm

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Before I remark on the social security aspects of the Queen's Speech, I want to comment on guns, although I know that that subject will be more fully debated next week. I wanted to speak during the statements last week but was not called.

I have a strong concern arising from my borough where, in the past year alone, the police have been called out to 845 incidents involving guns—all of which were illegally held. I query how any action on guns that we take will do anything about illegally held weapons, which are the day-to-day danger facing my constituents.

In the controversial, emotional debate that we are to have on guns, it is important that we remember that the people—certainly those whom I know in my constituency—who shoot in rifle clubs and who attend pistol shooting are decent, honourable citizens who are going about their legal pleasure. We should not imply—as some hon. Members have, although they might not have meant to do so—that anyone who has been shooting in a gun club is a psychopath in waiting. We should get that message across clearly in the coming debate.

It strikes me as strange that the House could be attempting to stop a sport—pistol shooting—that is currently legal and that is and will be part of the Olympic

games. We might be preventing those who have endeavoured and worked hard to become part of an Olympic team from practising their sport. This morning, we heard of a woman who has spent a long time becoming an expert pistol shooter, but who might now have to move to Jersey to continue. In the understandable emotion resulting from Dunblane, it is important that we remember that what appears to be the easy solution might not always be the best.

As a member of the Select Committee on Social Security, I am delighted that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said, the Secretary of State has, as usual, followed our lead, not only on the compensation recovery unit but on the question of fraud. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I welcome and want to strengthen the proposals dealing with fraud control, because the benefit system was designed to help those in greatest need and the poor. It is not right that some sections of society, whether individuals or gangs, should exploit it. I have not yet seen the relevant Bill, so it is difficult to comment in detail, but I hope that we shall adopt all the measures recommended in the Select Committee report.

The Secretary of State has not, however, followed the Select Committee's report on benefits for asylum seekers. The Secretary of State said that there would be a commitment to give local authorities help and support for the extra costs arising from changes in legislation dealing with asylum seekers. I want to give the House an account of some of the serious difficulties affecting some inner-London boroughs, especially the borough of Lambeth, as a consequence of the recent judgment on asylum seekers.

The judgment in the case of the four asylum seekers against the London boroughs of Lambeth, Westminster and Hammersmith and Fulham was given on 8 October. As hon. Members will know, the three boroughs lost the case. The judge clearly found that the boroughs should offer support to the asylum seekers under the National Assistance Act 1948 on the ground that they were destitute. He found it impossible to believe that Parliament intended that asylum seekers

"should be left destitute, starving and at the risk of grave illness and even death"

and felt that, if it did, it should have said so clearly and repealed the parts of the Act that provided a safety net for people who were destitute. He went further in his judgment. He said that, if Parliament was clear that that was its intention, it would almost certainly put itself in breach of the Geneva convention. He was also clear that, although he had great sympathy with local authorities and the financial difficulties that would be caused by the judgment,

"if a duty exists, it must be performed".

The judgment has significant implications for social services in many London boroughs, but I shall describe the repercussions in the borough of Lambeth. The housing department no longer has the power to offer housing to asylum seekers, and they are entitled to no social security benefits. The social services department is therefore responsible for their housing, food and support and also, potentially, for necessary expenses such as prescription charges.

The judgment potentially has a wider significance, in relation to those people who fail the habitual residence test, but at the moment, as hon. Members know, there are three different categories of asylum seekers. First, there are individual adults, such as the four adults who brought the case, who are usually fit and healthy and whom the local authority must now support under the National Assistance Act. Secondly, there are families with children, who, by reason of their destitution, are in need and must be supported under the Children Act 1989. Thirdly, there are unaccompanied refugee children, who must be supported under the Children Act.

Since mid-August, Lambeth social services has seen 250 units—either an individual or a family, as I have just defined. They have offered support to 109 units—70 families, 37 adults and two children, and that excludes children who are already in care. In August and September, applicants averaged 18 to 20 a week. However, on the day following the judgment, 9 October, 36 individuals—all single adults—arrived. By lunchtime on 10 October, 15 further people had applied. The borough estimates that, in the next few weeks, applicants may average 30 to 40 a day.

Where appropriate, people are offered housing—bed and breakfast arranged through the housing department and cross-charged to the social services department—and income support at 85 per cent. of its usual level. Expenditure on income support is currently about £4,500 a week and rising, and extra money is being sought for prescription charges, travel, and so on.

The social services department incurs other costs. Three additional social workers are hired from an agency at £500 a week each. There are the costs of transporting cash. There are the significant costs of Language Line—£3 to £5 a minute for interpretation—and the significant time of a team manager.

Lambeth was previously regarded as a local authority that mismanaged and had elements of corruption. I accepted all those allegations. All those problems have been tackled and the position is being turned around. I therefore strongly emphasise that Lambeth is not a soft touch. All applications are scrutinised in detail; many are rejected. Lambeth currently offers income support at a lower level than do other London boroughs. Additional expenses have so far been rejected, despite constant pressure from solicitors and from the Refugee Council, whose headquarters is in the London borough of Lambeth.

The Secretary of State will probably mention the two Government grants that are available. There is a grant to local authorities for unaccompanied children. However, we must spend £2 million before we qualify, which effectively means that no money will be available. There is a grant for children and families. Again, we must spend a large sum and we then receive only 80 per cent. of our expenditure above that figure. Lambeth is therefore obliged to subsidise the costs of asylum seekers significantly through the budget. There is no money for single adults.

Lambeth, Hammersmith and Fulham and Westminster have the most asylum seekers, as they were the initial targeted boroughs. We feel that the presence of the Refugee Council increases the number of asylum seekers who approach the borough of Lambeth. The Select Committee visited the Refugee Council a week or so ago and saw its wonderful work. We also visited the special day centre which has been set up in my constituency, just across the river.

[Miss Kate Hoey]

The presence of the Refugee Council and other organisations has, however, increased pressure on Lambeth's budget. One or two nights spent in a local refugee centre is claimed as the "Lambeth connection". That also happens in boroughs such as that of the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). Lambeth social services department will probably spend £1 million to £2 million more this year. Westminster council estimates that it will spend a similar figure, rising to £7.7 million in 1997-98. Significant numbers of asylum seekers are also being accommodated by the housing department while they wait for their next asylum decision.

The concerns on this matter are, primarily, financial. The department already overspends its community care resources and faces major cuts. Such expenditure is simply not affordable. Other community services will have to be cut further, which will impact on hospital discharges. There is already great difficulty in getting people out of hospital if they have nowhere to go. Given that the housing department says that the stock of bed-and-breakfast accommodation will be exhausted within the next couple of weeks, the problem is extremely urgent. There will be repercussions on the community generally. Major cuts have already been made and will continue to be made in services for the disabled and elderly, while new services must be set aside for asylum seekers. That does not bode well for race relations, so it must be dealt with.

In practical terms, the department has few resources to dedicate to the task, especially as Lambeth has had to prepare, propose, consult on and implement significant cuts that must take place anyway. Moreover, the new centres must be agreed and resourced. Although the problem does not exist all over the country, it is severe in some parts of London and the Secretary of State must take action. The Government are responsible for helping with additional costs because the cumulative effect of asylum seekers on budgets such as Lambeth's, especially as all the current grants imply a local authority subsidy, is extremely serious. The Government must take urgent action to set up a resettlement centre to which all local authorities can refer applicants. That might avoid using the national assistance legislation and reduce numbers.

This problem will not go away and action is needed urgently. It cannot wait for an appeal. As the supply of bed-and-breakfast accommodation throughout London vanishes, local authorities will have to set up their own emergency shelters. Lambeth social services is already making contingency plans to reopen a closed elderly persons home in Streatham within the next two weeks. One can imagine the repercussions that that will have on the local community. I understand that Westminster and Hammersmith and Fulham are taking similar action. Although local authorities can do some of the work, the Secretary of State is responsible for working closely with the Refugee Council to ensure that it directs asylum seekers all over London, not just to the boroughs which, for historical, geographical or community reasons, are targeted currently.

My constituency has 85 organisation headquarters and they all think that I am their Member of Parliament. Although that is correct in theory, in practice I cannot possibly be the Member of Parliament for all those headquarters, which range from those of important national organisations to small local ones. The problem is that, because many people claim a local connection by staying in my borough with one of those organisations or their friends, Lambeth takes a much greater proportion than it should. Obviously, the borough must take its share, but certain boroughs take more than their fair share.

We must also warn the health authorities and trusts, because hospital discharge arrangements may no longer be adhered to and Lambeth will simply be unable to afford the expenditure.

I am sorry if I have been parochial, but it is important to make that point about the legislation on asylum seekers. We have heard the court ruling. In his response, the Secretary of State should tell us what he intends to do to help the local authorities affected. We cannot afford to wait until the appeal.

1.4 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Eltham): I had anticipated that I would follow the hon. Member for South Antrim (Mr. Forsythe), speaking on Northern Ireland.

The Bills set out in the Queen's Speech are important, but the most important objective is to establish a framework to ensure that social advance matches economic advance. In the next 25 years, we expect to achieve roughly what we have achieved in the past 30 years: a doubling of the material standard of living. There is not much point in that, however, if it is not accompanied by an uplifting—in modern terms, a remoralisation—of what is going on around us.

When I first became a Member of Parliament, my constituency included parts of the Ferrier estate, where deeply caring people such as myself, with the help of better qualified professionals, created a town for 5,000 people in which for five years there was no pub, no post office, no chapel, no police officer and nowhere within a mile and a half where people could work. That was a mistake, and I hope that we have learnt from it.

There are estates of perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 people, mainly in the inner cities or outside large towns, where, if one asks children what there is to do after school—assuming that they are in school each day—they say, "Nothing." They are not always being accurate, but every child and parent should be able to talk about worthwhile activities.

Many hon. Members, if they did not have to work for a living, could fill their time twice over with worthwhile activities—voluntary service to others, academic and educational interests, entertainment and sporting interests—that they enjoy. That should be possible for all people—the young, the middle-aged and those in retirement. Yet the shortage of actual or perceived opportunities for young people is one of the reasons why they engage in so much worthless activity or inactivity.

I must add a comment in parentheses, addressed to those in the media who believe that people who speak about such issues should accept all that is thrown at them about their families or extended families, should lead perfect lives, or should deny any connection with wives, children, parents, mothers-in-law or anyone else. If problems are to be properly discussed in Parliament, even if all the answers are not provided, Members should not be expected to have skins sufficiently thick to endure insults to themselves and others close to them.

I shall give a minor example. When an in-law of mine went into hospital, two newspapers sent pairs of journalists to find out whether she was receiving special, advanced treatment. They discovered that she was not. Then, after a serious procedure, she woke up at 1 am to hear that a different newspaper had reported that she had had to wait too long for her treatment. Frankly, that demonstrates why newspaper editors rightly have a code that states that people should not achieve fame or notoriety simply because of their connection with someone involved in public service.

I return to the major issues. What is the avoidable disadvantage, distress and handicap that we are trying to relieve? Part of it may be due to feelings of alienation or anomie; part of it may be the need to help people achieve relationships that are more lasting; but most of it is to try to apply to others what we have experienced ourselves. What we have experienced and enjoyed, others should be able to choose to share. What we or our constituents have experienced or hated, others should have a better chance of avoiding, or choosing to avoid if they want to.

It is a matter not of laying down laws of social behaviour, but of trying to spread information and knowledge. The hon. Member for Croydon, North–West (Mr. Wicks) was director of the family policies study centre, which made available such information to people of all ages and to those moving through the stages of life.

If I were to make one criticism of our approach to social and economic policies since the last war, it would be that we have forgotten to bring the individual and family life cycle, and the family and household perspective, into our social and economic planning. For that matter, we do not normally gather our statistics in a way that enables us to monitor how cohorts are developing and changing. The European Union could usefully provide framework funding so that a new cohort study could start every seven years and each cohort could be re-examined every seven years. Researchers who wanted detailed information would not then have to argue with Government Departments and research funders to start from scratch, because they could tie in to the framework system and it would be far easier to research such issues.

I will share with the House an illustrative example of how such an approach can work, although we did not use one of the famous cohort studies. When I became a junior Minister in the Department of Transport, someone asked me what I would do to improve road safety. I asked how we would notice that there had been an improvement in road safety and the answer was that we would see a cut in the casualty figures. So I suggested that we start by trying to cut casualties. We then looked at the dominant reasons for casualties—crashes. Of the factors associated with injury crashes, 90 to 95 per cent. involve the road user's mistake, 30 per cent. involve some obvious defect in the road environment and 8 per cent. involve a vehicle defect, as conventionally defined. The most common factor was young men who had taken alcohol above the legal limit and then driven.

We then found a clue as to how to approach the problem, which was not to change the law. The clue came from research on a campaign that I inherited on drink driving in December 1986. The research in early 1987 showed that a high proportion of the target audience had received most of the message from television advertising. Fine, but there had not been any television advertising. What had people been seeing? They had seen news and current affairs coverage of the launch of the poster campaign.

If we need to change people's understanding of a serious subject, which is the first step towards changing their behaviour, why do we rely so much on paid-for advertising on only half the television channels? If the subject is important, it should be discussed and argued in mainstream life. If we can do that for a possible one in 50,000 chance of thrombosis caused by a brand of contraceptive pill, we should be able to do it for behaviour that in those days killed 1,200 people a year.

So we started trying to get young people to discuss the issues. At that point, it became obvious that instead of a 44-year-old Minister, as I then was, talking on Radio 4, we needed a 58-year-old disc jockey talking about the issue on Radio 1.

Once the issues were talked about in the media with which people were familiar and were not preached about, we started seeing a change in understanding. That led to an estimated cut in the number of occasions each week on which young men drove a car when they were above the legal limit, from 2 million times a week—which is low compared with France, Germany or the United States, although still a large number—to 600,000 within two years. Two thirds of an illegal, socially acceptable, body-breaking habit evaporated with no change in the law, sentencing or enforcement.

Let us suppose that we start being concerned about issues such as school attendance. The figures are improving now, but about five or six years ago, a third of young people aged between 14 and 16 and who attended inner-city schools were not in school. Whatever happened to the teacher-pupil ratio in those schools would not have helped those young people.

The approach can be used to tackle other issues, some involving behaviour that is against the law and others involving behaviour that is undesirable.

I have estimated that the number of times each week that young people, normally young males, commit a serious criminal offence for the first time, is 2,000. A third of men have already collected a serious criminal conviction by the age of 30, and the mathematics easily cascade down to at least 2,000 people committing a serious criminal offence for the first time every week. That problem is never discussed in the media relevant to those young people. No one person can be expected to stand up against a culture in which certain behaviour is acceptable or predictable, and we have to try to make it a more general issue.

The number of people each week who for the first time take up smoking is 5,000. That is 250,000 a year. But when we see a young person smoking, our only response is, "You are too young to smoke." Perhaps the more general response is to take up the argument about banning the remaining tobacco promotion. We do not say that taking up smoking is a relatively normal thing for a child to do, but not for adults. Smoking may be an adult thing to do, but it is not adult to start smoking, because that is irrational.

We see young people smoking who are in their teens or older. We see some of those people standing outside their offices having a quiet fag. Instead of looking them in the eye and saying, "What a blithering idiot you are, spending more each day on tobacco than most people

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

spend on the national lottery in a week," perhaps we should develop an idea that I have had, having seen people wearing red ribbons. One feels sorry for them, because they or a friend of theirs have been affected by HIV or AIDS.

Perhaps we should develop a new and accepted reaction, by looking away from the smoker and rubbing our hand down our cheek as if rubbing away a tear. That would be a way of saying, "I am deeply sympathetic. I am so sorry." Most people, especially when they are young, can take criticism; what they cannot take is sympathy. I suspect that if smokers found themselves getting sympathy two or three times a day, their numbers would fall away quite quickly.

Each week 6,000 people contribute to a conception that ends in an abortion. The House has been good in saying, "Let us fill Trafalgar square one Sunday with a quarter of a million saying that the unborn child has a right to life, but with a quarter of a million people saying the next Sunday that a woman has the right to choose." But we still have about 150,000 home-grown abortions a year. It takes two to tango, so 300,000 people are involved.

Most of the response tends to come from hon. Members, often Tory, including perhaps a 44-year-old. First, we say, "Don't do it." That is as if celibacy is something that we can inherit from our parents. We then say, "If you do it, think about family planning or birth control." I suspect that average active people leaving, perhaps, a new Labour drinks party, a Tory one or a Liberal Democrat one for that matter, except that the Liberal Democrats seem to have gone to a party already, do not say, "Let's plan a family. Let us control births." They will say, "Let's be closer than sharing a toothbrush." If they are to be bold enough to do that, let them pick their embarrassment beforehand. Do they want to talk about the embarrassment of conception afterwards or the embarrassment of discussing conception control beforehand?

I suspect that if we were rather more open about those issues, we would find the number of people becoming involved in conceptions that end in abortions falling from 6,000 a week to about 3,000 and then to about 1,000 within months.

One of the reasons why such matters are not discussed is that we do not have statistics in reasonably real time. We know each month the unemployment figures and the retail prices index to one place in a thousand, and we tend to discuss them. If we had available to us social statistics on age participation in crime, or if we found a way of producing surveys of the number of 15 or 16-year-olds taking up smoking, and we talked about them, we would begin to see changes in the figures. We would begin to discover what sort of interventions made a difference.

On drink driving, I was given much encouragement, to put it gently, from programmes such as "Panorama" saying that the only answer is mass random breath testing. Esther Rantzen on "That's Life" advocated mass random breath testing. The British Medical Association and police officers took the same line. They were all saying that a technique that appeared to have worked in New South Wales was the answer for us. But if we reduced drink-drive deaths from 1,800 a year in 1979 to 1,200 in 1986 and to 550 now without random breath testing, we must have been doing something more effective than the practice and experience in Australia.

I happen to believe from experience that Parliament can do three things. First, it can pass laws, which are quite good at turning offences into criminal offences. That does not necessarily stop them happening. Secondly, it can be quite good at giving people rights. Thirdly, it is quite good at giving people a dispute resolution system through the courts or in another way. Unfortunately, it is not particularly good at changing people's behaviour.

I am quite a big believer in spending money on the right things. For example, let us spend money if that is the answer to poverty. However, we would do better sometimes in providing help to get more people to move from income support to becoming taxpayers when they choose to do so. Rather than saying, "Squeeze those on benefit," or, "Tax those who are in work," it would be better to move people from one to the other.

I shall interrupt myself. We have not had a serious debate in the House about—we do not have a word for it—something that might be a called a wedge or a social cost to income ratio. If I were to employ an extra person at £200 a week, he or she would probably take home about £150 or £160. The cost of employing that person would not be £200 a week, which is officially the salary. It would probably be about £270 plus some other overheads. So the ratio of the £160 to the £270 is an uplift of quite a heavy proportion. People work for what they end up with in their pocket. The cost to the employer is what he has to pay out. We do not yet have a word to describe that ratio. That is one of the reasons why people cannot easily move from being out of work, and probably on income support, to being taxpayers.

Tax and spending can make a difference, but they are not the reasons for the biggest differences in social behaviour. Anyone who believes that restoring the child tax allowance or lifting the married person's tax allowance is the way to keep families together has not been paying attention to the basic improvements in some of those issues over the past 20 years. The child tax allowance gave extra help to higher taxpayers, no help to non-taxpayers and roughly the same to people in work. People should realise that going on to the child cash allowance is a better idea.

I argue strongly that the level of the child cash allowance should be set by the Chancellor and not, in theory, by the Secretary of State for Social Security. It is the equivalent of a tax allowance. It has the same purpose as a tax allowance. It should be set by the Chancellor.

Secondly, I would make the cost of the child cash allowance come from the income from tax revenues rather than treat it as part of public spending. We do not treat tax expenditures of personal allowances as social spending, so we should not do so for the child cash allowance.

For those who argue that the married man's tax allowance should go up, let us remember that half those who receive that allowance have a spouse who is working and half do not have dependent children, so it is the least targeted way of helping people when they have children.

The third thing that the Government could do is to go for exhortation: make a speech about a subject. If it was a really serious speech, the Minister could make a series of them around the country. At least we would get on with running the Department while he was away.

Those who make proposals for changes in the law—changes in tax and spending—and for the continuation of exhortation, should have an understanding of the situation. We should always try to make available to others the background on why we consider a change to be necessary or important. Once that understanding is shared—as in the drink-driving example and the other examples that I mentioned—we can begin to achieve social advances that will match the economic advances. I am not particularly interested in people having more and foreign holidays, more cars and more discretionary money to spend, if they find that, outside their front door or at different stages of their lives, life is unnecessarily miserable.

We cannot hide the fact that life ends in death, and often in disease and illness as well, but we can avoid much unnecessary disadvantage, distress and handicap. We have not yet found a way to bring those issues to the public's attention. If we were to have a big debate now about the future of Europe, the House would be packed with hon. Members whose views we know already. They would not be bringing forward their constituents' views.

We in the House represent housing estates, whether social or private housing, the ups and downs, the different ages and stages, and we should do that rather better, so that the social advance over the next 25 years matches what we can expect of the economic advance.

1.23 pm

Mr. Clifford Forsythe (South Antrim): Northern Ireland's constitutional position has been regularly discussed in the House, and sadly the security situation also requires much attention from right hon. and hon. Members. The media in general prints many column inches and uses many feet of film and tape to cover both subjects.

While that is understandable in our sad situation in Northern Ireland, one of the casualties is the lack of attention given to the many social problems experienced every day by people of all shades of opinion in Northern Ireland. I am almost certain that my remarks on social affairs could be applied to many other parts of the kingdom, although each area has its particular slant on the subject.

I welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to treat the fight against drug misuse and trafficking as a priority. The problem has grown steadily in recent years. Unless resolute action is taken, the robberies and assaults—and, yes, the murders—associated with that evil trade will get out of all control and adversely effect the lives of all our citizens.

The same paragraph of the Gracious Speech states that priority will be given to action to protect and improve the environment. "Environment" can mean many things; it can mean the football field that I used to play on; it can mean the trees, the rivers or even the roads. I wish to mention another little part of the environment: the living space that surrounds our homes. In his remarks on the Gracious Speech, the Prime Minister mentioned with pride the number of people who had purchased their own homes. Most of us agree that it is good to have responsible home owners who take pride in their homes, but what about their surroundings?

Tenants were encouraged to purchase their homes from the local authorities. In Northern Ireland, it was from the Housing Executive. They may be paying less for a mortgage than they used to pay for rent. So far, so good. They own their dwellings but their neighbours are often still tenants. They are good friends with their neighbours, especially their next-door neighbours. However, one day their good friends and neighbours next door move away and in come new tenants. Those people are not good tenants; indeed, they are outrageous. They play loud music at all hours of the night and in the early hours of the morning; their children pull down the fences; windows are broken; broken cars appear on their drives; and large dogs roam around, frightening people and creating mayhem.

Gradually, the people who are still tenants get transfers from the local authority or the Housing Executive, leaving the few home owners to cope with the bedlam. They have no escape because they cannot sell their homes. The police say that they must catch the culprits in the act. The local authorities say, "We are sorry but you are now home owners and you are not our responsibility." I hope that action will be taken on that environment. It is not a great advantage to own your own home in what rapidly becomes a rundown and hostile environment that other people avoid at all costs.

Of course a similar situation can arise for tenants and I have experience of how elderly tenants suffer from youths walking along their bungalows on the ridge tiles and looking through their bathroom and bedroom windows night and day. I hope that action will be taken to help people who live in that sort of environment.

The Gracious Speech promises consultation on measures to help people to make better provision for their long-term care. I am sure that that consultation will be closely followed by us all. However, most of us will be aware that many of those who need such care already feel that they made such provision by paying national insurance contributions over the years. They were given the impression that those contributions would provide for all their social needs, but we now know the truth: to provide all that would be desirable for people's needs requires someone to foot the bill. That bill can either be paid by us today through taxes, by our children and grandchildren tomorrow or, as some have suggested, through reducing the bill by reducing the provision of social services and benefits. Germany has had a taste of that in recent days.

The problem must be realistically faced by the House and not treated as a political football for short-term gain. Everybody and every hon. Member and political party will have to face that. As the total of social security payments rises, it becomes even more important to force fraud from the system so that available finance is targeted at those in greatest need. I strongly support the Secretary of State's proposed Bill to combat fraud and I support the other measures.

I am sure that all hon. Members could recount cases of fraud that have been reported to them over the years and I sincerely hope that we can expect action in this area as soon as possible in that part of the United Kingdom for which the Secretary of State for Social Security does not have responsibility—in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Social Security Agency there and the Department that is responsible now have a strategy in place: they did not have one in place when we took evidence from them almost a year ago.

[Mr. Clifford Forsythe]

It was illuminating that when checks were being carried out by Department of the Environment transport section inspectors on private hire taxis, 40 per cent. of those who were stopped and questioned had to be reported to the Social Security Agency for further investigation. That is a measure of the problem. Probably they were not all guilty. Nevertheless, 40 per cent. of those stopped were reported.

We all want eligible claimants to receive their entitlement but it is essential that those who defraud the system are detected and dealt with at an early stage. Nevertheless, all claimants should be treated courteously and hassled only when fraud becomes apparent.

There have been many recent changes to social security legislation and more problems have landed on my desk from constituents. The system for dealing with claims seems to have slowed down. I suspect that it is mostly due to the legislation's increasing complexity. Changes are difficult to absorb quickly and the system needs a chance to settle down before other changes are made.

At this stage, I take the opportunity roundly to condemn the cowardly and outrageous threat a few days ago to Benefits Agency staff by a telephone caller to the Falls road social security office. Such threats are disgraceful. I remind everyone that the staff merely implement, at the coal face, as it were, the legislation passed by the House. I am sure that the House will join me in congratulating all social security staff, but particularly those in Northern Ireland, who do an excellent job in difficult and sometimes, as I have illustrated, dangerous circumstances.

I have also been made aware of hold-ups in arranging tribunal appeals, so I checked the system in Northern Ireland and discovered that it was a bit similar to that of some of the quangos of which we in Northern Ireland are not particularly fond. I discovered that the president of the tribunals is appointed by the Lord Chancellor's Department and that the chairman is appointed by the Lord Chief Justice. Even though the "Public Bodies" book shows a president for each of the four appeal tribunals—the child support, disability, medical and social security appeal tribunals—I discovered that the president was the same person for each and that the chairman was the same person for each.

In a smaller part of the United Kingdom such as Northern Ireland, that is perhaps understandable. Do we want to appoint all those presidents or chairmen? I then discovered, however, that all the tribunal members are appointed by the president, so the president appoints 52 male and 38 female tribunal members.With that number of members, why do appeals take so long to be heard, and if the president and chairman cover all four bodies, do any of the members serve on more than one tribunal? I shall investigate further and perhaps have the opportunity to report to the House on another occasion. Perhaps it would help if the names of the people who serve on such bodies could be included in the 1996 edition of "Public Bodies".

The Government's programme up to the general election is before us. In saying that, I understand that two extra important items have been added. My party will examine carefully the fine detail of all those measures and will play its part by supporting or opposing them as appropriate for the general good of the country and of Northern Ireland in particular.

My party regrets that although Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, references to it in the Queen's Speech appear in that section devoted to external affairs, which offends us. My party and I are also disappointed that we still have to suffer Northern Ireland business being dealt with by Orders in Council.

1.40 pm

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I listened with great interest to the Secretary of State for Health. Few right hon. and hon. Members, to whichever party they belong, disagree about the importance of primary health care and family doctor services, which we all want to see developed. However, we did not hear in the right hon. Gentleman's lengthy speech any explanation of how his proposals fit in with the current situation in the health service and of the source of their funding. Who will pay for the kind of developments mentioned this morning?

St. George's in Tooting, in my constituency, is one of the largest hospitals in the United Kingdom. I spoke in two debates last year of the problems that afflict that hospital, which were also the subject of an entire "World in Action" programme. Subsequently, I received a large number of letters from not only my constituents but people throughout the country. They wrote, "The remarks that you made about the hospital in Tooting are the same that we would make. We have an excellent hospital with superb, dedicated staff, but it is being pushed to the limit by Government policies."

The situation was bad enough last year, but Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority—which covers a large number of parliamentary constituencies—is now confronting a major crisis in respect of St. George's, which faces a deficit next year of more than £14 million. Last year, I spoke of the conditions in that hospital's accident and emergency unit, where seriously ill people were left lying on trolleys in corridors for hours because there were no hospital beds for them. Wards were closed because the health authority did not have the money to open them or to employ the necessary staff. Sadly, the situation has not improved over the past 12 months.

I heard the Secretary of State's comments today about the new proposals on primary health care, but I must ask how the proposals will help to deal with the problems that we have faced in my health authority for such a long time. In recent weeks, we have heard of the total closure of treatment waiting lists for some medical conditions. No more names will be added to lists for hip replacements, cataract operations or for the treatment of varicose veins. At a meeting in the House a few days ago, we were told by senior health representatives that, because of financial problems, they envisage that they will be permitted to perform only about 25 per cent. of the operations in the next year that they have been able to perform in past years.

I am sure that all hon. Members hold advice services at which they meet people from all types of backgrounds. A couple of weeks ago, I met a lady at my advice service who told me that she was 50 years old and suffered appallingly from varicose veins. She has a very sympathetic doctor, who has helped as much as he can, but she said—this was backed up by her doctor—that the tablets that he prescribes for her no longer provide any benefit. She said that her health problem is not life threatening, but that her quality of life is continually

declining. She is not able to pay for a private operation. She told me that, unless someone makes some medical provision for her, someone else will soon have to provide her with other services, because she will no longer be able to perform the tasks that she has been able to perform for so much of her life. I am sure that all hon. Members can speak of similar cases.

In the past few days, all hon. Members should have received a letter from the British Medical Association. If ever there was a damning indictment of what is happening to health services in the United Kingdom, this is it. The letter states:

"The BMA held a press conference today to highlight the concerns expressed by doctors throughout the country about the implications for patient care due to chronic underfunding of the NHS. There are massive health authority deficits, rising waiting lists, and non-emergency procedures will virtually cease in many parts of the country. Patients who are not emergencies but who genuinely need treatment are waiting in pain and distress, and their diagnoses are being delayed. From doctors' reports, it appears that the crisis is more widespread and deeper than in previous years with doctors facing these problems only halfway in the financial year."

That statement is a description of what is happening in my constituency.

The list attached to the BMA's statement shows how many areas of the United Kingdom suffer from the same problems: Oxfordshire, Lancashire, Devon, Cornwall, North and South Thames, Derbyshire, the midlands, Scotland, Wales—across the United Kingdom. The BMA has provided documentation about the scope of the crisis that we are facing.

Earlier in this debate, some hon. Members mentioned accident and emergency services. I have already mentioned A and E services at St. George's. The *Evening Standard* of 23 October 1993 contains a full-page article entitled "One woman's diary of her struggle in a London accident ward". My only quote from that article is that it

"is a startling picture of the treatment Londoners are receiving."

That clearly shows the enormous problems faced not only by the people of London—other London Members of Parliament have touched on that subject today—but by people throughout the country.

Another matter is causing great concern in my constituency and at St. George's. We have a hydrotherapy pool that is in constant use. All hon. Members will agree that the use of a hydrotherapy pool to treat certain medical conditions is, without doubt, of enormous benefit to sufferers. The pool is currently open because a Hong Kong business woman made a £350,000 donation—it costs about £70,000 a year to run. We have been told by the health authority that the pool will be closed next year because of a lack of money. When hon. Members consider that it is estimated that the area will have a deficit of £14 million next year, the case presented by me and by other Members of Parliament for the area looks hopeless. One has to be realistic and ask whether we have any real chance of keeping the pool open in the face of such an enormous deficit.

That brings us back to the theme of the debate—primary health care. We are losing the essential day-to-day health services that are so crucial. Against the background related by hon. Members today, one has to ask where the Government's targets are now. We have heard a great deal about targets for the patients charter and waiting lists, but, when set against the enormous problems, one has to wonder what relevance they will have. I cannot believe that the public will see them as credible.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) wants to speak, so I shall make only one more point. In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State made much of primary care and family doctor services. Doctors in my constituency warmly support such action—we want progress to be made. But local people must have access to the sort of services that they need now. They should not have to wait until a condition is life threatening, as has the woman I described who was refused urgent hospital treatment. Treatment that is crucial to our constituents is, sadly, unavailable to them.

I have sat in on the debate since it started and listened to all that the Secretary of State said, but not once have we heard how his proposals are to be paid for. With the enormous problems that exist within the health service, one has to question the Government's sincerity in presenting a Bill while refusing to tackle those problems.

1.53 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): In the time available, I cannot cover all the points I had hoped to cover, but I wish to start with an extremely important one—it is a disgrace that the adoption Bill is not being brought forward at this time. Such a Bill would have been passed easily by the House and would have commanded widespread support, especially among the millions of people who are step-parents, who have step-parents or who are the siblings of stepchildren.

There was a real possibility of important action being taken to which the previous Secretary of State for Health was very committed, as was the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Bowis), formerly a junior Minister at the Department of Health but now the Under-Secretary of State for Transport. Apparently, the Government have again given way to the reactionary views held by some of their Back Benchers and have decided not to bring forward the proposals.

I shall concentrate on the problems suffered by Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority and north-east London generally. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, who has just resumed his seat, will recall that, a few months ago, in an exchange with me, he at least admitted that my constituents were experiencing special problems. Those problems are getting worse.

The bogus league tables produced by the Government show that seven of the 20 worst performing trusts in the country are in the North Thames health authority area and in Essex. In my health authority are Forest Healthcare NHS trust, the second worst performer in the country, and Redbridge Healthcare NHS trust, the sixth worst performer. Havering Hospitals NHS trust and others nearby are also in the bottom 20.

For many years, there has been a serious loss of hospital beds in central London, which has had knock-on consequences out into north-east London and Essex. My health authority is discussing with five local trusts a scheme to manage the crisis in accident and emergency care expected this winter.

We have a health authority with a £2.9 million deficit. We have Redbridge Healthcare NHS trust, with a predicted deficit of between £500,000 and £1 million. We

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

have Forest Healthcare NHS trust, with an on-going £8 million deficit and a programme of change to try to manage that. The deficit is partly due to the double running costs of the large Claybury mental hospital, whose recent closure had been planned for 20 years.

In the same health authority we have the large Goodmayes mental hospital, which is due to close by 1999. We are told that it will be reprovisioned by the private finance initiative. Do not hold your breath. We expect that to have serious costs. I do not know what their impact will be, but I guess that they will place an already stressed budget in extreme difficulty.

Local newspapers regularly report problems in accident and emergency departments. We read that the need to provide beds for A and E causes elective operations to be cancelled. In August—a relatively light time—at the Redbridge Healthcare NHS trust, King George hospital cancelled 25 elective operations a week.

The position is very bad, but the adjoining Barking and Havering health authority is to close the A and E department at Oldchurch hospital and concentrate all services at Harold Wood. The nearest hospital for people who live in Barking and Dagenham is not Harold Wood but King George in Redbridge, on the A12. It is estimated that, every year, another 20,000 people will attend the A and E at Redbridge—a hospital built for 50,000, which is already coping with 70,000. My constituents' operations for elective work will be cancelled to make space to allow for the additional pressure on that hospital from the accident and emergency department.

We are in crisis already, and the Government are not providing the necessary resources. I have a message for this Government and the next Government. The problems in the North Thames regional health authority area and in north-east London are acute, and my constituents already cannot cope. We have hard-working, dedicated nurses and midwives in our hospitals. It is reported that 12 nurses—disastrously, a third of the nurses in the department—left the A and E department in King George hospital in the past few weeks because they felt that management was not preparing adequately to meet the expected problems. The Government should be prepared to admit that there are special problems. North Thames health authority and Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority need resources to solve the imminent crisis in accident and emergency services and to prevent the cancellation of operations that will otherwise be necessary well into next year.

I do not have time to say more. Those problems must be dealt with now, or we will face unmitigated disaster in the next few months.

1.59 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Peckham): It is difficult to do justice to the extremely thoughtful contributions of hon. Members on both sides of the House to this wide-ranging debate. We have talked about the state of society, guns, drugs, adoption, child abuse, general practitioners and hospitals.

Mr. Burden: Does my hon. Friend agree that the debate should perhaps have covered accountability of hospital boards? Is she aware of the apology recently made by Mrs. Pat Marsh, the chair of the Birmingham Children's Hospital NHS trust, for her remarks at the Conservative party conference? She cast an outrageous slur on Labour party policy. The script of the video shown at the Conservative party conference was no doubt approved by the right hon. Member for Peterborough (Dr. Mawhinney), so he, as well as Mrs. Marsh, should apologise to the people and patients of Birmingham.

Ms Harman: I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

In his response to the Queen's Speech on Wednesday, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said that the Government must be judged on their record. It has clearly emerged from today's debate that the Government's record on social security is a record of failure. The best welfare is work, and the Government have failed on welfare because they have failed on work. None of the Bills proposed in the Queen's Speech will set that right.

The Government have failed to achieve even the social security objectives that they set themselves. They said that they would reduce dependence on benefit, but the number of people on means-tested benefit has doubled. They said that they would cut social security spending, but the social security budget has risen. They have failed people who are without work, their families and their communities and they have failed the taxpayer, who must pick up the bill.

The Government have failed because they refuse to tackle the causes of the problem. They blame the rising social security bill on the people who claim benefits. Their approach is founded on the view that the unemployed will work only if their benefits are cut enough. The result is a social security system that becomes more and more expensive, and more and more brutal and degrading for those who depend on it.

The poverty that drives up the social security bill is a direct consequence of the Government's policy of high unemployment and low wages. They ignore the plight of the people at the bottom: the marginalised and excluded in a divided Britain and a fractured society.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Ms Harman: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman, although it is hard to understand how he can disagree with the notion that we have a divided Britain and a fractured society.

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Lady is wrong to say that the current rise in the social security budget is due to rising unemployment. We, almost alone in Europe, have falling unemployment. The biggest and most rapid rise in the social security budget relates to the state earnings-related pension scheme. The hon. Lady opposes our measures to cap the growth of SERPS. The biggest unexpected growth in the budget comes from the increasing numbers of elderly people who are living longer. That is not the price of failure; it is the price of success. The next biggest source of growth comes from the increasing availability and generosity of benefits to disabled people. Does the hon. Lady count that as a failure or as a success?

Ms Harman: I shall deal with the points made by the Secretary of State in an intervention only one and a half minutes into my speech.

It is no good the Secretary of State quoting unemployment figures. His budget and his benefit bill cover many people who are of working age but who are not working. They, too, must be taken into account. I shall deal with that matter later.

The Government said that unemployment was a price worth paying, but look at who is paying the price. The young man who has left college; despite his hard work at school and college, cannot find a job and feels that he has been thrown on the scrapheap before he has even begun. Look at who is paying the price—the man who lost his job two years ago and still cannot find another, despite his skills, because no one wants those skills, and the woman bringing up her children on her own, who wants to work but cannot. The price is being paid by their communities, which are shattered by poverty and unemployment.

Labour believes that work is the best form of welfare for people of working age. Work restores dignity to individuals and helps to rebuild communities. But when unemployed people get work, too often it is low-paid work which must be topped up by benefits, or it is insecure. People get a job one day and lose it the next. High unemployment, a low-wage economy, an insecure labour market—that is the Tories' record and there is nothing in the Queen's Speech to deal with those problems.

Matters do not have to be like that. We will tackle the problems to get people off benefit and into work because that is the only way fairly and justly to reduce the social security bill. Our priorities are clear. On unemployment among young people, for example, we will end the situation where young people see their father and mother out of work and are themselves consigned to a life on benefit, the second generation unemployed—not wealth cascading down the generations, as the Government promised, but despair and poverty.

We will impose a windfall levy on the unfair and excessive profits of the privatised utilities to pay for a new deal for those under-25s who are excluded and left out. We will help the long-term unemployed back into work with a tax break for employers who take on those who have been unemployed for more than two years.

We will do more. There are 1.5 million women bringing up children on their own. Under the Conservatives, lone mothers have the lowest employment rate and highest benefit dependency rate in Europe. British single mothers are less likely to be working to support themselves and their children and are more likely to be dependent on benefit than single mothers in any other country in Europe. The position is getting worse. More women who are married or cohabiting and who have children are going out to work, but the number of lone mothers at work has fallen. Lone mothers are the ones who most want and most need work. Surveys show that 90 per cent. would work if they could. They do not want to depend on benefit, but they are trapped.

I recently spoke to a woman called Beth who lives in Manchester. She is bringing up three children on her own. She had a job, but had to give it up. With the cost of her child minder and the loss of her benefit, she was worse off in work and now she is back on benefit. She and her kids are living—existing—on £120 a week. She does not want a hand-out; she wants a hand up. She wants to work, but she cannot do it on her own. She needs Government support to overcome the barriers that are shutting single mothers out of the world of work and trapping them on benefits: the problems of matching work with school hours and making work pay.

The Government's failure to act hits everyone. Mothers who cannot work are stuck on dependency and the taxpayer picks up the bill, to the tune of £10 billion a year. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that those women are bringing up children who see nothing of the world of work and expect that their fate will be the same as their mother's—to depend on benefit. I see that clearly among my constituents in Peckham. They want to work not just for themselves, but because they do not want to bring up their children to expect benefit.

Mothers need basic advice and information, the chance to train and gain new skills, and child care. That is the purpose of our programme for single mothers. We will give advice and information. We will make sure that single mothers have their own adviser who will look at the difficulties of their circumstances and will help them to find the jobs, training and after-school care that they need.

We will create more nursery places by scrapping the costly and bureaucratic nursery voucher scheme and we are examining how to use some of the deadweight of the £10 billion spent on income support and other benefits for lone mothers, by transferring some of that money to support a network of after-school clubs. Such clubs would be good for mothers, good for communities and good for children. It is good for children to be involved in what the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Bottomley) referred to in his thoughtful speech as worthwhile activities. In after-school clubs, children can enjoy art, sport, homework, chess and many other activities. The Tories just say to lone parents, "Here's your weekly giro. Come back when your youngest child is 16." That is not good enough.

After four years of denigrating and sneering at lone mothers—remember the Secretary of State's little list not so long ago of women who get pregnant to jump the housing queue—I suppose that we should be grateful that at least he has come up with a pilot project, "Parent Plus". We welcome the U-turn in his language, but his policy is still to attack single mothers. We fully expect that he will cut or freeze the value of benefits for lone mothers in the social security uprating, without giving any help to get them into work. It is not so much a carrot and stick approach as a fig leaf and stick. Some 1.5 million single mothers will have their benefit cut, with possibly—only possibly—10,000 receiving advice.

Government failure has meant that dependency has stretched from the cradle to the grave. The Secretary of State mentioned people in retirement who were dependent on benefit. That is due in large part to the Government's failure to ensure a safe and secure second-tier pension in which people can invest during their working life to ensure that they do not retire on to means-tested benefit. They have cut the value of the basic state pension, they have cut the state earnings-related pension scheme twice, they have put VAT on gas and electricity and people have had to sell their houses to pay for long-term care. The Government have betrayed pensioners.

We have plans for action to support people moving from benefit to work and to ensure that they can save for their retirement so that they do not retire on to

[Ms Harman]

means-tested benefit. We are proposing action that people want, which will also reduce the social security budget and its burden on taxpayers.

The Secretary of State is nothing if not brazen. First, the Government create the conditions for housing benefit fraud on an unprecedented scale, then the Secretary of State blames local authorities for causing that benefit fraud, even though 90 per cent. of them have exceeded the targets on fraud that he set them. Having caused the problem and blamed someone else, he expects credit from the House for his actions to bring a partial halt to the fraud that he has created. I very much fear that, were it not for my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and the work of his Social Security Select Committee, we would not have even that partial measure. I hope that the Secretary of State will take up my hon. Friend's sensible and practical proposals, but the Government's proposals, as they appear at the moment through briefings in the papers, appear not to tackle the heart of the problem that they have created. We have yet to see the Bill, but I fear that it will need to be strengthened massively.

The Government have borne down on claimant fraud, but they have ignored landlord fraud and have failed to tackle the major problem of organised fraud. We propose that the Government should give local authorities greater powers to fight organised landlord fraud. The Social Security Select Committee found evidence of widespread abuse of the housing benefit system, amounting to one fifth of all direct payments of housing benefit to private landlords.

Local authorities should have the power to refuse direct payments to private landlords in all but the most exceptional circumstances to stop phantom tenancies. Councils should be required to provide details of payments to landlords direct to the Inland Revenue to make sure that they pay their income tax.

Today's debate and the limited proposals that will be set out in the Bill on fraud show that the Government have nothing to offer on social security. All their promises have been broken. The Government hand out benefits and then blame the recipients. They leave people trapped in poverty, dependence and hopelessness. Governments and communities have to bear the cost of Government economic failure. We would offer a partnership between the individual and Government to tackle unemployment, low incomes and the disintegration of communities.

The British people have heard all the Government's promises before. Indeed, they have heard them over and over again and they have seen them broken. They are saying, "Enough is enough." It is time for the Secretary of State and his Ministers to make way for Labour so that we can bring hope and opportunity to the young unemployed, to the long-term unemployed and to the mother who is trying to bring up her children on her own.

2.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Peter Lilley): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith). I had the pleasure to be shadowed by the hon. Gentleman for the past year or so and I came to admire the ability and integrity that he brought to his role as shadow spokesman on social security matters, which he fulfilled with distinction. I did not think that he deserved demotion in the last reshuffle.

That is not to say that the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), whom I warmly welcome as my shadow from now onwards, has not fully earned her promotion. I know that she will bring her immense dedication and commitment to her new role and the expertise that she acquired when she was formerly an Opposition shadow spokesman on matters concerning the Department, and during her previous career at the National Council for Civil Liberties. I rather suspect that because of that earlier background she and I may find that occasionally our approach to various matters, including some that will be set out in the Bill referred to in the Queen's Speech—I attach great importance to the forthcoming legislation—with have rather more in common than that of rather more gung-ho Back-Bench Members on both sides of the House.

I welcome the hon. Lady in the particular hope that she will bring the same warm and personal endorsement to our policies on social security as she brought to those on schools. I suspect, however, that if she ever chooses a private pension for herself she will probably still want to force the rest of us into Labour's state scheme.

As the hon. Lady said, this has been a valuable debate. It began with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, who asked me to convey to the House his apologies for his absence, comprehensively demolishing Opposition arguments about the health service. He set out a positive programme that will be contained in the legislation on primary care following the Queen's Speech.

We had an interesting speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Sir R. Boyson), who made a powerful statement on education, on which no one is better placed to speak than he. There was another powerful speech from the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), lucid and original as always. He was right in his emphasis on the importance of education and the damage that is done to people by illiteracy. More and more of our studies show that that is a principal reason for long-term unemployment and it is something that we are determined to tackle.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for the Bills that will stem from the Queen's Speech. I can assure him that we shall have the power to tackle more effectively landlord fraud. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the standard acknowledgement letter and its relevance to child benefit. It is no longer of the same importance as he supposes because asylum seekers are not entitled to child benefit. I know that that is opposed by the Opposition, who are keen to take away child benefit from 16-year-olds but want to restore it to asylum seekers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chislehurst (Sir R. Sims) welcomed the publication of Bills in draft. He made a valuable speech which was enhanced by his knowledge of the problem of child abuse, having been involved in a recent important report on the subject.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead made one of the most lucid and knowledgeable speeches in the whole debate. *[Interruption.]* I should have said my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant). The two hon. Members have a great deal in common, and I am sure that there will be great Conservative victories in

both constituencies in the next election. It was a speech informed by my hon. Friend's great knowledge of fundholding practices and it was very valuable.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Miss Hoey) made some brave remarks on guns. She has shown courage on many issues. She raised the issue of asylum seekers, particularly in her constituency, where, as she knows, I have some connections and get some first-hand arm twisting on a Sunday. I shall draw her speech to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, who is directly responsible for personal social services and local authority involvement in that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Bottomley) made another genuinely original and practical speech about his approach to changing social attitudes without coercion.

There were other original contributions to the debate. The hon. Member for Antrim, South (Mr. Forsythe) mentioned the danger of bad neighbours and spoke about the need for legislation in that area. I particularly welcome his warm support, which I echo, for the staff of the social security office in the Falls road and his condemnation of those who threaten them when carrying out their duty to provide benefit for those in need.

The hon. Member for Peckham will already have recognised the supreme importance of the subject that she is now shadowing. It is important not just in this country but worldwide. Reform of social security is the cause of crisis in the coalition in Germany. It has been the cause of riots and demonstrations and strikes in France. It is important because it is so large. It has grown—as I never tire of pointing out to the House—to the point where it costs every working person in this country £15 every working day. That is why we have set out a programme of reform. As well as those contained in the Gracious Speech, the additional Bills will bring to a total of 12 the Bills that we have introduced in the course of the reform programme that I initiated. I believe that it is essential for any Government or anyone pretending to be capable of governing this country to be willing to undertake the very difficult task of reforming the welfare system and not to pretend that it can all be done by mirrors or by spending yet more money.

As we have been going about the process of reform, we have become increasingly aware of two limitations on our legal powers. First, there are legal restrictions on our power to cross check data that we hold about social security claimants with data that are available to the Inland Revenue or Customs and Excise. We have developed powerful computer programmes to cross match data within the Department. It is sensible now to try to apply those techniques to cross checking data between Departments. The public already give us this information, so we are not talking about a further intrusion or burdens on them. It is only right that we should be able to cross check and establish, where there is a suspicion, whether people are working at the same time as claiming benefit.

The second area where our powers are limited is in the handling of housing benefit and council tax benefit. It is, after all, the responsibility of local authorities to handle those benefits. Therefore, they are responsible for stopping fraud. It is the most blinding complacency for the hon. Member for Peckham to suggest that the record of local authorities has been satisfactory and that the only shortfalls are those of central Government, which does not have direct responsibility. The fact is that, until I introduced rewards and punishments for local authorities, the record was even more deplorable. We have achieved a doubling in a single year and a further increase since then. Surely the hon. Lady must accept that there are still local authorities that are not putting as much effort or bringing as much expertise to bear as is needed to prevent housing benefit fraud. That is why the Bill will give us powers to establish an inspectorate and to require local authorities to obey its recommendations. The inspectorate will also be able to inspect the performance of different parts of the Benefits Agency and to offer its advice and expertise to enhance our efforts.

We want to be positive throughout the public sector, but it is important to begin where the need is greatest, as the hon. Member for Peckham frankly admitted. However, most of the Labour party's proposals on the subject are absolute nonsense, which is why she joined her predecessor in signally failing to try to justify or flesh out any of the figures previously published by Labour in its proposal to reduce spending by £1 billion in order to spend that money elsewhere.

The second Bill in our portfolio is on compensation recovery. A key principle in which we believe is the encouragement of responsibility. When employers or others are responsible for accidents at work, the company or its insurers, not the taxpayer, should foot the bill, and we are introducing legislation to ensure that that happens. The victims will be allowed to keep in full the compensation that they receive for pain and suffering and taxpayers will save about £40 million. The overall effect will be to encourage safety at work by giving employers more responsibility, to give a fairer deal to victims and to ease the burden on taxpayers.

In the coming year we intend to build on our programme to get people from welfare into work. I spelt out recently at a seaside resort some imaginative new measures to bring that about. For the first time, we will involve the private sector in the provision of services to help lone parents in particular, and later other unemployed people, back into work. Private firms will compete with Government teams from both the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service. They will be paid by results, so that they will make a profit only if they succeed in helping people back into work and keeping them in work, thereby saving taxpayers' money; it is a win-win-win situation. The proposal is positive, and I am astonished that the Opposition have chosen to rubbish it outside the House and to ignore it within.

The Opposition are right to recognise that the most intractable problem is getting lone parents back to work. That is why we have initiated the parent plus programme. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peckham on having today relaunched the out-of-school-hours child care programme that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has been implementing with great success. The programme has already created about 72,000 extra out-of-school-hours places for an investment of about £48 million and we intend to spend nearly £20 million more to boost it further. I see no difference between the hon. Lady's proposal and what we are already doing.

In his speech, the Leader of the Opposition said that the fracturing of our society was in large measure due to the Government's decision to remove entitlement to income support from 16 and 17-year-olds and to replace

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

it with a guaranteed training place. I invite the hon. Lady to tell us whether the Labour party would reinstate income support for 16 and 17-year-olds.

Ms Harman: We were absolutely right to oppose the Government who, in their attempt to find cuts without getting people into work, ripped away the benefit to punish those who were most vulnerable, including young people. We have said that we will make sure, using the windfall levy from the privatised utilities, that all those under 25 will have either a job or training or a combination of the two or will be in full-time education. They will not simply be left without jobs, training or benefit, which is what the Secretary of State has done.

Mr. Lilley: I thought that I would have got an answer from the hon. Lady, but I did not. I think the sentiment was that we were wrong to remove the benefit but that Labour will not replace it.

My second question is whether the Opposition propose to remove income support from those aged 18 to 25, replacing it with the sort of provision that we have made for 16 to 17-year-olds. I understand that to be the case, although the provision—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed upon Monday next.

HONG KONG ECONOMIC AND TRADE OFFICE BILL

Ordered,

That—

(1) in respect of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time; and

(2) if the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill is committed to a Committee of the whole House, further proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed; and that as soon as the proceedings on any Resolution come to by the House on Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill [Money] have been concluded, this House will immediately resolve itself into a Committee on the Bill.—*[Mr. Conway.]*

Middle East (Security)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Conway.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): It is an enormous privilege and pleasure to have the opportunity to initiate a debate on the important subject of security in the middle east. I am particularly pleased that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley), is in his place to reply to the debate. I hope that, as he did on 24 July when I initiated a similar debate, he will be able to answer my points and make plain the Government's position because Britain has a major role to play in helping to bring about a lasting and comprehensive peace throughout the middle east.

As I have said, I initiated a debate on this subject on 24 July. Many jobs and many lives have been put at risk and many lives have been lost as a result of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. Everything that the United Kingdom, together with our European partners, friends in the Gulf and the United States can do to bring about peace is to be welcomed.

On 24 July I expressed the hope, which is no doubt the hope of thousands if not millions of people throughout the world and especially in the Gulf, that in the coming months, in the aftermath of the Israeli elections, we would see some real progress. I was optimistic and at that time was prepared to take a kindly view of Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Netanyahu's stand and the way in which he was pressing ahead in trying to find a peaceful solution to the problems.

I regret to say that some three months on there has not been the sort of progress that many of us would have liked. One is beginning to come to the view that the Israeli Government are not prepared to act. I hope that that is not the case, but if there is a shred of truth in that suggestion I hope that Mr. Arafat, who has been statesmanlike over the past few years in trying to further peace, will do his best, as he has done in recent months, to ensure that the Palestinian people do not revolt against any aggression.

I wish that there had been progress in the past two or three months and I regret the fact that there are presidential elections in the United States. Our United States allies played a significant role in Madrid and Oslo in bringing about what I thought was a firm basis to move forward to peace. I have no doubt, and I know that this view is held by many, that the only way forward is along the lines of United Nations Security Council resolution 242. Land for peace is the way forward. I hope that those of us from outside the Gulf, playing an important and supportive role, as the United States and United Kingdom Governments are doing, will be able to support the people at the sharp end to ensure that the Palestinian people have the right to self-determination while at the same time addressing the equally important issue of the security of the state of Israel. Those of us who take an interest in this subject recognise that Israeli security is especially important.

The middle east peace process is a linchpin of our regional security policy, which is in search of a comprehensive regional peace settlement. Despite the

difficulties of the post-Israeli election period, there is a way forward. I do not subscribe to the view that Oslo and all that that entailed is in tatters.

The United Kingdom, perhaps more so than France, has an important, fair and non-partisan role to play in bringing the two sides together. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be able to assure me that, as soon as the United States presidential elections are over, the UK Government will bring further diplomatic pressure to bear on our American allies because they have enormous influence with the Israeli Government, of whichever political hue.

Once through those elections, the United States has a major role to play in ensuring that we press ahead on land for peace and, in particular, that Mr. Netanyahu and his Government are left in no doubt by their allies overseas, including the UK, that they need to do more in real terms to bring about peace. In particular, Mr. Netanyahu will have to accept that the only way forward is to stick to the agreements that the Israeli Government were part of and signed up to not so long ago.

President Chirac's recent visit to Israel and the occupied territories illustrated the fair and sensible path forward that the UK Government have charted in recent times. President Chirac was a little too partisan in his approach, although no doubt it went down especially well in France. The middle east is volatile and we will not achieve that comprehensive peace settlement unless the allies of Israel and of the Arab people support them in a way that is not too partisan.

Iran and Iraq still pose a threat to the region's security and I hope that Her Majesty's Government will continue to engage in security measures, particularly the monitoring of what is going on in and around those countries. Sometimes, those countries posture in a way that is of great concern to some smaller Gulf nations.

I am especially pleased that my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary will shortly visit Israel, the occupied territories, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. I gather that he is to meet Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Levy, and Mr. Arafat in Gaza. I am pleased that my right hon. and learned Friend will visit not just Yemen, but the United Arab Emirates, one of our oldest allies in the region, which is approaching its silver jubilee. As he said recently, the United Arab Emirates is an

"important country with the potential to play a significant role in the region's economic and political development".

I pay tribute to him and to my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade for the way in which the Foreign Office and the people responsible for trade are now working much more closely together in the interests of trade between the UK and those Gulf countries.

I pay particular tribute to Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan An-Nahyan, the United Arab Emirates President, who has played such a supportive role in relation to the Palestinians. I am pleased that the UK Government continue to give aid to the Palestinians in the interim before a peace settlement. Nor would it be proper to fail to record our appreciation of His Highness Sheikh Maktoum Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum and of the United Arab Emirates Minister of Defence, His Highness General Sheikh Muhammad Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum. There is a way forward for Israel and the Palestinians, and I hope that those peoples will one day be able to live together in the same peaceful, prosperous federation as we see in the United Arab Emirates.

It is not long since the Gulf war. Recently, there were highly successful elections in Kuwait. I pay tribute to the people there who have gone about their business so responsibly and are turning the corner. However, I regret—following my remarks on 24 July—that there has been insufficient progress in respect of Kuwaitis missing after the Gulf war. I pay particular tribute to Sheik Salem. I am pleased that, following the recent elections, he has been appointed Kuwait's Defence Minister.

It is pleasing that Syria is playing a more supportive role in a peace settlement throughout the region. Stability is possible but, for the Israelis and Palestinians, it must be on the basis of resolution 242 and land for peace.

I want to give my right hon. Friend the Minister a little more time than he might have expected to address the issues that I have raised and to state the Government's position on the hiatus that has followed the Israeli elections. However, I wish to raise one further matter that is important to both the Gulf and the United Kingdom, in ensuring peace and stability in the middle east.

I am particularly concerned about the activities of certain individuals from a number of different countries who live and work in and around London and the UK. They enjoy free and open access to our country but are involved directly or indirectly in supporting terrorist activities in the Gulf. One thinks particularly of the Algerians, Saudis, Bahrainis and Egyptians. I pay tribute to the work of President Mubarak and the Egyptian Government in bringing about a peace settlement.

The Saudis have understandably been upset by the activities of Dr. al-Masari. The Bahrainis have seen people in London, assisted by the Iranians, taking action to destabilise the Government and people of Bahrain. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will continue to support the security services in monitoring the activities of those individuals, who must be dealt with and punished severely if they break the laws of the United Kingdom. Regardless of the carefully chosen comments of our friends in the Arab world, we should not forget the importance of that issue to them.

I regret that more progress has not been made over the past three months but Britain has an important role. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary during his visit, will lay down another set of markers, to bring further pressure to bear in ensuring that the Israeli Government and Mr. Arafat get back to the negotiating table as soon as possible.

2.43 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Mr. Banks) for his timely Adjournment debate, and I agree with almost every word that he said. My hon. Friend's speech touched on many important issues. Last month's violence in Gaza and on the west bank left at least 75 people dead and created widespread doubt as to whether the middle east peace process has any future.

Only days before, on the other side of the peninsula, it was again necessary for the United States of America to launch cruise missiles against Saddam Hussein, to make him comply with Iraq's international obligations. Stability and security are in the vital interests of all the countries of the middle east. They are also in Britain's national

[Mr. Jeremy Hanley]

interests in the region, not only because Britain has a long-standing friendship with those countries but because of our commercial interests and the close links between our peoples. I should like to use this opportunity to explain what the Government are doing to enhance prospects for future security.

I shall turn first—as my hon. Friend the Member for Southport did—to the situation in Gaza, the west bank and Israel. King Hussein has said that we have looked into an abyss. As he pointed out, the recent disturbances were a grave setback, not only for Israeli-Palestinian relations but for the entire region. Television pictures of young Palestinians fighting Israeli soldiers were especially distressing because those pictures could have been filmed nine years ago. Strains are evident even in the relationship between Israel and her Arab neighbours, with whom it has made such great progress over the past three years.

The decision to open a tunnel entrance in a sensitive quarter of Jerusalem triggered the anger of Palestinians, whose dissatisfaction with their situation has been building up since the spring. Much of the interim agreement, which was signed in September 1995, remains unimplemented. The Israeli closure policy has driven Palestinian unemployment above 50 per cent., and substantive final status talks have not started. Many people feel that the Israeli Government have accelerated Jewish settlement building on the west bank and in east Jerusalem to pre-empt the final status talks. While those sources of underlying discontent still exist, it is important that both sides avoid acts that might be provocative.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary said, we are not in the business of apportioning blame. Both sides have a mutual interest in preventing a return to the use of force. Violence is an obstacle to peace, and it can only delay a final settlement. Before September, many people regarded advances in the peace process as an inevitable fact of life. Sadly, since then, the vulnerability of the process has become all too clear.

The main responsibility for moving the process forward lies with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Arafat. The parties now need to rebuild confidence in the peace process among the Palestinian and Israeli people, many of whom need to be reassured that peaceful co-existence can be made to work. They must generate a sense of optimism that, in the end, the process will lead to a permanent settlement. We believe that the best way to achieve that is to implement promptly and in full the agreements that have already been reached.

Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Arafat have both said that they intend to implement the Oslo accords in full. I welcome their statements, which should be translated into action as soon as possible.

Reaching an agreement on removing Israeli troops from the city of Hebron is an essential next step. By itself, however, that will not be sufficient to restore the forward momentum of the peace process. The Israelis should take firm action towards implementing other outstanding elements of the Oslo accords, in particular redeploying their troops from zones B and C in the west bank. For their part, the Palestinians should renew their efforts against terrorism and violence, which Israelis legitimately view as a threat to their security. I welcome President Arafat's statement that Palestinian police are now under a "permanent order" not to open fire.

Peace helps to build security. Palestinian frustration with the lack of clear progress towards a just, negotiated peace settlement has added to a climate in which people have turned to terrorism and rioting. Israel's need for security makes it imperative that the talks make progress. Without progress, there will not be the economic prosperity and inward investment that could underpin the final settlement.

Britain's deep-rooted friendship with both the Israelis and the Palestinians leaves us well placed to encourage dialogue between them. Over the past month, the Government have had intensive high-level contacts with all the region's major players. I was present when the Prime Minister met the Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, on 24 September. On 11 October, the Prime Minister met King Hussein of Jordan. He has also been in direct contact with President Arafat, President Mubarak and President Clinton.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Southport rightly said, the Foreign Secretary will visit Israel and the occupied territories next week, and he plans to meet Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Arafat and the Israeli Foreign Minister, David Levy. The visit will be an opportunity to build on the substantive dialogue that Britain is fortunate to have with both sides.

Through the European Union, too, we are examining ways in which we can play a more positive and active role in advancing the peace process. Europe has a substantial economic, historical and security interest in the region. The EU is already the largest aid donor to the Palestinians and has pledged 500 million ecu over five years. Britain contributes a sixth of that, and altogether the UK's commitment is some £88 million. The European Union is in the process of ratifying association agreements for Israel and the occupied territories. Those will deregulate trade in goods and should promote higher growth.

I am aware that the influence of the international community could be dissipated if we do not all pull in the same direction. Britain wishes to retain and reinforce the vital mediating role of the United States in the current talks. The European Union's renewed determination to support the peace process will complement American mediation, in line with the wishes of the Arabs and the Israelis.

A central part of our efforts to make the area secure is improving economic well-being. A prosperous society is one of the most effective defences against extremism and intolerance. The Israeli policy of closing off the west bank and Gaza for security reasons has raised prices and lowered standards of living throughout the occupied territories. Many Palestinians feel that they are suffering a collective economic punishment for the acts of a violent minority. Britain has asked Israel to allow Palestinians maximum freedom of work and movement commensurate, of course, with reasonable security precautions.

I would also like to see faster progress on opening the airport that was planned for Gaza and on the free passage of people and goods between the west bank and Gaza, as stipulated in the interim agreement.

Let me now focus on the Syrian track. Talks between Israel and Syria were suspended earlier this year; I am pleased that both sides now seem to want to bridge the

gap between them. I greatly hope that they will resume negotiations at the earliest opportunity, on the basis of a renewed commitment to the principle of land for peace, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Southport also referred. A comprehensive settlement in the middle east depends on success in the Israeli-Syrian relationship. Syria has taken constructive steps towards closer economic links with the European Union. Syrian isolation is in no one's interest, and I hope to see international agreements integrate Syria into a stable relationship with its neighbours.

Only last week, I paid successful visits to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar in support of key British interests. I am delighted to say that, after his visit to Israel and Gaza, my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary will be going to the United Arab Emirates and Yemen at the beginning of November, and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will be visiting Oman and Qatar this weekend. The frequency of such visits to the region is a clear indication of the importance we attach to the close relationship with our friends in the Gulf.

My visit gave me an excellent opportunity to exchange views on, among other things, a broad range of security issues—a subject dear to my hon. Friend's heart. During my talks, I was particularly struck by the fact that our policies on security matters are remarkably close to those of our allies in the Gulf.

I should like to mention now those who threaten our security interests in the Gulf—first, Saddam Hussein. The UN special commission's revelations about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programmes have been alarming. Iraq developed enough biological and chemical weapons to kill the world's population several times over. Saddam's recent obstruction of UNSCOM shows that he still harbours ambitions to use weapons of mass destruction to dominate the region. The UNSCOM chairman, Rolf Ekeus, whom we strongly support, has warned that he does not have a full picture of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Iraq has made a nonsense of past so-called

"full, final and complete declarations".

The Security Council has rightly insisted that Iraq co-operate fully with UNSCOM.

Saddam Hussein remains a threat to the Iraqi people, as was demonstrated by his recent attack on Irbil—a clear flouting of UN Security Council resolution 688, which demanded that Iraq end such repression. The US action in response, which we strongly supported, sent an unequivocal message to Saddam Hussein that such behaviour will not be tolerated. Fighting between the two Kurdish factions, the PUK and the KDP, which gave Saddam a pretext for his attack on Irbil, has caused much suffering in the area. We have urged the parties to stop fighting and to settle their differences through dialogue. With the Americans, a British official met the leaders of both sides earlier this week, and I am pleased to tell the House that they have agreed to a ceasefire. We shall pursue political reconciliation between them, with further meetings in the coming week.

While Saddam Hussein refuses to comply with Iraq's international obligations it would be foolhardy to relax sanctions; that would leave him free to spend Iraq's resources again on making war. His priority would certainly not be the Iraqi people. In September, the Security Council agreed that current conditions did not permit a change to the sanctions regime. Saddam has shown callous indifference to the suffering caused by his failure to fulfil the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. He spends money on weapons, not food; on palaces and statues of himself, not medicine.

The international community has tried to help the Iraqi people through Security Council resolution 986, the "oil for food" scheme, but Saddam has played a cruel game. He rejected that resolution for a year. His attack on Irbil further delayed implementation. Now, I regret to tell the House, the United Nations has said that the Iraqis have again obstructed us by going back on agreements already reached with the UN. We hope very much that Saddam will reconsider and allow the resolution to be implemented soon.

As I said to the House in July in response to my hon. Friend's debate, Saddam's indifference to human suffering is not confined to his own people. During my recent visit to Kuwait, I heard many harrowing tales of the suffering of families affected by Saddam's refusal to account for the Kuwaitis and other nationals missing since the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Iraq's failure to give a full account of the whereabouts of those families' loved ones is unacceptable and in clear defiance of the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Despite its claims, Iraq has so far failed to facilitate the work of the tripartite commission set up under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross to bring an end to this uncertainty. In clear defiance of the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, the Iraqis still refuse to give a clear account of their action.

Our ambassador to Kuwait took a robust view at the commission meeting in Geneva and called on the Iraqis to stop placing obstacles in the way of the commission's work. If they list missing Iraqi soldiers, those soldiers are not on a parity with those who were snatched from their homes during the occupation. I call on the Iraqis to respect that process, and I pay tribute to the Emir, to the Crown Prince and especially to Sheikh Salem—who was until recently Minister for the missing people—for their commitment to returning these people to their loved ones. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that subject.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the presence in Britain of many dissidents from the middle east. We are of course seriously concerned about people who abuse our hospitality to launch verbal attacks on friendly Governments, but we cannot act against them unless they break our laws. If there is any evidence that individuals are responsible for terrorist acts in the United Kingdom, we do not hesitate to take action against them.

That problem is not confined to Britain; it is truly international. We continue to work with our G7 colleagues and the European Union and in the UN to find solutions. A British initiative for a declaration designed to deny to terrorists and those who plan, finance or incite terrorist acts anywhere in the world the protection offered to refugees, while retaining the important safeguards for those in genuine need, is under consideration at the United Nations.

I began by saying that stability and security in the middle east represented important national interests for Britain. One of our great advantages is our close

[Mr. Jeremy Hanley]

friendships with many countries in the region. The Gulf nations themselves have made a significant contribution to maintaining stability and security in the region. The Gulf Co-operation Council has established, and continues to develop, a common defence force, the Peninsula Shield. GCC has also consistently exercised a stabilising influence through its responsible and measured foreign policies. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to meet the GCC's Secretary General during my visit and to exchange views with him.

I pay tribute to the countries in the Gulf. I pay tribute to the way in which they are investing in the future of their people with the wealth that may not last for ever. The Government remain committed to using these relationships to help build security and stability for the future. I thank my hon. Friend for the opportunity that has been afforded by his debate to make the United Kingdom's commitment to the Gulf, and to peace in the middle east, total and absolute.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 28 October 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

Bus Passenger Journeys

1. **Mr. Hinchliffe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many bus passenger journeys outside London were made in (a) 1994–95 and (b) 1985–86. [561]

The Minister for Railways and Roads (Mr. John Watts): There were 3.25 billion passenger journeys on local bus services outside London in 1994–95. The comparable figure for 1985–86 was just under 4.5 billion.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Do not those figures disguise the serious problems that affect many bus users in rural areas? Will the Minister consider the position in Denby Dale, between Wakefield and Huddersfield? A key service—No. 234—has been withdrawn from Upper Denby, as a result of which local pensioners cannot cash their pensions and cannot get to the doctor. Will he also consider the representations that I have received from Denby Dale parish council about that and about the behaviour of the bus operators, which chase passengers and block competitors' buses? Are not those activities a direct consequence of the Government's policies? What does the Minister intend to do about the problems?

Mr. Watts: If certain socially necessary services cannot be run commercially, county councils or, in metropolitan areas, borough and district councils, have the power to provide those services by competitive tender. We propose to introduce legislation to give parish councils powers to secure local transport.

Schoolchildren (Car Journeys)

2. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what statistics he collates on the numbers of children travelling to school by car in 1995; and what were the figures in 1979. [562]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Sir George Young): On average, 2 million children aged five to 15—26 per cent. of the total—usually travelled to school by car during the period 1993 to 1995. Figures are not available for 1979, but the equivalent figure for 1975-76 was 1.1 million—12 per cent. of the total.

Mr. Hutton: Would it not make more sense in terms of the environment and road safety for the Government to do considerably more to persuade parents, bus operators and local authorities to encourage children to travel to school on public transport? Are we not, yet again, being prevented from making any progress by the Government's dogma on those issues?

Sir George Young: I reject the premise on which that question was constructed. The circular on traffic policy and programme that we sent to local authorities emphasised the importance of measures to reduce over-dependence on the car by children going to school.

We have introduced a number of initiatives to promote safer routes to school. I visited a school in Hampshire where children, parents and teachers were finding safer ways of getting to school than by car. The Government want to work with local authorities, parents and teachers to reduce over-dependence and promote safe alternative routes to school.

Mr. Lidington: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government's recently published document about reducing child pedestrian accidents addresses the problems that have been identified in those exchanges? Will the Department bear in mind the need to promote road safety when it considers bids from local authorities for transport supplementary grant?

Sir George Young: Yes, of course. One of the aims of the safer routes to school campaign, which is being pioneered by many local authorities with Government support, is to make it safer for children to walk to school through the introduction of traffic restraint and traffic calming measures, and the promotion of routes that are well supervised by adults or shopkeepers. Children should be able to walk to school in groups knowing that the risk of being molested is sharply reduced because the route that they are taking is supervised by adults.

Air Traffic Control (London)

3. **Mr. Welsh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much public expenditure has been invested in replacing the London air traffic control centre with the new ATC centre at Swanwick, Southampton. [563]

Sir George Young: The Civil Aviation Authority forecasts a capital spend of approximately £340 million for this project, of which £303 million has so far been spent.

Mr. Welsh: Will the Minister acknowledge that the interests of public safety require more than one air traffic control centre in the United Kingdom? Will he guarantee that the new Scottish centre will be built at Prestwick as a public service for the public good?

Sir George Young: The interests of safety must be paramount and there must be contingency arrangements to cope with any failure of one specific centre. As the hon. Gentleman and the House may know, Sir Malcolm Field, the newly appointed chairman of the CAA, is conducting a review of the two-centre strategy. He hopes to complete that review quickly and is well aware of the strong feelings in Scotland about the importance of Prestwick in any future strategy.

Mr. Wilkinson: Why has the new centre near Southampton proved so late in coming into operation?

Was that delay in any sense a factor in the decision by the Civil Aviation Authority to conduct a review into the proposed new Prestwick centre? Has the Department of Transport drawn any lessons about the benefits or otherwise of the private finance initiative for such projects?

Sir George Young: The delay was due to problems in integrating software sub-systems into the air traffic management system. More than 2 million lines of software code are involved. Of course we must try to introduce, where possible, tried and tested systems in preference to brand new ones. The review on which Sir Malcolm Field has embarked is due more to the need to revisit a strategy that was started some time in the 1990s and it is being carried out in the light of operational changes and technological advances.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Will the Secretary of State confirm that air traffic control and the paramount need for public safety are, like national defence and policing, the prime responsibility of Government to secure? What views has he received from the Ministry of Defence about the Royal Air Force on the privatisation of the centres? Does he accept our argument that the two-centre strategy must proceed and that the new Scottish control centre must go ahead? For once, will he take some notice of the public, who are overwhelmingly opposed to the privatisation of those centres and see it as profoundly ill-judged dogma?

Sir George Young: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to what I think is his first appearance as shadow Secretary of State for Transport. I know that he will bring with him the disciplines that he exerted as shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury in restraining any extravagant proposals by any of his Front-Bench colleagues. I hope that he will find time to welcome the introduction of a more regular service between London and Oxford which has been introduced by the recently privatised train operator.

I see no reason why the air traffic control service should not be adequately provided by the private sector. The air traffic service is already provided by private companies at a number of our airports. Serco provides such services at nine United Kingdom airports. Other countries in Europe have services that are not wholly provided by Government, so there is no reason why this service has to be provided exclusively by the Government. I wonder why the hon. Gentleman spent so much time abolishing clause IV when he resists proposals such as this for more to be done in the private sector. The best argument for putting the service in the private sector is that the industry is capital intensive. It needs access to private sector capital and should not be restrained by the disciplines of the public expenditure survey.

Newbury and Thatcham (Transport Requirements)

4. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects to announce his decision in relation to Government funding for the future transport requirements of Newbury and Thatcham. [564]

Mr. Watts: I expect to announce details of the local transport capital settlement for 1997-98 in December.

Mr. Rendel: Does the Minister agree that the plans that are being presented for traffic rearrangement in Newbury and Thatcham will ensure that the benefits to the environment that will be produced by the bypass, assuming that the plans can be financed, will last not merely for a year or two but will be retained for the long term?

Mr. Watts: It would be wrong of me to pre-empt the decisions that still have to be made about transport policies and programme bids. However, I agree that the completion of the bypass will present an opportunity to return Newbury to its people and to resolve the current traffic management problems by taking through traffic away.

London Taxicard Scheme

5. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what steps he has taken to secure the future of the London taxicard scheme; and what measures he will take to promote the adoption of similar schemes by local authorities elsewhere. [565]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. John Bowis): I recognise the value of the London taxicard scheme and other such schemes. The establishment and management of such schemes are a matter, in London, for the London boroughs and, outside London, for other local authorities.

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—the Department's statutory adviser on disability issues—has produced guidelines for local authorities on the establishment of taxicard schemes. Copies have been distributed to licensing authorities throughout the country.

Mr. Jones: The Minister will be aware of how well received the taxicard scheme is in parts of London, where it is a great asset to disabled people. When is it likely to be extended to other major cities and even to towns in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Bowis: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the successful London scheme, which carries some 60,000 trips a month. Other schemes are starting throughout the country. It is entirely a matter for the local authorities concerned whether they start schemes, but we are trying to encourage that by setting up the guidelines through the DPTAC. I hope that he will find that helpful in persuading perhaps Clwyd county council to consider starting such a scheme because I understand that, as yet, it is not moving in that direction.

Mr. Bendall: Is the Minister aware that the taxicard is being reviewed and that the review body is liable to recommend that more money be spent on policy, not on management? That is causing great concern to voluntary organisations in London and to the 50,000 users of the taxicard scheme. Is he also aware that this suggestion is being made by a Labour party member of my local authority?

Mr. Bowis: I am not aware of the last point, but I am certainly aware of the London Committee on Accessible Transport's review of the accessible transport unit and of the committee's view that the unit could be downsized. It is entirely a matter for the London boroughs what sort

of review they have and what emerges from that review, but I have no reason to suppose at the moment that there is any threat to the service for disabled people in London.

Mr. Tom Clarke: Does the Minister agree that the Government's Disability Discrimination Act 1995 does not outlaw all discrimination on all forms of public transport? Does he accept that, because the Government have reneged on their funding promises, the London taxicard scheme is being presented with difficulties? How do the Government intend to respond to people's expectation from the Government that disabled people will be assured of access to mini-cabs and unregulated taxis? How do the Government intend to deal with people who use wheelchairs and people with guide dogs and hearing dogs? Surely this Minister, coming from London as he does, views this as a splendid opportunity to build best practice as a beacon for the rest of Britain.

Mr. Bowis: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's reference to my experience of London and of its transport needs, including the needs of disabled people in London. I know and recognise their needs and shall seek to further their interests. There are many ways in which that can be done. The taxicard scheme is part of that. The dial-a-ride scheme transports some 1 million people a year. The discrimination Act will not only bring in accessible taxis—as the hon. Gentleman knows, in London, that will be required by 1 January 2000—but is making great progress in terms of accessible buses and trains, and even in terms of access to the underground, so we have progress. I shall seek to ensure that that progress is furthered.

M66

6. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects contracts to be let for the last stage of the M66; and when he expects the section of M66 from Denton to Middleton to be open. [567]

Mr. Watts: Invitation of tenders will be subject to the availability of resources.

Mr. Bennett: The Minister will realise that many of my constituents, who have suffered from the traffic spilling out at the Denton roundabout for many years, will be disappointed that the date for the scheme's completion appears to have slipped from 1998 to possibly 1999. Unless the last contract can be let, much public money will be wasted because the first four contracts have put bridges and flyovers into place, but there is not yet a linking road between them. Surely the Minister will now guarantee that that linking road will be built quickly and that the motorway will open as soon as possible to relieve the problems that my constituents face?

Mr. Watts: There is no doubt about our commitment to completing the project, which is extremely important to Greater Manchester, but I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman today when we shall be in a position to invite tenders for the final contract. It is our intention to take it forward as rapidly as the availability of resources permits.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: When my hon. Friend the Minister eventually lets that contract, will he include a requirement for the contractors to use the new porous asphalt, which is much more skid-proof and quieter—and which we are trying to persuade my hon. Friend to use on the M6 stretch between Lancaster and Carnforth?

Mr. Watts: We always try to use the quietest materials available, commensurate with traffic levels. Typically, porous asphalt is not as hard wearing as conventional dressings. As to the M6 scheme, more than 1,200 properties will be fitted with secondary glazing to mitigate the effects of noise.

National Air Traffic Services

7. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the potential proceeds of privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. [582]

Sir George Young: I have made no estimate of potential proceeds from privatising National Air Traffic Services.

Mr. Miller: It was interesting that the Minister, in an earlier reply, did not respond to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) about the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Air Force. When the right hon. Gentleman considers the proposal's financial benefits, will he carefully examine the practical ways in which civil air traffic control and the Ministry interrelate? It would be ludicrous to create a charging policy that would work in those circumstances. Does the Minister not realise that the majority of people are totally against that crass privatisation?

Sir George Young: A number of representations were in favour of it. The reply that I gave on Friday was on behalf of the whole Government, so of course the Ministry of Defence agrees with the strategy that I have outlined, and its needs will be met under the new strategy of a privatised NATS.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: Is not the most obvious benefit to be derived from privatising National Air Traffic Services that it would provide the best guarantee that moneys would be forthcoming for NATS's huge investment programme?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend has succinctly summarised the best argument for privatisation, which will free management investment decisions from public sector constraints.

Mr. Foulkes: I am sorry that I was not present for Question 3, but I was delayed—not by air traffic control but by the appalling London underground system. Irrespective of the arguments for and against privatisation, will the Secretary of State give an absolute guarantee that the Government will continue to support the two-centre strategy that is vital for the future of those of my constituents who are among the 650 workers at Prestwick? What is the right hon. Gentleman doing with the two private funding initiative bids that he received some months ago?

Sir George Young: The Oceanic bid is proceeding. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not in his place

earlier when I replied to Question 3. I say out of courtesy to the hon. Gentleman, who doubtless for good reasons was not present at 2.38 pm, that Sir Malcolm Field, the newly appointed chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority, is conducting a review of the two-centre strategy. He is aware of the strong feelings in Scotland about Prestwick, and he hopes to complete his review at an early date, so that the uncertainty to which the hon. Gentleman referred can be brought to a speedy end.

Mr. Fabricant: When the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) flies down from Scotland and finds that his aircraft is circling above Heathrow airport, he may not be aware that his plane is unable to land because the UK has only half the density of aircraft in the air as the United States. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one reason for that lack of air traffic density is that the UK does not have the latest computers in air traffic control? Would not privatisation be the best way to provide the funds that would allow greater air traffic density and less in-air delays?

Sir George Young: Density is a slightly different issue from the best form of air traffic control. We are building at Swanwick a modern en route centre that will have the latest technology. My hon. Friend is right in thinking that the ability to access funds without the constraints of public expenditure requirements is the main reason for privatising NATS.

Merchant Shipping

8. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what response he has received to consultation on the draft Merchant Shipping and Maritime Security Bill. [583]

Sir George Young: Fifty-four replies were received to the consultation on the draft Merchant Shipping and Maritime Security Bill.

Mr. Ainger: Is not the United Kingdom coastline the most vulnerable in Europe to oil pollution? Are not urgent measures needed to deal with that? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the intervention measures included in the draft Bill are welcome, but unless they are backed up with the necessary expertise—the expert individuals who can provide advice to the Secretary of State and give him the powers of command and control of operations such as the Sea Empress—they will be useless?

Does the right hon. Gentleman further accept that we need those command and control measures in the national interest, so that we are not dependent on private salvors which, at the end of the day, have only their commercial interests at heart? Is it not about time that experts were put in place to take command and control of operations such as the Sea Empress?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said at the beginning of his question. The Bill was widely welcomed when it was introduced in another place last week. Its measures are aimed at improving safety at sea and minimising marine pollution. I hope that they will consolidate the considerable progress that we have already made.

On the point about intervention, the hon. Gentleman will know that there is a parallel consultation exercise on the powers needed by local and harbour authorities, on which the Government have not yet reached a conclusion.

I will consider the hon. Gentleman's point about expert advice. However, it is my view that I and my Department have access to the best advice available to enable me to discharge the responsibilities that fall on my shoulders.

Ms Glenda Jackson: I welcome the fact that the Government have finally decided to implement the majority of the recommendations in Lord Donaldson's report. However, it is deeply disappointing that they have not used the opportunities provided by the draft Merchant Shipping and Maritime Security Bill to address some of the more fundamental problems—such as the fact that over the past 15 years the British merchant fleet has been reduced to a quarter of its former size; that 50,000 seafaring jobs have been lost; that maritime overseas earnings have been halved; and that there has been an increase in flagging out and the use of cheap, unskilled labour forces. Is it not the case that two thirds of accidents involve vessels sailing under a flag of convenience? We hope that the Government will expand the possibilities under the draft Bill to begin to redress the downturn in the British merchant fleet.

Sir George Young: We have accepted 91 of the 103 recommendations in the Donaldson report and we have already implemented half of those accepted. The maritime Bill, which is now before the other place, will implement even more.

On the broader question, I should be interested to hear exactly what proposals the hon. Lady is making from the Opposition Front Bench and exactly how much they will cost if she intends to put money behind the suggestions that she has just made.

The Government have helped our Merchant Navy. In two successive Finance Bills, we have given the roll-over relief much wanted by the shipping industry. We have given specific help with the training of officers. The industry also has a national insurance regime that is preferential to that enjoyed by many other industries. If the hon. Lady has any concrete proposals, she should put them forward, cost them and tell the House exactly how she proposes to pay for them.

Asthma (Air Pollution)

9. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent research he has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on asthma and air pollution from road transport; and if he will make a statement. [584]

Mr. Bowis: The Government have commissioned and evaluated a range of research related to health and air pollution. The report of the expert advisory Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants, "Asthma and Outdoor Air Pollution", was published in October 1995. Copies are in the Library of the House.

Mr. O'Brien: The Minister must be aware that air pollution exacerbates, and in many instances causes, asthma. Why, therefore, does he continue to pursue policies

that result in one in seven of our children suffering from asthma and 2,000 people dying from asthma each year? In addition, traffic congestion costs business £19 billion a year and our cities and towns are becoming gridlocked. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in pressing for targets on pollution to be set throughout the country so that we can at least measure the problems that are causing so much pain and suffering and do something about them?

Mr. Bowis: We are setting targets to reduce pollution levels, and, in particular, emission levels. I should correct the hon. Gentleman on his first point. The report makes it very clear that there is no evidence that air pollution causes asthma. There is evidence that, to a small extent, asthma may be exacerbated by air pollution, but the causes are unknown and unproven.

The hon. Gentleman made a fair point about what we should be doing. As he knows, we envisage a package of proposals composed of tax proposals and powers for local councils. The package also includes Government proposals on vehicle emission levels, unleaded fuel and cleaner diesel fuel and discouraging car and lorry use by encouraging public transport, cycling and rail freight. Those measures will help. If we can meet emissions targets, the hon. Gentleman will see results in the nation's health and the public's quality of life.

Mr. Harry Greenway: What damage to health, if any—I presume that there is some—comes from diesel vehicles? Is my hon. Friend aware that many people switched to diesel vehicles because we thought that, by doing so, we were reducing air pollution, but that we have now been told that we are not?

Mr. Bowis: While petrol emits gases that affect the ozone level, diesel emits gases—particularly nitrogen oxide, which affects local air—and particulates. That is why it is so important that industry looks for cleaner diesel fuels, that vehicle operators use them and that we implement ever-higher emissions standards for lorries, taxis and buses. Those vehicles are checked frequently, regularly and randomly by the Vehicle Inspectorate.

Mr. Bradley: The Government must accept that the most effective way to reduce air pollution would be to reduce car usage and to invest in high-quality public transport. Therefore, why did the Government not allow Greater Manchester passenger transport executive and others identified in the National Audit Office report to bid for passenger rail services on a revenue-sharing option basis, which would have allowed extra resources to be invested in public transport and not caused taxpayers to be ripped off further by rail privatisations?

Mr. Bowis: One of the measures that I mentioned in answer to the question of the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) was our effort to reduce car use by promoting public transport. The Government have a proud record of investing in public transport in London and in our other major cities. We are also attempting to persuade people to leave their cars at home more often and to use bicycles and their feet. We have strategies to achieve all those measures to promote non-car use, and I hope that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley) will support them—to achieve the ends that he claims to want.

Mr. Forman: In an earlier answer, my hon. Friend conceded that one of the causes of these problems are particulates from diesel engines. Will he assure the House that enforcement measures taken by local authorities and others are sufficiently stringent and based on roadside action? My impression from travelling round London is that that is often not the case, and that air pollution levels probably would not satisfy the standards set by the World Health Organisation.

Mr. Bowis: I note what my hon. Friend is saying and asking. The Government, scientists and technologists are hunting constantly for better methods of preventing diesel pollution—such as by the use of particulate traps, which are being developed. However, there is not yet sufficient evidence that traps are an effective method to achieve our aim.

I take on board my hon. Friend's point about ensuring that local authorities have not only the duty but the power to tackle pollution. We have already given powers to reduce volumes and types of traffic in some areas. We have imposed the duty to designate air-quality management areas in areas where that is appropriate, and we shall soon consult on the provision of new local powers to check vehicle emissions. Another matter to be addressed is vehicle idling.

National Air Traffic Services

10. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received on the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. [585]

Sir George Young: Over the past few weeks, I have received representations about privatisation of National Air Traffic Services from representatives of airlines, general aviation, NATS trade unions and other air traffic control service providers. I have also heard from a number of individuals, who wrote directly or through their Members of Parliament.

Mr. Hanson: Is the Secretary of State aware that, in a consultation held in 1994, 114 of the 188 respondents opposed privatisation? Is it not simply a matter of dogma for the Government to proceed? Will he outline to the House the representations that he has received on safety? There are genuine concerns that safety will be compromised by privatisation.

Sir George Young: There will be no compromise on safety. NATS will continue to be regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority. The main concern expressed by those whom we consulted was that they should be fully involved in the process of working up legislation. We are committed to that. Many of those whom we consulted supported the objective of freeing NATS from public sector financial and management control.

Dorchester-Weymouth Relief Road

11. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects to announce his decision on the Dorchester to Weymouth relief road. [586]

Mr. Watts: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State expects to make an announcement on the Dorchester to Weymouth road by the end of November 1996.

Mr. Bruce: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward by two months the possible date with which we had been threatened, as it were, by the Department in Newcastle. May I say with the utmost respect, however, that the time that it takes for the Department in Newcastle to study paperwork and for inspectors to produce reports is not good enough? My constituents want to know whether they can make a decision and my county council wants to know whether to put the money aside. Can the Minister make the result available sooner?

Mr. Watts: That is unlikely. My hon. Friend should acknowledge that the inspector's report was received only last month in my Department. The target for a decision by the end of November is ambitious, but we shall try to meet it because we recognise the urgency of the matter for my hon. Friend and many of his constituents.

Mr. McAvoy: When the Minister makes a decision on the Dorchester relief road, will he take into account the fact that there is an existing road plan on the books? That is entirely different from new motorways and new roads. He should aim for the completion of the existing road scheme in Dorchester, and those in Denton and Newbury, and he should ensure that dogma against the building of new roads does not interfere with the construction of roads that would give relief to those areas.

Mr. Watts: I am pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman criticise dogma against new road building. I thought that that tended to be a characteristic of his party.

Highways Agency Properties

12. **Mr. Sumberg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received in connection with the management of properties owned by the Highways Agency in the Bury, South constituency; and if he will make a statement. [587]

Mr. Watts: I have received many representations from my hon. Friend on behalf of his constituents.

Mr. Sumberg: Although my constituents were delighted when my hon. Friend announced the cancellation of the M62 relief road, they are less than delighted by the situation that they now face. The management of the houses by my hon. Friend's agents is appalling. Many houses are still boarded up; there is a question mark over the safety of the gas boilers in some of the houses; worse, my constituents cannot sell their homes at anything like market value. It is totally unsatisfactory to keep on denying them compensation for the loss, in many cases, of their life savings. We must be able to deal with the matter in a better way. Will my hon. Friend re-examine it?

Mr. Watts: I think that my hon. Friend is aware of the reasons why it is not possible to use discretionary purchase in respect of a scheme that has been abandoned. However, I accept that conditions for many of his constituents have been unsatisfactory. That is why, earlier in the year, I took steps to speed the rate at which we can dispose of the properties, which are now entirely surplus to requirements. Having introduced sales by auction, we have sold a total of 70 properties—65 by auction and five by private treaty—and a further 42 sales have been agreed and are in the pipeline.

Mr. Lewis: Behind those figures lies the disgrace of the way in which the agency is dealing with the problem. The Minister knows the problems that the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Sumberg) and I have brought to the House on several occasions—some of my constituents are also affected. The devaluing of whole areas of property, caused by the handling of the issue, is disgraceful. It is time that the Minister took a direct hand and took the matter away from the agency. He should start worrying about people for a change.

Mr. Watts: The hon. Gentleman should recognise that the poor condition of a property is usually the result of vandalism or, in some instances, of ill treatment by the temporary tenants. I have already explained that I have taken a direct hand in switching from sale by private treaty only to auction sales, which have proved successful. The best way to bring comfort to the remaining owner-occupiers in the area is to dispose of our holdings as rapidly as possible so that we no longer exert a blighting influence on the neighbourhood.

Buses

13. **Mr. Pope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many buses more than 12 years old are currently in use; and what was the comparative figure in 1985–86. [588]

Mr. Bowis: In 1994-95, there were 26,000 public service vehicles in the bus taxation class having nine or more seats and more than 12 years old. The comparable figure in 1985-86 was 12,000.

Mr. Pope: Does that not show that the number of old buses in use has doubled since deregulation 10 years ago? We have seen passenger safety compromised and people getting a worse service because of dogma. Is there not a case for the Government to accept the need, as we have suggested, for a new public-private partnership and a new regulatory framework to provide a better, safer service for passengers?

Mr. Bowis: The answer is no. The figures need to be looked at in context. The total number of public service vehicles has gone up from 67,000 to 75,000 over that period. In the past five years, new registrations have gone up from 3,000 to more than 5,000, with reports of significant orders being placed. Age is not the determining factor for safety or for pollution. Quality of maintenance is the key. If the hon. Gentleman is reflecting his party's policy, I hope that he has had the cost to the taxpayer that it would bring in cleared by his hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), the former shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

The hon. Gentleman is also posing a threat to the wish of Londoners to have the Routemaster in service—a bus which goes back 30 years. If the Labour party's policy is to ban it because it is more than 12 years old, the people

of London will want to know. We shall resist that just as much as we shall resist Mr. Kinnock should he put forward European legislation on the matter.

Motorway Repairs

14. **Mr. Rooker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what measures his Department takes to ensure value for money on motorway repair work carried out under annual schedule of rates contracts. [589]

Mr. Watts: The Highways Agency secures good value for money on motorway maintenance contracts through its choice of contract form, competitive tendering procedures and supervision by the agency's managing agents.

Mr. Rooker: What is the total value of the work—mainly routine maintenance contracts—that is not specifically tendered for each job? Would it not be a good idea to change the list of contractors for the jobs completely every few years? That would provide transparency, assuring the public of value for money on such work, much of which is not specifically tendered for.

Mr. Watts: I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with an accurate figure on the precise value of the total work undertaken under schedule of rates contracts. Generally, we find that such contracts provide the best value for money when the volume of work cannot be anticipated at the start, such as contracts for routine maintenance, with work ordered and paid for on a needs basis. The lists of contractors are amended and reviewed from time to time.

A2

15. **Mr. David Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to improve the A2 road to Dover. [590]

Mr. Watts: The road programme includes schemes to improve the A2 between Lydden and Dover, the A2 and M2 between Cobham and junction 4 of the M2, and the A2 and A282 at Dartford. On 22 May this year, I announced two new schemes for widening the A2 between Bean and Cobham, near Gravesend.

Mr. Shaw: Does my hon. Friend accept that, under the present Government, there have been considerable improvements in the roads to Dover? We welcome the improvements to the A20 and the Sandwich to Dover road and the fact that the A2 between Lydden and Dover is gradually being duelled. However, can my hon. Friend give us some intimation of how he will press the Highways Agency to develop long-term plans to improve the A2 between Lydden and Dover? The improvements so far have been of enormous benefit to Dover's ferry industry and we should like further such developments to be made.

Mr. Watts: I thank my hon. Friend for his acknowledgement of the value of road improvements to Dover in recent years. The Lydden to Dover improvement scheme will be undertaken when substantive progress has been made on other main programme schemes that are more advanced.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alterations (Expenditure)

29. **Mrs. Helen Jackson:** To ask the Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee what expenditure on alterations to the Palace of Westminster has been approved by his Committee in each year since 1992. [596]

Mr. Paul Channon (Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee): Excluding the phase 2 building, approved expenditure for all new works in the parliamentary estate since 1992 has been £10.45 million in 1992-93, £9 million in 1993-94, £7.16 million in 1994-95, £9.85 million in 1995-96 and £9.2 million in 1996-97.

Mrs. Jackson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that answer. Will the Committee seek to find the money necessary to alter the use of the shooting gallery in the Palace of Westminster to a more appropriate use? The right hon. Member will be aware that it has been said before, almost as a joke, better a creche than a shooting gallery. As the vast majority of hon. Members now support a ban on the private use and ownership of handguns, is it not appropriate that steps are taken to put that into practice now?

Mr. Channon: I understand the hon. Lady's concern, but that it is a matter not for my Committee but for the Accommodation and Works Committee. Perhaps she should write to the Chairman of that Committee; if we can assist financially, we shall certainly do our best.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Does my right hon. Friend have a view on whether pressure on the budget would be relieved if Parliament decided that the boundary changes would reduce the number of hon. Members from roughly 660 to about 450 after the next general election?

Mr. Channon: That is an extremely ingenious question, but I am not sure how it relates to expenditure on alterations to the Palace of Westminster.

TRANSPORT

Barking to Gospel Oak Line

16. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to improve services and rolling stock on the Barking to Gospel Oak line; and if he will make a statement. [578]

Mr. Bowis: The franchising director is consulting on his passenger service requirement proposals for the Gospel Oak to Barking line. The draft PSR safeguards the current level of service for the line. He will also be requiring bidders for North London Railways to make proposals for the replacement of the existing rolling stock on this branch.

Mr. Corbyn: I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) that tomorrow the Minister, or his colleague, is travelling on the Gospel Oak to Barking line. I hope that sufficiently

crummy, out-of date, broken down heritage rolling stock is being prepared for them. Without wishing the Minister a bad journey, I hope that the train breaks down tomorrow so that he can experience what it is like to travel on the Barking to Gospel Oak line. We have had numerous debates and questions on the matter. Will the Minister please ensure that money is made available quickly to bring new equipment and signalling and a better service to the line rather than letting it run down and close, which is the real intention of some in his Department?

Mr. Bowis: That is very ungenerous to my hon. Friend the Minister of State. I am sure that the House will join me in wishing him a very happy journey tomorrow.

Mr. Tony Banks: There is no restaurant car in it, though.

Mr. Bowis: I am sure that there are plenty of facilities at the station.

The only thing in the House that is broken down is Labour policy on trains. As a result of privatisation and franchising, there are new standards of service, comfort, reliability and punctuality on the line, affecting the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I should have thought that he would be delighted about that and would be standing up and cheering at the thought that privatisation was galloping to his rescue.

London Transport

18. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the amount of money he estimates is required (a) this year and (b) next year for the current programme of work of London Transport. [580]

Mr. Bowis: This year, London Transport is planning to invest more than £1.1 billion in the network and the Jubilee line extension. I cannot anticipate future funding decisions by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. Hughes: Given, as I am sure the Minister would agree, that a well-functioning public transport system in London is a prerequisite not only for London but to the country functioning well, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that his Department received the famous "What If" memorandum during the summer holiday, which confirmed that major works on the London underground were urgently needed to ensure that stations were safe, that escalators worked, and so on? Will he assure me that he and his colleagues are doing all in their power to persuade the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the best thing he can do for public expenditure on transport in the Budget will be to ensure that we have the money to carry out all necessary works, continue the expansion of London Transport and complete the Jubilee line on time next year?

Mr. Bowis: The figure that I gave—£1.1 billion for local transport in London under this Government—is in real terms four times what it was in 1979. I believe that that commitment to London's transport is enviable. The hon. Gentleman is right to praise the Jubilee line extension, which will provide many new facilities for his and many other parts of London. London Transport has expressed confidence that the extension will be ready on time as planned. Alongside that, the City branch of the Northern line has just reopened, work is coming forward on the Croydon tramlink, orders have been received for new Northern line trains and private finance initiative plans are coming forward for power-supplied electronic ticketing, and so on. Much work is going on in many parts of public transport.

Documents may have been produced, but to London Transport's management and to me, safety comes first. Safety is the priority. Thereafter, we can look to expand the comfort, reliability and punctuality of our trains. The record is good. Of course, at this time of year we all send letters to Father Christmas, but sometimes they go to Santa Ken as well.

Mr. Harry Greenway: Did my hon. Friend see press reports a few weeks ago suggesting that some stations were a serious danger to passengers and were unsafe? Does he agree that it looks as though such reports were a means of trying to press the Exchequer for more money for work on those stations? Will he confirm that no station in London, including Northolt in my constituency, which was one of those named, will be allowed to be used if it is not completely safe for passengers?

Mr. Bowis: Of course it is true that London Underground management have the responsibility for ensuring that services and stations are safe. It is up to them to take immediate action if it is thought that anything is proving unsafe for the travelling public or, indeed, the staff working on our London Transport railways and bus systems.

The alleged report to which my hon. Friend referred is the same document to which the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) referred, and I make the same point. If a safety item is identified in the very large sum of money that is available for London Transport's purposes—concerning both the Jubilee line extension and its core needs—it will be a priority.

Aircraft Noise (Heathrow)

20. **Mr. Jessel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action he intends to take to reduce aircraft noise around Heathrow. [569]

Mr. Bowis: On 28 August 1996, the Government announced more stringent noise limits for aircraft taking off from Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, to come into effect on 1 January 1997. Between 1979 and 1992, there was a 77 per cent. reduction in the number of people living around Heathrow exposed to levels of aircraft noise likely to cause annoyance. This was achieved despite a 41 per cent. growth in the number of air transport movements. The compulsory phasing out of older, noisier, chapter 2 aircraft by 31 March 2002 is expected to bring further improvements. The United Kingdom played a leading role in securing international agreement to that.

Mr. Jessel: Although the Government stopped the fifth terminal at Heathrow last time round in 1985—

Mr. Mellor: 1984.

Mr. Jessel: 1985—and although they stopped the Heathrow-Gatwick helicopter link and have contained the number of night flights at Heathrow to one in 60, is my hon. Friend aware that there are now more than 1,000 flights every day from Heathrow, that my constituents regard the noise as a pestilence and that they want the noise drastically curtailed?

Mr. Bowis: My hon. Friend is, as always, a robust defender of his constituents, and rightly so. He will have noted, I believe with pleasure, that as from 1 January next year the decibels permitted will be reduced for daytime flights from 97 to 94 and for night-time flights from 89 to 87. Fines are applicable if aircraft exceed those limits. As of tonight, experiments with alternating runways will take place for night flights, which should help my hon. Friend's constituents in Twickenham.

Mr. Mackinlay: What about terminal 5?

Mr. Bowis: Terminal 5 is a question for the planning inquiry, not for me today.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sitting Hours and Days

30. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Lord President of the Council how many (a) days and (b) hours the House of Commons has sat in each of the last 10 years. [598]

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The House of Commons has sat for between 83 and 240 days in the past 10 Sessions. I have written to the hon. Gentleman with the full details.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful for that answer. The mischievous question would be, "How many days will we sit this Session and will the Lord President please be precise?", but the serious point is that, although the Minister has been helpful in organising many aspects of our business, two steps remain: first, to end the nonsense of the spillover when we could easily finish all our business in the summer; and, secondly, to ensure that we have reasonable summer holidays, not a huge expanse of summer holiday—[Hon. Members: "Oh!"] I mean holiday from this place. We could come back and start the new parliamentary year in September, like everybody else who has an annual autumn start.

Mr. Newton: On the latter part of the question, the House has already spoken for me in resisting the suggestion that the recess is a matter of being on a beach with a bucket. Members of Parliament have many matters to attend to elsewhere in their constituencies.

On the earlier point, we have just had the shortest spillover for many years. I share the hon. Gentleman's view that having a short spillover and an early start to the new Session, which is what we have achieved this year, is a sensible way to proceed.

Mr. Rooker: Does the Leader of the House accept that the real issue is the effective use that we make of our time in the House? Changes could be made in that respect. I sincerely hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not be responsible for the dates of next summer's recess, but does he agree that it might be a good idea to ensure that the House never sits for more than six weeks at a time, but never goes into recess for longer than six weeks either?

Mr. Newton: In view of how helpful I have been to the House in recent years on recess dates and the like, I find the hon. Gentleman's introductory remarks a little churlish; however, I understand why he made them.

On the hon. Gentleman's latter point, he will be aware that it is not long since all those matters were examined by the Select Committee on Sittings of the House and set out in the Jopling report. The Committee looked carefully at a number of options and concluded that a modified pattern, along current lines, would be sensible.

Procedure Committee Reports

31. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Lord President of the Council how many reports by the Procedure Committee are awaiting his response. [599]

Mr. Newton: Taking account of my observations in the debate on procedure, which took place on 11 July, I have made some response to all the reports but one. I hope to respond shortly to the Committee's second report of the last Session on reference to matters subject to injunction.

Mr. Banks: Notwithstanding the Lord President's comments in the debate of 11 July, is it not advisable to implement the Procedure Committee's recommendation regarding Prime Minister's Question Time and at least try a change this side of the general election rather than after it? We have time on our hands and it seems right that those who may leave the House, either voluntarily or by force, should have the opportunity to say what they really think about changes in procedure. Given that we have creeping presidential government in this country, is it not about time that we organised proper debates in the House involving the Prime Minister and the leaders of the Opposition parties? If the Prime Minister has not got the bottle to face the Leader of the Opposition outside the House during the election campaign, perhaps he could do so in this place. The people of this country are entitled to see what the two leaders would do on a head-to-head basis.

Mr. Newton: I shall leave aside the latter part of the question, because my right hon. Friend has shown no disinclination to debate with the Leader of the Opposition either during questions or in other ways in the House—as he did only last week.

As to the hon. Gentleman's point about the Procedure Committee's report, as I said during the July debate—it becomes clearer by the minute—it is easier to see what some people believe is wrong with Prime Minister's questions than to find a solution that is acceptable on both sides of the House. I do not think that this is the time for Parliament to embark on radical change in that respect.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Two weeks ago, you said clearly that you wanted the Committee on Standards and Privileges to examine an issue in a transparent and open manner and the whole House supported you absolutely. Madam Speaker, would it concern you and your office to learn that a Committee member had taken a strong position in the battle between Tiny Rowland and Al-Fayed and had tabled 58 early-day motions on one side of the argument—namely, Mr. Al-Fayed's? In those circumstances, would it be in the interests of the House of Commons for that hon. Member to stand down from the Committee?

Madam Speaker: It is a simple matter. The issue has been referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and it is now for him to make a recommendation to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You may recall a debate on private legislation when my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) referred to a practice in this place as a "constitutional outrage". Evidence has been provided since then that a lobbying organisation conducted activities, which were probably perfectly proper at the time, to frustrate legislation introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) designed to curb the promotion of that most deadly addictive drug, tobacco. As the rules have changed in the post-Nolan days, is it not appropriate to reconsider the Bill in Government time?

Madam Speaker: Would that it were a matter for me and that I had the authority to determine what the House considers in Government time. That is a matter for the Government, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

FAMILY LAW

That the Social Security (Adjudication) and Child Support Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 1996 (S.I., 1996, No. 2450) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Brandreth.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[FOURTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 October],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—*[Sir Norman Fowler.]*

Question again proposed.

Home Affairs

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): Madam Speaker, my first priority as Home Secretary has always been to protect the public and to build a safer Britain. The legislation in the Gracious Speech adds up to the most radical attack on crime this century. It will build on the progress that we have made in every area to tackle crime more effectively. There will be five Home Office Bills in this Session of Parliament and each and every one of them has one simple aim: to protect the public.

The tragic events at Dunblane highlighted the need for radical reform of our firearms legislation. I intend to introduce a Firearms (Amendment) Bill this week to achieve that reform. With the co-operation of all parties, I hope that it will be law by Christmas.

Mr. Norman Hogg (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): The Home Secretary will know that the tragic events that occurred at Dunblane have greatly motivated public opinion on handguns. Does not the right hon. and learned Gentleman recognise that there is a real need for the House properly to express its view on the matter? That would best be done if Conservative Members were accorded a free vote.

Mr. Howard: I do not accept that view. One of the most important considerations that the House should bear in mind as it approaches the proposed legislation to which I have referred is the need to get it on to the statute book as quickly as possible. It may help the people of Dunblane to draw a line under the dreadful experiences to which they have been subjected, and to put those matters behind them, if we bring the matter to a close in the House as soon as possible. I do not think that a free vote would assist in achieving that objective.

Mr. Nicholas Budgen (Wolverhampton, South–West): Will my right hon. and learned Friend explain a little further why getting such a measure on to the statute book quickly will help the people of Dunblane? It seems highly unlikely that such a horrible incident is likely to occur anywhere near the people of Dunblane in the foreseeable future. Are not they as concerned as anyone else that we should proceed in a careful and orderly way, and not in a hurry?

Mr. Howard: With respect to my hon. Friend, I think that it will be possible to examine the proposed legislation

in a careful and orderly way and with expedition. It is important to get such legislation on to the statute book as quickly as possible, and that is not inconsistent with examining it carefully. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be one of those Members who will ensure that we do indeed examine it carefully.

Mr. Terry Lewis (Worsley): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Howard: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall make some progress.

The proposed Bill will ban all handguns from the home. It will outlaw higher-calibre handguns of the sort used by Thomas Hamilton altogether, and it will ensure that all other handguns are kept under safe lock and key at all times. The Bill will lead to the destruction of at least 160,000 handguns—80 per cent. of those legally held in Britain.

I know that some hon. Members believe that we should go further and ban all handguns completely, but I believe that we can both provide protection for the public and allow target shooting with low-calibre handguns—which has always been an Olympic sport—to continue in the security of clubs. Indeed, I believe that banning all handguns might drive some target shooters underground. That might well mean that the public had less protection than will be afforded by my proposals.

Clubs that cannot meet the new security arrangements will have to close. We will also ban the sale of guns through the post, narrow the grounds on which applicants can appeal on being refused a licence and outlaw expanding bullets except for the shooting of deer.

Mr. John Carlisle (Luton, North): My right hon. and learned Friend will understand that there is a large lobby outside the House—innocent people who enjoy the sport of shooting—that entirely disagrees with the line that he has taken. It took six weeks to produce Lord Cullen's report. It is a comprehensive report, as my right hon. and learned Friend knows, because he, like me, has read it. Yet he has decided almost to ignore the report's conclusions. The report does not state at any point that all handguns, or the categories that my right hon. and learned Friend has put forward, should be banned. Why has he gone beyond the report? Why did he not stick to the report? Or is there some deep political motive of which my right hon. and hon. Friends and I are not aware?

Mr. Howard: I understand the feelings of those members of the community to whom my hon. Friend has referred. He is right to say that the vast majority of them are decent, law-abiding citizens. I accept that. I do not agree, however, that the conclusion that the Government have reached ignores the conclusions of the Cullen report. We have carefully examined the report. We have carefully taken into account Lord Cullen's analysis and his conclusions. We disagree in some respects with his conclusions, but that does not mean that we have ignored them. On the contrary, we have given them the most careful attention.

Our proposals are clear and consistent. We promised to await the outcome of the Cullen inquiry, and we did. We promised to act speedily and positively after we received his report, and we have. Contrast that with the reaction of the Opposition parties. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) stressed in September—

Mr. Budgen: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Howard: No. I am not giving way to my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Blackburn stressed in September that Labour would not make final decisions about gun control until it had

"received and studied the conclusions of Lord Cullen's Inquiry".

That message somehow failed to reach the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). He was telling his constituents:

"We support a ban on the holding of handguns in residential property. People such as yourself,"—

he said to one of his constituents—

"will still be able to own handguns but they must be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres".

But, to be fair, the hon. Gentleman was just following the policy set down by the Opposition spokesman on rural affairs. In a letter to the *Shooting Times and Country Magazine* published on 3 October, the hon. Member for Glanford and Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) said:

"We do think that handguns should be limited to the Olympic Standard of .22 calibre and we do think there is an argument for handguns to be kept in secure storage and under supervision at clubs".

He went on to explain that claims that Labour supported more "draconian" measures were a figment of the "hysterical imagination" of the *Shooting Times and Country Magazine*.

They were all wrong. The day before Lord Cullen's report was published, the Leader of the Opposition pulled the rug from under their feet. He rewrote Labour's policy. He let it be known without, apparently, telling his party's home affairs spokesman that Labour would ban all handguns. So much for waiting for Cullen. So much for studying his conclusions. So much for allowing people to keep lower calibre handguns under lock and key in clubs. The draconian measures described by Labour's rural affairs spokesman as a figment of people's imagination are now official Labour party policy.

Mr. Budgen: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Howard: I give way to the hon. Member for Workington.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: If that is the case, it is quite clear that there are varying views across the Commons on these matters. Why not have a free vote? Then Conservative Members will be able to walk into the Lobbies quite freely and vote as we intend.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman's repetition of the question that I answered earlier does not improve the question, and I have nothing to add to the answer that I gave earlier.

[Mr. Howard]

The Liberal Democrats have been just as hypocritical. At their party conference, they voted for a motion that endorsed the policies in the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. Two weeks later, their spokesman, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), said:

"The Government's proposals have much common ground with our proposals to the Cullen inquiry . . . we are prepared to support and facilitate legislation based on those proposals"—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 836.]

Last week, the Liberal Democrats said that they would vote against the Bill. Once again, the gulf between the sanctimonious platitudes of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) and the squalid manoeuvring of his party is shown to be as wide as Westminster bridge.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick–upon–Tweed) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Beith: We have never said that we would vote against the Bill. The issue, as I said when the Government's proposals were announced, was whether the Government's proposals for an 80 per cent. ban would prove adequate and workable. As the Police Federation has said that they are not, the Home Secretary should not be surprised that we take some lead from what the police say on this matter. Can he name any organisation, from either side of the argument, which thinks that the Government's proposals are satisfactory?

Mr. Howard: There have been many reactions in support of the Government's proposals. Many people think that our proposals get this difficult balance right. The right hon. Gentleman has not seriously answered the question why the proposed legislation, which corresponds to the measures that he put to Lord Cullen, which he welcomed when I announced them on the Floor of the House less than a couple of weeks ago, are now proposals that his party is not prepared to support.

Mr. George Robertson (Hamilton): This subject deserves a more serious and high-minded contribution than we have had so far. The Home Secretary is making much—unnecessarily, I think—of when decisions were made. The Government did not show us the Cullen report until a few hours before it was published and announced to the House, yet every heavy Sunday newspaper on 13 October, the day before the Government received Lord Cullen's report, ran almost identical stories saying that, irrespective of Lord Cullen's recommendations, the Government's response would be to ban handguns from the home. The Home Secretary surprisingly said that he did not know who had told the Sunday newspapers. Will he now tell the House that he has no evidence to suggest that anyone close to him or acting on his behalf told those Sunday newspapers exactly the same story?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman and his party—[Hon. Members: "Answer."] I will answer the question: I am dealing with the hon. Gentleman's initial observations. He and his colleagues are the last people to talk about taking a high-minded and serious approach to the proposals.

I have no idea where the stories in the Sunday newspapers came from: they were all wrong. The hon. Gentleman must know that they were completely wrong. They would hardly have come from the Home Office or from me, because they were all, without exception, absolutely wrong, and did not accurately forecast the Government's response to the Cullen report.

Mr. Budgen *rose—*

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), and then I shall move on.

Mr. Anderson: Will the Home Secretary answer a serious question about compensation? When a private interest yields to a public interest, the usual pattern is that the private interest is properly compensated. A legitimate shooting establishment in my constituency will be made non-viable as a result of the likely measure. What assurances will the Home Secretary give that private interest that it will receive compensation according to normal principles?

Mr. Howard: We shall, indeed, follow normal principles. People whose guns will be banned under our proposals will be compensated for their loss, and that is as it should be. It is not in accordance with normal principles for those whose business interests are affected by tighter regulation and legislation automatically to be compensated for the consequences of that change. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall follow normal practice. Our measures will be strictly in accordance with precedent and with our obligations under national and international legislation.

Mr. Budgen *rose—*

Mr. Lewis *rose—*

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough and Horncastle) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I have already given way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen), so I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough and Horncastle (Mr. Leigh).

Mr. Leigh: My right hon. and learned Friend answered that question very well. However, does he accept that, as a matter of honour, a Conservative Government would take the view that if a lawfully held private possession were confiscated by the state, the Government would pay the full market price to compensate the individual concerned?

Mr. Howard: Yes. I have already said that people who now lawfully hold guns that will not be lawfully held under our proposals will be compensated at market value. I am happy to repeat that assurance to my hon. Friend.

Mr. David Mellor (Putney) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I shall give way for the last time during this part of my speech.

Mr. Mellor: How would my right hon. and learned Friend feel if people who received compensation for handing in their higher calibre guns immediately invested in .22 guns?

Mr. Howard: If the Government's proposals find their way to the statute book, that will be perfectly legitimate

and will be a matter for individuals. We propose that the use of .22 calibre guns should be limited to stringently secure conditions in clubs under security arrangements about which we shall consult the police and others. No sensible comparison can be made between those who now use higher-calibre weapons in different circumstances, and those who will use .22 calibre weapons in the strictly controlled circumstances that our legislation will create.

I shall now consider the Police Bill. The Government are determined to ensure that the police have the resources and the powers that they need to fight crime. Spending on the police has doubled since 1979, even after allowing for inflation. The police are having considerable success in combating crime. Thanks to their efforts, recorded crime has fallen by 10 per cent. in the past three years: there have been more than 500,000 fewer crimes. Between 1993 and 1995, England and Wales showed the greatest fall in recorded crime of any OECD country for which figures are available. But there is more to be done. Organised crime is an increasing threat, and as a result of last Session's Security Service Act 1996, which came into force this month, the Security Service is able to work in support of the police and Customs and Excise in tackling serious crime.

Criminals do not respect police force boundaries and often travel long distances to commit crime. The Police Bill will establish a national crime squad to build on the existing regional crime squads. This will not be a British FBI nor will it become one. Policing will remain locally based, but that squad will provide an improved, nationally co-ordinated approach to organised crime. The Bill will also put the National Criminal Intelligence Service on a statutory footing—reinforcing its leading role in gathering intelligence for the police and others.

In addition, the Police Bill will create a criminal records agency. Access to criminals' records raises important issues. On the one hand we must do what we can to rehabilitate offenders, to help them find work and to keep them on the strait and narrow. But we must also ensure that the public are protected, particularly the most vulnerable in society—our children. All those who work on a regular unsupervised basis with children—among others—will be eligible for an enhanced criminal record check which will include both conviction and non-conviction material. In addition, all doctors and teachers will be eligible for a full check which will list all convictions and cautions centrally held. These are difficult issues, but I believe that our proposals strike a fair balance between the rights of individuals and the need to protect the public.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Can the Home Secretary confirm a newspaper report which suggests that section 9 of the Interception of Communications Act 1985 about bugging may be lifted? I have no objection to that in principle, provided that there is full disclosure about the how the bug was placed, what resulted from it and how the evidence has been used since then.

Mr. Howard: I can neither confirm nor deny that report. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait for a possible decision on that question to be announced. I am sure that if such a decision is announced the caveat that the hon. Gentleman has entered will be considered carefully.

Sex offenders pose a particular danger because many of them are highly manipulative and likely to reoffend. To help protect the public the Police Superintendents Association last year called for a register of paedophiles. We have consulted widely and concluded that serious sex offenders, not just paedophiles, should be required to notify the police of their address and any subsequent moves. They will also be required to notify the police of any change of name. These proposals will enable the police to keep tabs on such criminals and help to protect the public from their activities.

In the past year a number of widely publicised stalking cases have come to court. The current law does not give the victims of this dreadful crime the protection they deserve. The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson) raised this issue earlier in the year with her private Member's Bill, but there had been no consultation on those proposals and the Bill had significant deficiencies.

As Evonne von Heussen of the National Anti-Stalking and Harassment Campaign said:

"A bad Bill is worse than no Bill . . . and her proposals"—

referring to the proposals by the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen—

"were not precise enough. You have to be able to defend legitimate activities such as debt collecting against the stalking charge".

Our proposals have been the subject of wide consultation. They are tough and they will help to protect victims. They focus on the impact on the victim and they do not require proof of intent. Victims would have several remedies open to them. They would be able to seek a civil injunction against someone who was molesting them and a breach of that order would be a criminal offence punishable by up to five years in prison. We shall create two new criminal offences, which I shall explain to the House after I have given way to the hon. Lady.

Ms Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): Why does the Home Secretary feel that it would not have been possible in a Standing Committee to iron out any differences between us on the contents of my Bill?

Mr. Howard: It is because there was no time and there would not have been full and proper consultation. Those who criticise the Government for our attitude to the hon. Lady's Bill are the first to criticise us for rushing into legislation without proper consultation hasty and ill-considered proposals. We have published a consultation paper that sets out in great detail the basis of our proposals. We invited comments on that paper. We have modified our proposals in the light of that consultation exercise. As a result of the consultative exercise, we are now in a position to introduce legislation that is substantially better and more effective than the hon. Lady's Bill. That is the right way to approach difficult legislation, when definitions are of the essence. That was our approach and it is the right one. I hope that the hon. Lady and her friends will give our proposals full support.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): Why did the Home Secretary think that the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson) was not appropriate because time was not available? Why, when a longer time was available, did he think that a private Member's Bill was appropriate for his current

[Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe]

proposals, until the Prime Minister stepped in? Why did the Home Secretary think that my hon. Friend's Bill was not the appropriate Bill?

Mr. Howard: I have just answered that question, if the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I said. The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen introduced her Bill at a late stage in the previous Session. There was no time to engage in the sort of consultation exercise in which we have since engaged. That was why we could not do it in the previous Session.

Sir Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Howard: I will in a moment, if my hon. Friend will bear with me while I answer the question of the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe). In this Session, we thought that the speediest way forward would be through a private Member's Bill, until we received the offer in the House last week from the Leader of the Opposition. In that context, it is right that I should draw to the House's attention a most worrying communication that my right hon. Friend the Captain of the Hon. Corps of Gentlemen at Arms has received from the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip in another place. It shows that that party looks as though it is likely to obstruct the passage of that legislation and go contrary to the assurances of the Leader of the Opposition in the House last week. A passage from the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip's letter says:

"We favour the principles behind both measures but we will insist on full debates in the normal timescale provided in the Companion to Standing Orders. We would resist any suggestion that the timescale should be abbreviated in any way whatever."

So it looks as though the best intentions, I am prepared to accept, of the Leader of the Opposition and of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister may yet be endangered by the party political manoeuvrings of the Liberal Democrats in another place.

Mr. Beith *rose—*

Mr. Howard: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman wishes to disown the Chief Whip of his party in another place. I hope that that is exactly what he will do.

Mr. Beith: I rise merely to confirm the assurance that we gave that we will support and assist the passage of these Bills, but it is unusual for the Home Secretary to conduct on the Floor of the House the sort of discussions that go on in another place to ensure that, if this House does not have the details of the Bill right when it reaches the other place, it will sort the Bill out. To assist the matter, will the Home Secretary guarantee that he will introduce no amendments to the Bill in the other place?

Mr. Howard: That fell some way short of the sort of assurance that we might have expected from the right hon. Gentleman and his party, if they were determined to co-operate to get the legislation through as quickly as possible on the fast track promised by the Leader of the Opposition last week.

Sir Michael Shersby: Does my right hon. and learned Friend recall that I first tabled an amendment to provide for a law to deal with stalking during the passage of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994? Does he further agree that the difficulties that were explained then by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office, made it clear beyond any shadow of doubt that, before this sort of legislation could be introduced, it had to have the most careful consultation and consideration, including representations from organisations such as Liberty?

Mr. Howard: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We pay careful attention to the representations that have been made, both by Liberty and police associations, and they have all contributed to the fact that the legislation, which we hope to introduce shortly, will be in such excellent shape.

The first criminal offence is to catch persons who behave on more than one occasion in a way that causes the victim to believe that immediate violence would be used against them, and the maximum penalty would be five years in prison. The second offence is to catch persons who behave persistently in a way that causes someone to be distressed, alarmed or harassed. The maximum penalty would be six months in prison. Those proposals will also help to protect the victims of racial harassment and nuisance from neighbours.

Ms Liz Lynne (Rochdale): As to paedophilia, why is there no Bill in Government time on sex tourism, to prosecute men in particular who engage in sexual acts with children in other countries?

Mr. Howard: A similar private Member's Bill made excellent progress through the House in the last Session and is now on the statute book—and was none the worse for taking that route. However, we will take the hon. Lady's comment on board when we make our final decisions about the way in which our proposals will be taken through the House.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (The Wrekin): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Howard: No.

The centrepiece of our legislation will be the Crime (Sentences) Bill. The proposals that it contains have one simple aim—to protect the public from serious persistent and dangerous criminals. The police have revolutionised the way in which they fight crime. They are increasingly targeting persistent and known criminals who commit the majority of crime. About two thirds of crimes are committed by a hard core—one fifth or so—of offenders. Operation Bumblebee and Operation Christmas Cracker are testament to the success of the police.

We need to ensure that the criminal justice system targets also the career criminal. Our proposals will do just that. They represent the most radical reforms to our sentencing system this century.

For serious sexual and violent criminals, the maximum penalty for crimes such as armed robbery and rape is a life sentence. Such offenders rarely get life, even if they offend again. In 1994, 217 offenders were convicted of a second or subsequent serious sexual or violent crime.

All 217 offenders could have been given a life sentence but only 10 were. Unless such offenders are given life, they must be released even if they remain a danger to the public. That cannot be right. It does not give the public the protection that they deserve.

Two months ago, for example, a rapist was sentenced to life at Chelmsford Crown court. He was described by the judge as "verging on the satanic" and had been convicted of rape before, not once but twice. One of his victims was a nine-year-old girl. Because that rapist was not given a life sentence, he had to be released—released to rape again. He did. That is something that should never happen.

The Crime (Sentences) Bill will ensure that second-time serious violent and sexual offenders get a life sentence. In such cases the trial judge will set the tariff—the minimum period to be served for retribution and deterrence. Once that term has been served, the parole board will decide whether the offender still poses a danger to the public. If he does, he will remain in prison. If he does not, he will be released on life licence and subject to recall for the rest of his life. The Association of Chief Police Officers, supporting my proposals when I announced them in 1995, said:

"The public have a right to be protected."

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Lord Justice Donaldson has been quoted as saying that he disagreed with that particular issue. My understanding is that a judge could say, in exceptional circumstances, that a second life sentence should not be imposed. Will my right hon. and learned Friend clarify that point?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend is right, as I was about to explain.

The hon. Member for Blackburn likes to pretend that he supports that policy, but there are fundamental differences between us. The hon. Gentleman does not, despite his strenuous efforts to give the opposite impression, support automatic life sentence for second-time rapists and other serious sexual offenders Under his proposals, those offenders—once judged safe to be released—could not be recalled back to prison. In addition, his proposal would not cover repeat violent offenders. As the hon. Gentleman explained in his document, "Honesty, Consistency and Progression in Sentencing",

"Offences of a sexual nature should be distinguished from other violent offences."

The Opposition think that the public do not need greater protection from those who conspire to commit murder or from armed robbers. Despite all the synthetic fuss that they are presently making about knives, they argued against giving the police greater stop and search powers to deal with those who carry knives on our streets and they now oppose automatic life sentences for those who twice use knives to inflict serious injury on others.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howard: Yes. I am not surprised that the Opposition do not like to be reminded of the effect of their policies.

Mr. Foulkes: Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman aware that there is great disappointment throughout the country that he has not seen fit to introduce a measure to ban combat knives, on the spurious excuse that he cannot tell combat knives from household knives? Has he ever seen a combat knife? It is one of the most horrific and easily identifiable knives that he will ever see.

Mr. Howard: However much the hon. Gentleman and his party may pretend otherwise, the truth is that we have not been able to come up with a satisfactory definition of a combat knife.

Mr. Foulkes: Rubbish.

Mr. Howard: It is not. The Association of Chief Police Officers agrees with us, as do the Scottish Police Federation and the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales. We have been working with the police for some time to try to come up with a satisfactory definition. ACPO has said, and the other associations agree, that it is not possible to do so without at the same time banning lawful knives.

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn): On Independent Television News at lunchtime, a representative of the Police Superintendents Association said:

"If they can get a man on the moon, I am sure they can come to a definition of a combat knife."

Does not the Secretary of State think that there is a palpable difference, which can be defined in law, between a kitchen knife and the sort of knife advertised in the magazine *Gun and Accessories Mart* as:

"Special operation knife, ¼" stock, 12" overall, 145 lbs",

which has no purpose whatever other than killing or maiming people? It should be banned.

Mr. Howard: ACPO, in a letter dated 9 May—*[Interruption.]* We have been looking at the issue, together with ACPO, for some time. The letter said:

"I should first say that we agree with you on the impossibility of defining an undesirable dangerous knife without also catching other knives which should not be banned. We can all sympathise with the public view that certain types of hunting knives should not be on sale, but their definition would be difficult and the benefit dubious if carving and other catering knives are to remain available."

The Police Superintendents Association, to which the hon. Member for Blackburn referred, issued a press release this afternoon saying:

"The Association's views do not differ from our colleagues in the Police Service and mirror those of the Home Secretary."

The truth is that the Opposition were invited last week by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to put forward any suggestions that they might have, but what was their response? They came forward not with a suggested definition, but with a petition. What we need are definitions, not petitions, and rather less of the trivialising gesture politics in which the hon. Member for Blackburn and his party indulge.

Mr. Straw: Would the Home Secretary like to read on? The national secretary of the Police Superintendents Association says in today's statement:

"We believe that both the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, and the Shadow Home Secretary, Jack Straw, have the same ambition to deal with so-called 'combat knives'."

[Mr. Straw]

I hope that that is true. The statement goes on:

"It is up to those concerned now to see if such a definition can be agreed and to support any measures proposed by the Government as a result."

It was the same representative of the association who, at lunch time, asserted on ITN that it was possible to distinguish between a kitchen knife and a combat knife—and it is.

Mr. Howard: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is casting any aspersions on the credibility or veracity of the secretary of the Police Superintendents Association. I read what the association's press release said—that its views mirror my own. Of course I would like to ban combat knives if we could come up with a satisfactory definition—we have been trying to come up with one for a considerable period of time. If the hon. Gentleman has any suggestions, I will consider them carefully—but we need specific suggestions for a definition, not party politics built on petitions.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): I agree very much with my right hon. and learned Friend about kitchen knives and so forth. I am a keen cook—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) appears to be amused; I remind him that I was the country's No. 1 housewife in 1960. It would be difficult to define the knives in my kitchen. I do not believe that my right hon. and learned Friend saw the kitchen knife displayed by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), but the only thing that that proved is that his wife has never let him into the kitchen—no one would regard that as an eligible kitchen knife.

Mr. Howard: I have never had the privilege of being invited into my hon. Friend's kitchen, but I am certain that she would not give kitchen room to the knife that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) played with during his absurd shenanigans in front of the television cameras on Friday.

I want to draw attention to the real reason why the Labour party has engaged in this entirely synthetic fuss about knives. Three Labour Members rose to intervene during the part of my speech in which I pointed out the fact that Labour has no proposals to deal with second serious violent offenders. That is a diversionary tactic designed to divert attention from the extremely important proposals that I shall explain to the House.

Mr. Alan Howarth (Stratford-on-Avon) *rose—*

Mr. Howard: It always gives me great pleasure to give way to and deal with the interventions of the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Howarth), so I am delighted to give way to him now.

Mr. Howarth: There is a pressing and urgent problem in respect of knives, and it is fatuous of the Home Secretary to contemplate some kind of endless Socratic dialogue in which we attempt to define a knife—that is, of course, impossible. He must accept, however, that any police officer, magistrate or judge can recognise the sort of knife that is designed for violence. Is not the right hon. and learned Gentleman's difficulty—which I can well understand in view of his uncomfortable experiences at their hands—that he is prejudiced against allowing the judges any more discretion? Because of that prejudice, he is prepared to allow the knife culture to fester and citizens to remain at risk of being injured or killed.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman's suggestion is absurd. Everybody, including the police, agrees that a definition is needed before those knives can be banned. I understand that even the hon. Member for Blackburn agrees with that. We have welcomed co-operation in trying to find a definition, but it is not an easy task.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): You have not.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that we have not invited co-operation. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wrote a letter in which he specifically invited co-operation. He said that, if Labour Members were able to suggest a definition, we would be happy to sit down with them and discuss it. That remains our position.

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith) *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley), but I shall not allow Labour Members to continue to divert attention from the serious matters that I was addressing in my speech.

Mr. Soley: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way at last. There are several proposals, some of which have been around since at least 1985, when I put one to one of his predecessors. It was seriously considered then and should be considered again now. A sub-committee should be set up in the Home Office to consider imitation guns and knives, and to make recommendations on them. Using the statutory instrument procedure, certain types of knives should be designated unacceptable for sale or production. If we can ensure that it is impossible even to look through the window of bookmakers' shops, the Home Secretary can ensure that knives are not displayed so that some young lad with a fantasy of violence can look in a window and see how much it would cost to turn his fantasy into horrific reality

Mr. Howard: There is no difficulty about the procedure. The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the statutory instrument procedure. We have used it in order to ban 14 knives and sharp instruments. We are not reluctant to use it. That is why I have said repeatedly that as soon as we have a definition—if such can be produced—of a combat knife, we shall not hesitate to use the procedure that we have used in the past. I have no hang-up about using it; I would be delighted to do so. The only difficulty is the purely practical one of finding a workable definition.

Lady Olga Maitland (Sutton and Cheam): Does my right hon. and learned Friend recall that he and I considered carefully how to deal with that very problem when I was preparing for my own knives Bill—the Offensive Weapons Bill? Does he agree that one of the

problems is that a combat knife could be outlawed, but the same weapon could then be described as a diving knife or some other kind of knife? It is easy for the House to apply glib descriptions to an acutely difficult problem.

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend is entirely right. If my recollection is correct, it was in the context of her private Member's Bill in the previous Session that we engaged in consultation with the police staff associations, which produced the letter from the Association of Chief Police Officers to which I referred earlier.

I return to the Opposition's proposals for dealing with serious violent offenders and the ways in which those proposals differ from ours. Their proposals will not deal with someone convicted of armed robbery who serves his sentence, is released and subsequently commits rape. But Labour have a record on the matter: eight years ago the hon. Member for Blackburn and the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) voted against increasing to life imprisonment the maximum sentence for taking a gun to a crime. Now they refuse to support the proposal that criminals who do that twice should get an automatic life sentence, despite the dangers that those criminals pose to the public and the police. Old Labour, new Labour, it all comes to the same thing: a serious violent offender can rely on Labour to protect him.

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. There are two Members standing at once. If the hon. Gentleman is seeking to intervene, he might let it be known not only to the Secretary of State but to me, rather than simply standing at the Dispatch Box. Is the Secretary of State giving way?

Mr. Howard *indicated assent.*

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker, and to the Secretary of State. Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman aware that we adopted that position in 1988 not only because of firm advice that we had received from the Police Federation that the proposal was likely to be inoperable, but because, perhaps unwisely, we took the advice of the hon. and learned Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence), who said of the proposal for life imprisonment for carrying firearms that it was

"another con on the public."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 1988; Vol. 125, c. 711.]

Mr. Howard: The proposal was not and is not a con on the public. The hon. Gentleman's comments do not go an inch of the way towards explaining Labour's present position on the proposals contained in the Crime (Sentences) Bill.

I turn to the subject of drugs. Drugs devastate lives, often young people's lives. A recent sample showed that the average sentence for a third conviction for dealing in hard drugs was just over four years. People subject to such a sentence would often be out after two years. That does not remotely give the public the protection that they deserve. The Crime (Sentences) Bill will ensure that anyone convicted of dealing in hard drugs on three separate occasions would get a minimum of seven years in prison, and the maximum would remain life.

House burglary is another dreadful crime. Victims lose treasured personal possessions. The sanctity of their memories, as well as their homes, is violated. Persistent domestic burglars deserve long prison sentences, but they rarely get them.

Mr. Beith *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I must make progress.

A sample of the most serious domestic burglars convicted in the Crown courts in 1993 and 1994 showed that the average prison sentence for a first-time offender was 16.2 months. After three or more convictions, it was 18.9 months, and after seven or more convictions it was barely higher, at 19.4 months—and, of course, only half of that is served.

Those sentences do not deter career burglars, for whom the occasional short spell in prison has become an acceptable occupational hazard. The Crime (Sentences) Bill will ensure that career burglars spend a minimum of three years behind bars. Such sentences will, I believe, deter many burglars altogether. Others will not be deterred, but at least the public will have a lengthy break from their criminal activities. As the chairman of the Police Federation has said:

"People whose homes have been desecrated by intruders will applaud the automatic sentences in store for persistent burglars."

Mr. Beith: As the proposals will require the construction of perhaps as many as 12 new prisons, will the Home Secretary give us an idea of when they will be brought into force?

Mr. Howard: I gave that estimate in the White Paper, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman has seen. The provisions for automatic life sentences and mandatory minimum sentences for those who traffic in hard drugs for a third time will, I hope, be brought into force in October next year. I hope that the provisions for honesty in sentencing, which I have yet to explain, and for minimum mandatory sentences for career burglars will come into force in 1999.

The White Paper, which I published in April, made it clear that the courts would have the discretion not to impose minimum sentences in exceptional circumstances. The Bill provides them with that discretion. The White Paper also made it clear that we were considering a discount for guilty pleas. For professional house burglars and dealers in hard drugs, the Bill will enable the courts to take up to 20 per cent. off the minimum sentence for guilty pleas. Such a provision is, of course, not necessary for automatic life sentences for second time serious sexual or violent offenders, because judges will be able to take into account a guilty plea when setting the tariff.

Fourthly, there is honesty in sentencing. Automatic early release from prison enrages victims. The former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Taylor, strongly disagrees with many of my proposals, but he made it clear that the current early release arrangements

"have the appearance of a charade".

The fact is that the majority of prisoners are released after serving only half their sentence. The Crime (Sentences) Bill will abolish automatic early release. Instead, prisoners who co-operate and behave well will be able to earn a small discount—20 per cent.—off their

[Mr. Howard]

sentence, creating an incentive for them to behave well. All those sentenced to more than a year will, on release, be supervised in the community for 15 per cent. of their original sentence. These proposals will ensure that the most dangerous criminals spend the longest under supervision. In addition, all sex offenders will be subject to extended supervision of 50 per cent. of their sentence, or 12 months, whichever is the longer. The courts will have the power to increase the period up to a maximum of 10 years.

Those are the main provisions in the Crime (Sentences) Bill. The Liberal Democrats are clear that they oppose them. They believe that current sentencing practice is adequate for persistent and dangerous criminals. They are entitled to that opinion. We at least know where they stand.

Labour has been less forthcoming. The hon. Member for Blackburn said that he would say whether his party would support the Bill when he saw it. But on Friday, having seen the Bill, he consistently refused to tell the BBC lunchtime news how his party would vote. Labour's position is untenable. The hon. Member for Blackburn has complained that my proposals raise "important issues of justice" and that they would lead to

"sentencing becoming arbitrary, taking insufficient account of the full circumstances of the offences and the offender".

On 19 June—two months after I published the details of my proposals—the Labour party and its leader voted against them. That at least was logical. Apparently, Labour now argue that my position has changed. My position has not changed. The proposals in the Crime (Sentences) Bill are those set out in the White Paper in April—the very proposals that the Opposition attacked as unjust and voted against on that basis.

Yet over the past few days, Labour spin doctors have been working overtime. They have had two objectives. The first is to create a myth that my original sentencing proposals have been ditched. That is not the view of my critics in another place. More important—as I have already explained—it is completely untrue. Secondly, they seek to create the headline "Labour supports tough sentencing" when it does nothing of the kind.

The hon. Gentleman's proposals would leave it up to the Court of Appeal. There would be no guarantee whatever that the present pattern of sentencing for persistent house burglars and dealers in hard drugs would change at all. My proposals would provide that guarantee. If Opposition Members want the credit for supporting tough action, let them earn it. There should be no abstentions and no weasel words in reasoned amendments, but clear, unequivocal support. It can be demonstrated in only one way: by voting with us in the Division Lobby.

The Crime (Sentences) Bill was drafted to meet the need to protect the public. As the president of the Police Superintendents Association said, it is in "the national interest" that it should become law as quickly as possible. Yet Opposition Members complain that it was designed to put them on the spot. They made the very same complaint two years ago when they voted against the Prevention of Terrorism Act as IRA mortars were raining down on Heathrow airport. That complaint tells us all we need to know about the new Labour party. Labour Members are put on the spot when they are asked to support tough anti-terrorism powers. They are put on the spot when they are asked to support stiff minimum sentences for career burglars and dealers in hard drugs. They are put on the spot when they are asked to support automatic life sentences for repeat serious sexual and violent offenders.

The Conservative party is not put on the spot. Our instincts are clear. We understand the importance of protecting the public. The country needs the Bill. It is crying out for the Bill and we are the only party that can be trusted to deliver it.

Madam Speaker: At this stage, I must announce that all Back Bench speeches are restricted to 10 minutes as there is such a great demand to participate in the debate.

4.27 pm

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn): After that speech, only one person is on the spot—the worst Home Secretary in Britain since the war.

Let me deal immediately with gun control. Of all the traumatic events in recent history, none has been worse than the killing in Dunblane on 13 March of 16 children and their teacher and the wounding of many others. When similar appalling events have occurred in the past, time has undermined the resolve of Parliament and the people to seek remedial action. Sadly, that was the case after Hungerford, but not after Dunblane. Thanks to the huge courage of the parents and the strength and dignity of the Snowdrop campaign, there is ever-increasing public support for an immediate ban on handguns in general civilian use.

We shall have a further opportunity to debate the issue on Second Reading of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill in a few weeks' time, but in view of the Home Secretary's opening speech, let me make Labour's position quite clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) and I, after careful consultation with the Home Affairs Committee and the Scottish group of Labour Members, presented the following report to the Cullen inquiry in May. It stated at paragraph 18:

"In general, given the lethal nature of handguns, we see a strong case for banning them altogether. The shooting fraternity must make a case for possession and if they can, they must suggest and accept restrictions and costs necessary to prevent such guns for being used for anything other than for target practice."

At the end, we said:

"Following discussions with the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland this report has been prepared to set out our initial views to the Cullen Inquiry. We shall of course, carefully consider all the evidence given to the Inquiry and the recommendations which Lord Cullen makes before coming to final conclusions."

And that is exactly what we did.

On such a crucial issue, there is of course scope for honest disagreement. I am the first to accept that but, as I did in the statement two weeks ago, I must ask the Secretary of State to think again and reflect on the merits of his decision to allow a fifth of all handguns to remain available for licence.

Mr. Howard: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will lift the veil a little more on the decision-making processes of his party and explain the circumstances in which his hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) came to write a letter to his constituent on 24 September stating very clearly:

"People such as yourself will still be able to own handguns but they must be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres."

Mr. Straw: I have just explained the Labour party's position. I am sorry to have to tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that I do not write the constituency letters of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson).

Mr. David Harris (St. Ives): Does he write yours?

Mr. Straw: Nor does he write mine. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition explained, we shall be having a free vote on the issue. If my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool wants to take a different decision from that which some of us will take, it is entirely a matter for him. In our judgment, gun control should be the last issue to be made into an official dispute between the parties. We and the Liberal Democrats have played our part in seeking to take the issue out of party politics by pledging a free vote. It is up to the Government to respond in a similar way.

Having observed the spectacle of disunity behind the Secretary of State while he was speaking, there can be only one reason why he and the Prime Minister are sticking to the decision not to allow a free vote: the Secretary of State is scared of the result of allowing Conservative Members to follow their own judgment on the issue. I must ask the Secretary of State to think carefully about the consequences of turning the issue into a partisan one, for it cannot then be resolved as a result of votes on the Firearms (Amendment) Bill and will end up following us through into the general election.

Mr. John Carlisle: We have noted that the hon. Gentleman does not want the issue to become party political. On that basis, perhaps he will tell the House whether his party invited Mrs. Ann Pearston of the Snowdrop campaign to address its conference or whether it just so happened that she was passing the door at the time and was invited in. Was she invited by the Labour party to address the conference or not? If she was, is that not taking the issue right into the party-political process?

Mr. Straw: Mrs. Pearston was a Conservative voter and we invited her without knowing anything about her party politics. She has made it clear that she would very readily have accepted an invitation to speak at the Conservative party conference as well. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman was slightly more measured in his tone than he was a couple of weeks ago when, with a quite deplorable lack of taste, he accused the Dunblane parents of being hysterical and emotional. Had I been in the position of the Dunblane parents, I would have been hysterical and very emotional indeed. They are also very angry about the lack of a proper response from some Conservative Members to the campaign for effective gun control.

Mr. Carlisle: I am grateful for the chance to clear up the matter. I said that the people who were getting hysterical and emotional were the leaders of the campaign and its spokesmen and spokeswomen. I might say that the enormous postbag that I have had since then endorses that view, which is held by very many people and many, many members of the Labour party. Regrettably, I believe that such emotion takes those leaders and spokeswomen out of the argument. They have approached it in such a hysterical and emotional way, which has no place in the formation of legislation.

Mr. Straw: If that is so, I hope that the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Carlisle) will write to the Dunblane parents to apologise and withdraw his appalling words of two weeks ago.

On the Secretary of State's current position, the more I consider the case for allowing .22 pistols to continue to be licensed, the flimsier I find it. As the Police Federation said, .22 multi-shot pistols are just as lethal, and faster on the draw, than higher-calibre weapons. The only argument advanced by the Secretary of State for not imposing a complete general ban was his fear that a complete ban would

"drive underground an activity that could then be conducted without any safeguards for security".—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 835.]

That would not happen, not least because rifle and shotgun shooting will still be available as alternative lawful sports. Moreover, we should not be blackmailed into such a position by the increasingly shrill and disingenuous arguments of the gun lobby. The Dunblane children could have been killed as easily and swiftly with a .22 pistol as they were with a 9 mm Browning. There must therefore be a complete ban on all handguns in general civilian use.

Mr. Budgen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I had intended to leave the matter of firearms now as we shall return to it under the Firearms (Amendment) Bill, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene I will accept his intervention.

Mr. Budgen: Is it not a question of proportionality? Some 1 million firearms are held illegally; we wish to guard against the risk that somebody who holds a handgun in a heavily regulated club might leave it in circumstances such that someone else could pinch it. If regulations on such clubs are efficiently carried out, someone who wants to do a dreadful deed will get hold of an illegally held firearm rather than break into a club. The risk that the hon. Gentleman is guarding against is therefore tiny.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is an issue of proportionality, but he and I obviously disagree about how the public would best be served. I suspect that throughout the Firearms (Amendment) Bill we shall be on different sides of the argument. The most horrific massacres in the past decade have taken place using not illegal but lawful firearms. The Secretary of State's position is logically inconsistent: while he accepts that weapons of a higher calibre than .22 should be banned from general civilian use, he has created a huge loophole by allowing the continued availability of .22 multi-shot and single shot and lower calibre weapons.

Mr. Mellor: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that Lord Cullen specifically found that Thomas Hamilton would not have bought weapons on the illicit market had he been unable to obtain weapons legally? Is he also aware that it is precious little consolation to Robert Kennedy and Yitzhak Rabin that they were shot with a .22 calibre weapon?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Gentleman is right on both points. In response to the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen) about greater control on clubs, he should look at page 121 of the Cullen report, where Lord Cullen quotes in detail the view of the British Shooting Sports Council that, no matter what system of checks and paperwork was in place, somebody like Thomas Hamilton could still withdraw his weapon and use it.

The major issue before the House today is the Secretary of State's proposals for better control of crime. The Government's record on crime is the worst of any Government of a major western country since the war. In 17 years, crime has doubled. Today, 50,000 crimes will be committed—one every two seconds. Under the Conservative party, violent crimes—those that cause most fear in people—have risen even faster, and street robberies have risen by 400 per cent. since 1979. There is much more crime, but many more criminals are getting away with it. Although the number of crimes has doubled, the number of people convicted or cautioned for those crimes has fallen by almost a tenth. Only one crime in 50 results in a conviction. The Crown Prosecution Service drops far too many cases. Sentencing has become a lottery, witnesses are routinely intimidated and costs have spiralled. Alongside that, people must face not only the fear and reality of specific crimes but the constant, wearing anxiety of disorder in the streets caused by criminal anti-social neighbours, drug dealers and gangs of youths.

The Government's record is worst on youth crime. In 10 years, the number of youth crimes has risen sharply but the number of young criminals dealt with by the courts or the police for those crimes has fallen by a third. It is no wonder that so many young people believe that they can get away with their crimes when the youth justice system is in serious disarray. Many youngsters do not believe warnings or cautions that further criminal behaviour will lead to serious consequences because, even if they get to court, in more than half the cases another warning follows. The system fails too often to confront young offenders and their families with the consequences of their unacceptable behaviour. It fails too often to impress on young offenders the difference between right and wrong.

That appalling record on crime is an indelible stain upon the Conservative party. As the right hon. and learned Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor), a former Home Office Minister, said in the summer, the Conservative party is losing the plot on law and order. Having promised more law and better order, the Conservatives have delivered greater lawlessness and more disorder.

Mr. Mellor: The hon. Gentleman goes too far in what he says. I said that the Conservatives were in danger of losing the plot on the gun control issue; I made no wider comment.

Mr. Straw: With respect, the right hon. and learned Gentleman did say that. I will read the whole quotation. In *The Guardian* of 1 August 1996, he said:

"The Labour party is outflanking us on law and order and there is a serious danger of the Conservative party at all levels losing the plot."

Faced with the rising tide of crime, the reaction of Conservative Ministers has been to panic. There have been 33 criminal justice Acts in 17 years, 12 in the past four years, more crime Bills since 1979 than in the previous 60 years, and there are five more Bills before the House this Session.

There would be no objection in principle even to that incontinent torrent of legislation if each Bill had been thought through carefully, if each Bill had built upon the experience of the last and, when it became an Act, if it had worked to cut crime and to improve public safety. Instead, the Government have lurched from one extreme to the other. As one ill-thought-through stratagem failed to work, the Conservatives discarded it for the exact opposite in the arrogant hope that the public would not notice the difference.

In March this year, the Secretary of State described the present sentencing system as a "mockery and a farce". As ever, the clear implication of his criticism was that that "mockery and farce" had nothing whatever to do with him. However, the system—that "farce and mockery"—is not the creation of some misguided liberal philanthropists of the last century nor or previous Conservative or Labour Governments. The system is just five years old: it is the creation of this Prime Minister and of this Cabinet, of which the Home Secretary is, and was, a leading member.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman knows that he is being absurd. He must accept that the system of parole and early release dates back a very long time—far beyond the Criminal Justice Act 1991. That Act increased the proportion of the sentence passed by the court which was served by the criminal. It did not go far enough, but it was a step in the right direction.

Mr. Straw: I am afraid that that will not do, as I shall show that huge parts of the 1996 crime sentencing legislation overturn key parts of the Criminal Justice Act 1991, for which the Home Secretary voted. It is not a matter of the Bill's proposals differing a little in emphasis from the 1991 legislation: one is a total contradiction of the other.

As the Secretary of State said, under the new Bill an offender's previous convictions will be critical in determining sentence length. However, under the 1991 legislation—for which the Secretary of State voted—the courts were generally banned from taking any account of previous convictions. The then Home Secretary—that well known left-winger, now Lord Waddington—referred to the need to ban courts from considering such convictions. He said:

"If an offender has already been punished for a previous offence it seems unfair and unjust to punish him twice over by increasing the penalty for a subsequent offence".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1990; Vol. 181, c. 141.]

Fixed so-called minimum sentences will now be the cornerstone of the Government's strategy for punishing the guilty. In 1991, the Government explicitly rejected

fixed minimum sentences on the grounds that they would increase crime. The 1990 White Paper, which preceded the legislation, stated:

"A system of minimum sentences . . . could result in more acquittals by juries, with more guilty men and women going free".

Today the Government propose to trim the discretion of the judiciary because of inconsistency and a lack of progression in sentencing practice. In 1991, Ministers fiercely defended judicial discretion and, when Labour advanced measures to provide for greater consistency and uniformity in sentencing, they dismissed our proposals as unnecessary.

Mr. Nicholls *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment. The then Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Mr. Patten), said that our proposals would

"end up like the experience in the United States".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1990; Vol. 181, c. 232.]

He said that they would produce

"the dead hand of conformity".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 7 February 1991; c. 721.]

Ministers—including the present Home Secretary and, I suspect, the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls)—voted down our proposals for greater consistency and instead voted in favour of unfettered judicial discretion.

Mr. Nicholls: So that the public can understand the hon. Gentleman's point about inconsistency, does he recall that he and his shadow Cabinet colleagues voted against the proposition that the prosecution should be entitled to appeal against over-lenient sentences? Will he take this opportunity to apologise both to the House and to the public for doing so while pretending that Labour is serious about matters of law and order?

Mr. Straw: I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman on our voting record. I have a transcript of the debate that took place on 20 June 1988. In debate on the Criminal Justice Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) introduced a series of proposals to control the sale of knives to those aged under 16 and to control the advertising and marketing of combat knives. The hon. Gentleman, however, together with the Home Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister, voted against them and the Conservative party defeated our proposals. If those proposals had gone through, we would not have the dreadful knife culture that now afflicts this country.

As I made clear in a detailed document published in March this year, the present sentencing system is not working as it should. The description of sentences amounts, at best, to a benign deception of the public who can be clear neither about what a sentence means nor about when a prisoner is likely to be released. Worse still, the system lacks proper consistency or progression. The punishment that an offender receives may depend more on where the offender is sentenced than on what he or she is sentenced for.

In the Staffordshire Moorlands magistrates court, one in six defendants convicted of indictable offences receives an immediate sentence of imprisonment. In Maidenhead, Berkshire, the chance is not one in six, but one in 66. We now have the bizarre situation where, according to figures that I gave in my paper, the sentence length for repeat house burglars remains the same—at 15 months—whether for a first, second or third conviction. The custodial sentence for dealing in drugs on a third conviction is two months less than on the first.

We need a sentencing system which operates clearly and transparently, is consistent between courts and is progressively more severe the more persistent or dangerous the criminal behaviour. It is on those aims—on the paramount need to improve public safety—that we shall judge the Crime (Sentences) Bill. The public, especially women and children, must be protected as far as possible from those who have raped and then rape again. Some 21 years ago, an official committee recommended an indeterminate reviewable sentence for such dangerous offenders. The proposal in the present crime Bill for an indeterminate life sentence to be imposed for repeat rapists and other serious sexual offenders, with exceptions, amounts to the same thing—and we support it. The sentence served will of course still be determined by reference to the particular offence and the particular offender.

Mr. Bermingham: I declare an interest as a practising lawyer. I recognise unreservedly the danger of the repeat rapist, but half the problem has always been that those serving a sentence for rape are not regularly medically assessed to determine whether there are any predilections toward a repeat offence. Would it not be sensible to invest in regular medical assessments for those who are sentenced once—never mind twice—for rape, and to allow those assessments to form part of the view of the parole board in deciding when it is safe to release them?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend makes an important point and we must consider it carefully. I know from my visits to vulnerable prisoner units that the Prison Service is already doing a good deal to get sexual offenders to confront their offending behaviour. I recall a chilling occasion when I was sitting in a cell with three prisoners who had been convicted of rape and one of them said to me—I think that he was telling the truth—that it had taken him eight years to recognise that it was not he, but the woman whom he had raped, who was the victim. The capacity of such rapists to turn the world upside down and to convince themselves that they are the victims is quite extraordinary.

Such people are profoundly dangerous. That is why we support the proposal that the decision to release someone convicted of a second serious sexual offence should not be made at the moment of sentencing, but at an appropriate time when it is judged safe to do so. The sentence in such a case will be determined by reference to the particular offence and the particular offender. After the minimum laid down by the trial judge, the parole board will decide on release when, in its opinion, it is safe to do so. There will therefore in practice be nothing fixed or automatic about the length of term served in such cases.

We support the aim of securing greater transparency or honesty in sentencing. I am concerned, however, that the Home Secretary's proposals could result in serious criminals being released without an assessment of the risk that they pose to the public and that the proposals could reduce the period of supervision in the community after release. That strong, though not irrefutable, case was

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made by the Parole Board. We believe that there may be a means whereby the Home Secretary can achieve the accepted aim of greater honesty in sentencing without scrapping the mechanism developed to protect the public from dangerous criminals after they have served their sentence. We want to pursue that matter in Committee.

The third proposal in the Crime (Sentences) Bill is for so-called automatic fixed minimum sentences for drug dealers and domestic burglars convicted for a third time. The Home Secretary told us today that he had not changed his position. Who was he trying to kid? When he first announced the plan at the Conservative party conference last year, he said that he had a simple answer to those who offend again and again and again:

"If you don't want the time, don't do the crime."

There were to be no exceptions to that rule. The word exceptions did not appear once in his speech to the 1995 conference.

The Home Secretary knew that his words were good for a headline, but he also knew that they would be hopeless as a policy: a wholly rigid and inflexible sentence to apply in every circumstance was, as he well knew, bound to produce manifest injustice and to lead, as his predecessors had all predicted, to more not guilty pleas and to more guilty people walking free.

The Home Secretary had to start watering down his proposals. In December, he conceded that there might have to be exceptions to the rule. By April, in a statement to the House, he grudgingly acknowledged that there would have to be exceptions, but said that they would be limited to

"genuine, very special, exceptional circumstances."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1996; Vol. 275, c. 394.]

The Government's White Paper referred to "occasional, quite unforeseeable circumstances".

Now all those qualifications have been dropped from the Bill and the courts are to be given a much wider discretion not to apply the so-called minimum if they are of the opinion that there are exceptional circumstances. As both the prosecution and the defence will be able to challenge the trial judge's definition of exceptional circumstances, the Court of Appeal will quite swiftly lay down detailed guidance on the criteria.

Next we learned that there would be up to a fifth off the sentence if the defendant pleaded guilty. In addition, for the largest category of criminals concerned—repeat domestic burglars—the provisions would not in practice start to bite until 2001.

The problem with the Home Secretary's original simple answer is that it was never really simple, just simplistic and naive. His clarion call about time and crime has now become, "If you don't want the time, don't do the crime until 2001 and, by the way, there's 20 per cent. off if you plead guilty and even more discount for exceptional circumstances." We dispute not the Home Secretary's aim—stiffer sentences—but his methods. He has rowed back a long way and we shall examine his proposals with greater care in Committee.

We support other proposals in the Bill, including the proposals for sensible alternatives to imprisonment for fine defaulters, the substitution of the Parole Board for the Home Secretary's discretion on juveniles detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, and a new and long overdue provision for mentally disordered offenders.

Mr. Howard: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he has no proposals for automatic life sentences for second serious violent offences?

Mr. Straw: I am glad that the Home Secretary asked that. In the past I have spoken of my concern about the breadth of the categories of offences that would trigger that proposal. I have no difficulty at all about those offences of serious violence which result in homicide or about sexual offences, but I have some reservations about the breadth of section 18 wounding. It would be sensible to discuss that matter in Committee, and we shall do that.

We shall ensure that the Bill receives a Second Reading when it is debated next week. In Committee, we shall scrutinise the detail and try to improve the Bill as a whole. We shall make final decisions on its separate specific elements once they have been fully considered.

One other measure in the Bill has our whole-hearted support: that relating to the calculation of time spent on remand. One thing that the Home Secretary told the Tory party conference last year has certainly come true: "Release from prison—", he said, "it comes too soon." Those words were ringing in the ears of 541 hardened criminals as they walked free in August, months—in some cases years—before their sentences should have come to an end. There are few better illustrations than that bizarre spectacle of the chaotic way in which the Home Secretary has administered the Prison Service. Clarification of the law is long overdue, and we shall secure it.

The legislative programme is as significant for what has been omitted as for what has been included. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has been Secretary of State for three and a half years. He has presided over a Prison Service in persistent crisis, a youth justice system in disarray, mounting public fear about crime and rising anxiety about the fracturing of our society. However, he has notched up one achievement to his credit that we would not dream of taking away.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North): Do not be so generous.

Mr. Straw: I am generous.

Opinion polls record that the Conservative party is even less trusted on law and order now than it was three and a half years ago, when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Home Secretary.

It may be the growing realisation that the Home Secretary's principal powers of persuasion are to drive voters into Labour's hands that led the chairman of the Tory party to make an otherwise extraordinary decision about the timing of debates at Conservative party conference a few weeks ago: those stars of the political stage, the Secretary of State for National Heritage and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, were put on at prime time, with live coverage; but the Home Secretary's speech was delayed until live television coverage had been switched off—his place taken by Oprah Winfrey. Even Sky abandoned him. I had to surf the radio waves to hear his familiar tones crackling through the medium wave of Radio 5 Live. Those

members of the British public who, like me, were able to hear the Secretary of State, if not see him, would have heard him promise action on paedophiles, stalking and sex tourism. With regard to a Bill for a paedophile register, he said:

"I intend to bring it in."

Of the proposed stalking Bill, he said "I will make sure" that women get protection from stalking.

If Conservative Members want to know why the Tory party has lost the plot on law and order, they should consider what followed. First, the Minister of State announced 10 days ago that the stalking Bill was to be left to the lottery of the private Member's Bill procedure. Only last week, we learned from *The Times* that the Bill to introduce a paedophile register would also remain outside the Government's programme. As soon as I found out about that change of position, I wrote to the Secretary of State to offer our co-operation to get the measures through. He wrote back almost as swiftly as I had sent the letter—rejecting the offer.

At 11.30 am last Wednesday, as Her Majesty was about to read her speech, the Secretary of State's senior officials and aides were briefing heavily on his behalf that there was no way in the world that the Secretary of State would allow these measures in Government time. It was to be the private Member's Bill route or nothing, and that position was repeated by Ministers in all lunchtime interviews.

At 3.30 pm my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition repeated the offer that the Secretary of State had rejected the day before. We then witnessed the extraordinary spectacle of an impromptu meeting of the legislation committee of the Cabinet taking place on the Treasury Bench, followed by the public humiliation of the Secretary of State as the Prime Minister overruled his decision of the previous day and announced that the two measures would, after all, be in the Government's legislative programme.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman knows how preposterous is the version of events that he has just given. The truth is that the offer made by the Leader of the Opposition across the Floor of the House bore no relation to the offer that the hon. Gentleman made in his letter to me. The offer that he made in his letter to me was that the Labour party would treat these Bills in the same way as in the last Session it treated the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Bill and the Security Service Bill, both of which took seven months to reach the statute book. We do not have seven months for these Bills to reach the statute book, so we could not possibly have acceded to his offer. The Leader of the Opposition made an entirely different offer of a fast-track procedure for these Bills, and that was why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister accepted it.

Mr. Straw: I have the letter with me that I wrote to the Secretary of State. The offer that I made was exactly the same as the offer that my right hon. Friend made. Indeed, my right hon. Friend made the offer because I had made the offer the day before and the Secretary of State had refused it.

So far as co-operation is concerned, the Secretary of State just made a very unwise intervention. I will, if I may, offer him this gratuitous advice. It does not do for the Secretary of State to talk about the delays that took place on the Security Service Bill. He knows that we co-operated fully on that Bill. It was given its Second Reading on 10 January. It then went to Committee. Its Third Reading took place on 14 February and it was committed the very next day to the House of Lords. What happened next? For no reason to do with Opposition Members, but everything to do with Government business managers, the Conservative party then delayed the introduction of that measure for three further months. That was why it took seven months. It would have taken four months if they had followed our timetable.

Mr. Howard *rose—*

Mr. Straw: This must be the last intervention.

Mr. Howard: Does the hon. Gentleman not appreciate that if a Bill has to be slotted into the main legislative programme without any offer of fast-track procedures that is precisely what will happen? That is why, in the absence of the assurance that we had from the Leader of the Opposition, it was sensible to say that a private Member's Bill would be the best way forward. It was only the assurance of the hon. Gentleman's right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition that made things different. Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that?

Mr. Straw: What I do understand is the advice that my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Healey once gave, and which I now give to the Secretary of State:

"If you are in a hole, stop digging."

I am delighted that in the end we have ensured that the Secretary of State's clear promise at the Tory party conference will be now be backed by action and, as I said in my letter, we shall co-operate fully on these Bills, as we did last year on two important criminal justice Bills—the Security Service Bill and the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Bill. Indeed, so much did we co-operate that the Secretary of State and the Minister of State put their thanks on record.

Do not this sorry shambles and the dreadful display that we have just seen from the Secretary of State show how vacillation and indecision have again taken over the current Administration? They say one thing; they do another. The talk may be tough, but the action is weak and ineffectual. Indeed, in some cases, they say one thing and then do nothing.

One has only to consider the three-year saga on identity cards. First, we had the flagship policy from the Prime Minister, in April 1993, of compulsory ID cards. Then we had the holding policy from the Secretary of State of voluntary ID cards, followed by a diversionary argument about whether the Union flag should appear on the cards, and whether they were voluntary or compulsory. Then we had the intervention of the Tory right-wing leadership challenger, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who said that any kind of ID card was a bad idea. So now we have no ID cards, just the fig leaf of a draft Bill that the Secretary of State did not even bother to mention.

As I made clear last year in the debate on the Security Service Bill, we support the principle of a properly accountable national police squad and look forward to co-operating with the Government to get this measure on

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the statute book. We have also supported the plan for a criminal records agency, provided that there are effective safeguards, but we believe that that measure alone will not provide adequate protection against the scourge of cowboy, criminal private security companies.

There is now widespread appreciation that our society is deeply fractured. We are reaping the whirlwind of a selfish "me first" society in which too often people demand rights but refuse to accept responsibility. What we have proposed are measures so that communities can rebuild confidence and control over people's lives, so that young offenders and their parents are forced to accept responsibility for their wrongdoing before it goes too far. We have called for comprehensive measures to deal with neighbourhood disorder, where youngsters roam the streets without any adult supervision, to establish an effective duty on local authorities to work in partnership with the police, for a thorough reform of the youth justice system, new and tougher drug treatment and testing programmes to get addicts away from their habit, for a major shake-up of the Crown Prosecution Service, with locally accountable prosecutors for each police force area, and effective regulation of the private security industry. As we heard earlier, we also propose a ban on the marketing and sale of combat knives.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point, although I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will be surprised that it has taken him so long to get there. Assuming that the hon. Gentleman is not synthetic in his strong views on the banning of knives, will he now give a clear definition of a combat knife so that the House can legislate swiftly to outlaw them?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman had been here earlier—

Mr. Fabricant: I was.

Mr. Straw: In that case, if the hon. Gentleman had been awake, he would remember that I quoted the representative of the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales, which has said that if they can get a man on the moon—

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When one asks a clear question for a clear definition so that the House can legislate—for the record, I have been present throughout the whole debate and have heard what the hon. Gentleman is about to read out—is it in order for the hon. Member to rattle out an answer that he gave a quarter of an hour or 20 minutes ago and not to answer my question?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): That is not a point of order for the Chair. Indeed, if it were, the burden on the Chair would be tremendous.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that the drafting of Bills does not take place across the Floor of the House. However, like the Police Superintendents Association, I believe that it is possible to distinguish between a kitchen knife and a combat knife. What is more, I also believe, and it was our opinion back in 1988—I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was in the House then, but no doubt he would have joined his hon. Friends and voted against the measures on the control— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Straw: I know that the hon. Gentleman was not here. It is just as well, and he will not be here next time—

Mr. Fabricant: You still have not given us a definition.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) is very keen that we should all be in order, I remind him that seated interventions are out of order.

Mr. Straw: We believe that it is possible not only to give a definition that will distinguish between kitchen knives and those disgusting combat knives, but to control the sale and marketing of combat knives, and we have done so for eight years.

I have made it clear that we require a more effective sentencing system. Given that only one crime in 50 results in a conviction, sentencing is only a partial solution to a far wider problem. A co-ordinated strategy is required to prevent crime and to tackle the underlying causes of crime, such as bad parenting, truancy, youth unemployment and drug and alcohol abuse. Each of the measures that we have proposed would make some difference and would improve the quality of people's lives, but taken together they would significantly shift the balance against the wrongdoer, and improve the self-confidence of citizens and their communities. They would re-establish the notion that responsibility and respect for others are the preconditions of rights and freedoms from others.

None of the proposals to which I have referred should be controversial, because they have been widely welcomed by the police, local authorities and groups campaigning for better standards of parenting. Yet time and again, our proposals are dismissed by this Administration. First, they say that the measures are not necessary. Then, as they discover how detached they are from public opinion, they introduce half-hearted versions of our proposals and hope that the public will not notice that they have made yet another U-turn.

The current Administration have presided over the near collapse of the youth justice system, which is ineffectual, wasteful and replete with delay. It permits scandals such as the one in Mansfield, Nottingham, where six young offenders were arrested 419 times last year before any effective action was taken. The Secretary of State always talks tough, but his actions are too often weak or even non-existent.

The Government have been panicked by our proposals and by an Audit Commission report that is likely to be damning in its criticism. Consequently, they have drawn up new plans for young offenders, as the Prime Minister told the Tory party conference. However, it seems that there are no plans to reform the youth courts, and there is little prospect of any action this side of the election. It has been the same old story with knives, child sex tourism, stalking and paedophiles: so anxious are the Government

to score cheap political points that they put the interests of victims and their communities below the self-interest of the Tory party.

The first duty of any Government is to secure the safety of their citizens and their communities. On that, the present Administration have failed. They have lost not only the plot on law and order, but the confidence of the British people. The Government are profoundly out of touch with people's feelings and anxieties. They lack a proper understanding of the causes of crime, and they have no coherent strategy or vision for dealing with the epidemic of crime and disorder that now scars the nation. We shall be tough on crime, and tough on its causes. We shall give communities the power to help people face up to their responsibilities. We shall close the yawning gap between the number of crimes and the number of convictions. We shall make this country a safer place.

5.13 pm

Mr. David Mellor (Putney): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State on a vigorous speech, with almost all of which I entirely agreed. I am sorry that, owing to the constraints of time, I must focus on the one section with which I did not agree.

I can tell the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) that I recall the comment about losing the plot. It was made on the radio in the aftermath of the publication of the Home Affairs Select Committee's report. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, if I had thought that the Government had lost the plot on law and order, I would not have been afraid to say so, but that is not what I said. I suspect that he is relying on an errant transcription taken down from the radio.

I reiterate what I have said since Dunblane. I think that the Government would have been well advised to move more swiftly on this matter, and in the direction of a total ban. But I do not believe, and have never said—I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not continue to say that I said it—that the Conservative party has lost the plot on law and order.

I hope that the superficial, partisan element of this debate will be calmed down. In the aftermath of the shooting, the Prime Minister invited the Leader of the Opposition to go with him to Dunblane. The two of them stood together with the Secretary of State for Scotland and the shadow Scottish spokesman. As they were all deeply moved, indeed overwhelmed, by such a singular tragedy in the history of our nation, I hoped that it marked the beginning of a process that would enable the House to move swiftly and decisively towards a resolution of this matter in a way that would gain the public's sympathy.

Thomas Hamilton was able to obtain a small arsenal of handguns with the assent of the public as expressed through our laws and the way in which they were applied. He was then able to go into that school and massacre 16 infants and their teacher. It is perfectly understandable that the public want a repudiation of the gun culture, and of the introduction in this country of the alien concepts of the right to bear arms and the right to use handguns—I am not making the point about shotguns, because they are different—as depicted in American mass entertainment.

I still think that it would have been better to have disciplined discussions between the parties. Hon. Members should have had the opportunity to state their views before the Government had made up their mind on their response to the Cullen report. My right hon. and learned Friend has proposed a measure that will go a long way towards resolving the problem: indeed, I previously thought that it could have been an opportunity for compromise. The tragedy is that public opinion has hardened. As predicted, Lord Cullen was unable to help on policy issues—he is a judge, and it is not a judge's job to make policy.

Mr. David Martin (Portsmouth, South): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Mellor: I do not have time to give way.

It is a judge's job to evaluate evidence, not to make policy. My right hon. and learned Friend must have been as distressed as the rest of us when he woke the day after he made his statement. It was as if he had done nothing about this matter. He said that, after such a singular tragedy, each of us should draw on our own experience when making up our minds, and I hope that that is the spirit in which hon. Members will make up their minds—some more speedily than others, because some of us have had experience of this problem. I was a Minister in the Home Office for more than five years, which is at least as much as anyone else. My view is that a tightening of the gun laws is long overdue.

The range of options is fairly narrow: we reject the Government's proposals—as some of my hon. Friends want to do—because they go too far; or we accept them as a reasonable balance between the interests of the wider community and those of shooters; or we say that they do not go far enough and that there should be a total ban.

The Government are faced with two unpalatable alternatives, one of which is to be defeated. After 17 years in the House, I have never voted against the Government on a three-line Whip. I do not want to be turned into a rebel merely to be consistent in my view about what needs to be done. Ultimately, we will all have to bend to the will of the public, as the Government have shown. I am sure that they wanted a much less draconian proposal than the measure that they have introduced.

The public will not be denied on this issue. The tragedy for the Government is that, even if they carry the day, they will gain small comfort, because the public will think that the measure is wrong.

Mr. John Carlisle: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Mellor: No, I will not, because I have only 10 minutes.

It would be better if we were allowed to bring our independent judgments to bear. There would be no shame or disgrace on anyone for having held any particular view. I hope that that can be done.

Clubs will have to go to much trouble and fuss to establish proper storage arrangements for .22 calibre guns. There are more than 2,000 clubs, whose members do not want this measure. They are supposed to operate a compromise that they have rejected out of hand. I do not see the point of that.

Derisive comments were made when I asked my right hon. and learned Friend how he would feel if people traded down from one calibre of handgun to another.

[Mr. Mellor]

If it is the public will—as I believe it is—to do away with handguns altogether, what is the point of saying that only 40,000 of the 160,000 handguns will be left, when the truth of the matter is that many people will simply invest in .22 calibre guns? Those .22 calibre guns are known to be extremely dangerous. They were responsible for the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Yitzhak Rabin, and for the attempted assassinations of Governor Wallace and President Reagan. That is why I hope that the House will not underestimate the strength of public feeling on this matter.

The Government have a good record in dealing with the problem of knives. Some categories have been banned by order, and the Bill that had Government support in the last Session increases the penalties for going out with knives. It is right to look further, and I hope that that will be done in the spirit of sensible co-operation between the Front Benches.

We should make some further legislative intrusion into the culture of violence which leads to those dreadful magazines that were produced by Opposition spokesmen and the description of weapons that are manifestly sold on the basis of their ability to harm others rather than on their usefulness in the kitchen. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman) mentioned that. That should not be beyond the wit of people, and some of the ingenuity that is being used to say that it cannot be done should be used to say that it must be done.

Why are Rambo side-swords or whatever they are called being produced? It is for only one reason—as a contribution to the culture of violence that we have imported by our unthinking acceptance of American entertainment norms. The House needs to grasp that. I was a Minister with responsibility for broadcasting and I am aware that we have all permitted this to happen, but even in Hollywood people are becoming aware of the unacceptable culture of violence. Each film is trying to push the frontier even further forwards, gratuitous violence is pumped in and television follows.

What is spawning the kind of young thug who murdered Philip Lawrence? It is the fact that he could go round as a Triad. Did he learn about Triads even in the advanced history classes in inner-London schools? Absolutely not: he learned about Triads from a cult of unpleasant and unattractive films, which influenced his immature mind. Many people can endure such stuff but others cannot, and we shall have to look long and hard at the issue. It is not a matter for legislation. It is more likely to be a case of asking the British Board of Film Classification to tighten up on violence.

Throughout the 1980s, we were obsessed with sex in films, when we should have been obsessed with violence. It is the unwillingness of television companies, film makers and film distributors to come to terms with that which leads to the kind of climate that breeds the parasites, the people who run the clubs that pander to the taste for violence that has captured the imagination of some people in society, some of whom inevitably ape what they see in public entertainment.

I warmly welcome the Home Secretary's proposals on paedophiles. The problem is that it is extremely difficult for a person, once committed to paedophilia, to get rid of the habit. The difficulty that bedevils the law in this area is that people are punished for what they have done but are released without any test for dangerousness. Future danger is what we must fear, and that can lead to ghastly situations, as in the murder of young Sophie Hook. Howard Hughes, who was a known paedophile, was regarded as a ticking time-bomb, a disaster waiting to happen. However, he could not be apprehended until he had done something vile. I hope that the Home Secretary's proposed changes to the law can deal with that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman's 10 minutes are up. I call Mr. Denzil Davies.

5.23 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Some of the Bills mentioned in the debate will receive a Second Reading and be debated again several times. In the nine and three quarter minutes that are left to me, I shall deal with the seven lines in the Gracious Speech on the European Union and their failure to relate to the single currency or its constitutional consequences.

I am not surprised that the Government did not mention the single currency. Since 1972, the Government and, I am sorry to say, the Opposition have embarked on a journey of obfuscation on the constitutional consequences for the House and for democratically elected Governments of a single currency. The leadership of both main parties are determined to establish that a decision to join the single currency is a matter of economics and nothing else. It is said that it is a question for the counting house and not about the United Kingdom's constitution and the power of the Government.

Whatever the economic advantages or disadvantages—that matter poses difficult questions—the single currency is substantially about democracy. As I have said, it is about the power of democratically elected Governments over the economy. Whatever one's view of the economic consequences, it cannot be denied that joining the single currency would considerably diminish our already imperfect democracy.

The powers that now reside with democratically elected Governments over a range of significant economic functions such as the exchange rate, the setting of interest rates, the control of the money supply, price stability, the control of inflation and the level of public borrowing would be lost. Those powers would go to a European central bank or to the Commission, or they would be entrenched in treaties, all of which would be supervised and controlled by the European Court of Justice. Powers currently exercised by Ministers in democratic states would be exercised by bankers, bureaucrats and lawyers.

Many people argue that it is not necessary to have such powers, or that they are illusory, and democratic Governments do not really possess them. It is also said that they are too important to the functioning of a modern economy to be left to democracy. For example, let us examine power over the exchange rate. We have been told that devolution is bad and no panacea, so it is better not to have it. Of course it is not a panacea. Everybody understands that, from time to time, short-term adjustments have to be made to an economy, and that the power to devalue helps to make such adjustments.

The German Government are desperate to devalue the mark because of problems over productivity and wage costs. I have not read pompous editorials in the *Financial Times* about how terrible is devaluation. The Germans are said to be adjusting their parity, or trying to, and of course it is being adjusted down, because that has short-term benefits. I make no criticism of the Germans for that.

A few years ago, many people said to me that the Government no longer had power to set interest rates, and that anyway the Bundesbank does it. One good feature that emerged recently is the transparency introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his fine-tuning of the British economy with the Governor of the Bank of England. It is a crazy system, but at least we know that it is done by the British Government. That has been happening since the war, but it now it takes place more or less in public. The British Government, quite properly after consultation with the Governor of the Bank of England, determine interest rates.

Price stability is a strange concept. I understand that it means that inflation should be zero, or perhaps 1 per cent., and that decisions should be taken on the basis that inflation must remain very low or be non-existent. That is the latest economic ideology. Again we are told that price stability is too important to be left to politicians but must be entrenched, as it is in the Maastricht treaty. None of us must touch this economic icon.

One can imagine on 1 January 1999 this icon of price stability being carried through the streets of Frankfurt, bedecked, bejewelled and painted, taken to the cathedral of the European central bank and placed there away from democracy and the mobs in the streets, so that it is unsullied and undesecrated. But economic fashion changes, and economic ideologies come and go. The gold standard was considered a marvellous ideology, and perhaps it was for a long time. If the Maastricht treaty had been drawn up in the gold standard era, we would have had an entrenched clause in the treaty saying that the gold standard had to go on for ever and be protected by treaty.

It is said—I do not know whether it is true—that, when Britain eventually came off the gold standard in the 1930s, a former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer said, "Nobody told us we could do that." If we had had the Maastricht treaty in the 1930s, we could not have gone off the gold standard.

We come to the 1950s and that now despised ideology, if I can so describe it, of Keynesianism. For 20 years, from the 1950s to the middle of 1970s at least, there was no alternative to the doctrines and theories of John Maynard Keynes. All the political parties agreed. Bankers did not spit on Keynes in the 1950s and 1960s. Again, if we had had the Maastricht treaty then, Keynes's theories would have been entrenched in that treaty, to go on for ever, despite the changing economic circumstances of the 1970s, which in the end destroyed that economic fashion and ideology.

I dare say that price stability will not last very long either, and that that economic fashion will become outdated, but we are asked to entrench it for ever. The House will not be able to change it. Democratically elected Governments will have no power to do so. It is supposed to be put beyond the reach of the horrible mob and that terrible thing called democracy.

Finally, there is public debt and public borrowing. The House knows—I will not go over it again—about the 3 per cent. and the 60 per cent., but, in addition, it is necessary to introduce a stability pact into the operation. Understandably, we cannot have Governments inflating their public borrowing and then seeking redress or recompense, or to be paid by the other European Union Governments, so we are going to write in another limitation on the power of democratically elected Governments—this time the limitation that they cannot borrow more than a certain figure—again all to be entrenched in non-democratic institutions and treaties.

My party believes—I subscribe wholly to that belief—in devolution. We believe in taking power from bureaucracy in the United Kingdom—in Wales, Scotland and the regions of England—and handing that power somehow to regional assemblies, which will be able to debate these matters. That would be two steps forward for democracy, but, if we signed up to the single currency, it would be eight steps back for democracy.

We all protest that we believe in democratic accountability, in bringing power to the regions—we all make these speeches and, I think, we all believe them—yet here we are embarked on an exercise that will diminish and floor democracy by entrenching these ideologies and theories, which will never be able to be changed, either by the House or by a democratically elected Government.

I mean no disrespect, but the Gracious Speech is half a speech, because it is for half a Parliament. The next Queen's Speech in about six months will be that of a new democratically elected Government. It will be made at the threshold of conclusions in the intergovernmental conference and of major decisions on the single currency. I live in hope that the next Queen's Speech will frankly tell Parliament and the people the consequences of the single currency for the House. I live in hope, but experience tells us otherwise.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Sir Peter Lloyd.

5.33 pm

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): I am not going to follow the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) in his disquisition on the single currency, but I am happy to endorse what he says, and hope that his party listens to him with care. Instead, I should like to reach guns and sentencing via Hong Kong—a circuitous route, I know.

I applaud the references to Hong Kong in the Gracious Speech. I took the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990 through the House. It proved a far-sighted measure—good for Hong Kong, for China and for the United Kingdom—even if it was more limited than I would have liked it to be. I was conscious, however, that some loose ends were left, which I expected to be dealt with reasonably soon afterwards. Citizenship for war widows was one example. Although the substance was conceded, with an undertaking that they could come to the UK whenever they wanted, the desire for citizenship was insensitively and pointlessly denied for years.

That is now to be remedied, I believe, but it should have been done before. I hope that any other such claims on our duty and loyalty to the people in Hong Kong—for instance, in relation to the armed services or the ethnic minorities, who have no other home—will be dealt with imaginatively and generously.

[Sir Peter Lloyd]

It would be a pity if our departure from Hong Kong were marred by minor meanness. I am glad that we shall be having a debate on Hong Kong before Christmas, when such matters can be dealt with more thoroughly than I can do now.

We shall also have a debate, it seems even sooner, on the firearms Bill. It was right that the Government should immediately set up a review of gun laws in response to the appalling atrocity at Dunblane. It was right to pay special attention to the bereaved parents and the horrified disbelief of the public at large. It is, however, seldom right to legislate at high speed out of sympathy and guilt. Our duty in the House is to make sound, just and effective law. Lord Cullen appears to have produced a thorough review, which should be studied and thoroughly discussed. I am not yet convinced that the Government are justified in going beyond his recommendations.

I have never been interested in shooting. It has always seemed to me a boring sport, and I have always felt suspicious of people who find it exciting. However, many law-abiding people gain sober pleasure and satisfaction from the combination of discipline, co-ordination and concentration that accurate shooting requires. They are not a threat to society. Their guns are held securely, and we can require that they are held even more securely and that licences are even more difficult to obtain.

We should do that, but I wonder whether it is right, or a fitting memorial to the murdered children, to ban a lawful sport and to incur a large bill for compensation, which could be spent on genuinely effective anti-crime programmes, when there is little or no evidence that the public—children or adult—would be any better protected as a result.

I have similar reservations about the crime Bill. It contains much of value, but its proposals, particularly on sentencing, do not seem to have been properly thought through, and we shall regret it if they reach the statute book unchanged. It will not achieve greater honesty in sentencing, and ending parole will leave the public less well protected. Minimum sentences will not better deter, but they will certainly lead to injustice in a proportion of cases, which will bring those changes, and thus criminal justice in Britain, into disrepute.

By contrast, not enough use is made of indeterminate sentences—partly, I suspect, because, to sound fiercer, they are called life sentences, although that greater honesty that is much spoken of in this context would demand another name.

I made those points more fully in the debate on sentencing in the summer. As I shall no doubt repeat them on Second Reading, I shall not weary the House now. I will say that Parliament has the duty as well as the power to limit the discretion of judges, if justice and the safety of the public require it. In 1991, Parliament restricted the right of courts to take previous offences into account. That was a mistake that had to be remedied.

We should beware of making a similar error at the other end of the law and order spectrum. It will not be sufficient to allow judges discretion just in cases where there are exceptional circumstances, as the Bill presently does. The problem will come with cases in which a concatenation of ordinary factors makes the mandatory sentence the wrong one. The court will be left with no opinion but to pass it. I hope that further debate will produce amendments that will transform the Bill into the good legislation that it could be.

5.39 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Never have home affairs Bill provided such a large proportion of the Gracious Speech—and that was true even before two Bills were added, although that was more by accident than design. I welcome the Prime Minister's decision—a genuine change of mind to incorporate the stalking Bill and paedophile register into the Government's programme—but I criticise some previous actions. I heard the Minister of State's announcement the week before because I attended the conference that he addressed, and it was successfully designed to secure the headline "Government will put stalkers behind bars". However, he never said that the Government would not introduce the Bill. That should have been the announcement: "Government to exclude stalking Bill from programme". Thankfully, that was overturned by the Prime Minister.

To compound the felony, Ministers went around saying that a private Member's Bill would have been a fast-track method of dealing with that legislation. Clearly some Ministers have never attempted to take a private Member's Bill through the House—otherwise they would know that such a Bill could not be introduced until shortly before Christmas at the earliest, and that its prospects would depend on which hon. Members came high in the ballot. I can think of two or three Conservative Members—a couple of whom have intervened in this debate—who would not have adopted such a Bill. Also, the subsequent stages of a private Member's Bill are much more staggered than those of Government Bills.

If the Government want to know what is meant by a fast-track Bill, they should consider their agenda for Thursday, when the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill will be taken on a fast track through the House in Government time. That is the only real fast track that allows proper debate and consideration. The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Maidstone (Miss Widdecombe), suggested that the stalking Bill could be taken through all its stages in one day—that we should not even debate and properly examine the details of that complex legislation. One can take a Bill through the House reasonably quickly and still examine it properly. Taking it through the House without any debate at the closing moments of Friday business is not a reasonable way to legislate—and would be a great disservice to the people whom we seek to protect. Both Bills are important. If we get them right, they are potentially of real value.

Other Bills have fallen by the wayside. The Government have now announced that they are sympathetic to a sex tourism Bill, but it is still not in their programme. This afternoon, the Home Secretary appeared to suggest, in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Ms Lynne), that the Government have not finally decided to exclude such a Bill from their programme. Perhaps it will appear as one of the other measures that will be laid before us. The right hon. and learned Gentleman did not seem to exclude that possibility, so we will continue placing pressure on him.

We would like a Bill, or the inclusion of appropriate clauses in other Bills, to regulate the private security industry. It remains a scandal that criminals can gain such

easy access to an industry that offers them the opportunity to commit further crimes while posing as protectors of the public. The industry itself wants change and is crying out for regulation.

We are in favour of draft Bills, but it is a bit of a joke to say that the identity cards Bill is being published as a draft. It has already been the subject of widespread consultation and the Home Secretary has already told Ministers which flags must appear on the card. It is called a draft Bill because of deep division in the Government.

The route for draft Bills looks compromised and blocked, now that the draft adoption Bill is not to feature in the Government's programme. It was the subject of widespread consultation but has disappeared from view, despite having enjoyed widespread support—which suggests that the Government's inclusion of various measures as draft Bills is not constitutional reform but the pigeonhole into which losing candidates were put when left out of the Queen's Speech.

We welcome the Police Bill. I am on record as arguing that it should have come before the House before the Security Service Bill, because it attempts to put in place a system of national co-ordination of police intelligence and national operations against crime, into which Security Service work must be plugged. The provision for formal authorisation of eavesdropping is important and we need to get it right. It raises the matter to which the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) referred—press speculation that admissibility of eavesdropping evidence in court might be introduced by means of yet another Bill. The Home Secretary sounded as though he had not heard about that issue before and gave an extremely defensive answer.

It is a matter of anxiety that a body as important at the National Criminal Intelligence Service appeared to command such little confidence in a recent survey. That service's work is extremely important. Its position has been far too shadowy and has been inadequately provided for in legislation.

What is needed are more policemen and confidence-building measures in communities. Must the new policeman's helmet be in the form that has appeared? The public will find it baffling to see police officers looking like people gathering for a cycle club outing. Police uniform has some bearing on public perception, and many officers regard the dignity of their uniform as something to be considered with care. I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton), who is the Minister of State, Scottish Office, is not in a position to comment, because the traditional helmet is not worn in Scotland except by the British Transport police. However, that helmet is significant in England, where the public make traditional assumptions. Anything that chisels away at those assumptions can be unwise.

We have said all along that we will assist during the passage of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill through the House. The Government have accepted a mass of Lord Cullen's recommendations. Some of them present cost problems. The vetting of youth leaders is important, but the Scout Association has pointed out that it will incur extra costs. Many other organisations will do the same. Those costs will represent an investment in preventing crimes that may be committed by unsavoury people who get into youth leadership work, and will ensure that youth organisations can continue their good work. That is vital in turning another generation of young people away from crime. Their role is underestimated.

All parties have gone beyond Lord Cullen's recommendations on handguns, which did not say that they should be outlawed. All parties have sought, in different degrees, to take account of strong public concern and demand. That emphasises my party's belief that there should be a free vote on that legislation—the differences of opinion we have heard from Conservative Members make it obvious that that should be so—or some hon. Members will be dragooned into voting for something in which they do not believe and think unwise.

The Government's proposals on handguns do not command support from people who would like a total ban or from shooting sports organisations, which view the proposals as unworkable and offering no reasonable prospect of a continuation of Olympic standard sports shooting. Nor do the Government's proposals command support among the police. The Police Federation has made it clear that it anticipates real difficulties in trying to administer the Government scheme. We must look for another approach. When an amendment on a total ban is proposed—perhaps by a Labour Front Bencher—right hon. and hon. Members will examine its exemptions. Will there be an exemption for professional use, such as by veterinary surgeons? Will there be an exemption that would allow the Commonwealth games to take place in Manchester in 2002, as planned? It is clear that all party leaders have felt it necessary to respond to enormous public concern.

The Government will also have to re-examine compensation. They have shown a willingness to compensate at market value the owners of guns that are made illegal, but clubs may be forced to close. Many of the legitimate businesses involved are small firms of the kind that the Government claim to favour, but those firms are being hit disastrously. Compensation must not be limited to gun owners. If the Government's proposals are passed, some gun owners will be unable to use their legal weapons because no club will be available to them—and will be unable to sell those guns because the market in them will have collapsed. If a total ban is not introduced, some provision will have to be made for that category. Let us not pretend that the legislation that we eventually pass will solve the problem. Many other types of gun will still be legally available and licensed and there will be many illegal guns. Effective policing remains crucial.

We want the Government to look at the knives issue and we have underlined our willingness to co-operate. Even if the only effect of banning combat knives is to prevent certain types of knives from being advertised, that, in itself, will be helpful.

We are also concerned about violence on television and videos. I gave a wry smile when I heard the Home Secretary say with pride that the Government had legislated against violent videos, as I knew that it was the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Mossley Hill (Mr. Alton), supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House, that forced the Government to take action in a previous Criminal Justice Bill.

I want to deal with sentencing. Our prisons are already scandalously overcrowded. Leading figures in the Prison Service concede that we might have to move to weekend prison sentences to cope with the pressure on our prisons.

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

Prison regimes designed to stop people coming out of prison as hardened criminals are falling by the wayside because of the pressures on the service. It is against that background that the Government want to make the fundamental constitutional change of taking away from courts and judges the ability to decide when life or other sentences are appropriate.

The issue is not whether a rapist should receive a life sentence at the second offence; it is whether Parliament should decree that a judge should, in all but the most exceptional circumstances, pass that sentence. That is what the issue is about—not the effectiveness of particular sentences. It is about what the framework should be. We believe that the proposed legislation—as well as its Scottish shadow to be brought in in its wake—is fundamentally misconceived. It runs counter to the Government's previous policies and legislation and to the work of previous Home Secretaries, such as the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd). There are constitutional objections as well as numerous practical objections.

If the legislation is passed, in cases of rape there will be fewer guilty pleas and greater ordeals for women victims of rape as they are questioned in an extremely unpleasant and oppressive way. More rapists will walk free because they will not have the incentive to plead guilty. Indeed, some rapists may murder because there will be no difference in penalty for the two crimes.

There will be an effect on the fight against drugs. If the legislation is passed, less intelligence will be available because the sentence will be automatic. Recently, some serious drug offenders were given extraordinarily broad concessions, presumably because they had provided intelligence that assisted in the apprehension of other offenders. *[Interruption.]* Whether or not that was the right route to use in that case, there is no doubt that it will be more difficult to use that route in future and intelligence will dry up. In addition, the parole system will be seriously undermined, almost to the point of being destroyed.

The cost of the proposals will be phenomenal—about £400 million a year on the Government's own estimate. Twelve new prisons are to be built. Where will the money come from? What part of the Home Office budget will suffer? Will it be policing? Will it be probation work? Will the money come from other Departments' budgets, such as education or social services? Will it come from the other agencies that are needed to fight crime?

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): The right hon. Gentleman rightly points out the cost of keeping people in prison, but what about the cost of leaving them at large to burgle our constituents' houses? What about the costs to the insurance companies, our constituents, the courts and the police who arrest those people time and time again?

Mr. Beith: We want offences prevented. The whole of the Government's policy approach is from the wrong end. It says, "Let us accept that there will be lots and lots of burglaries and violent crimes and then let us lock up people for longer and longer and in such a manner that they will be even more likely to commit further crimes when they eventually get out." The Government's policy does not deal with crime prevention.

The transfer of resources involved in building 12 new prisons will decimate the programmes necessary to prevent the offences from being carried out in the first place. In particular, the potential impact on policing is disastrous. Of course, it will not happen. We know—and the Government know—that those 12 new prisons will not be built. No part of this policy will be implemented—it is gesture politics. The Labour party should not fall for gesture politics. I acquit the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) of doing so with the Scottish Bill, as the Labour party made clear its fundamental opposition to it. Labour's opposition is not so clear when it comes to the English Bill. Indeed, if it does not oppose the Bill, it had better say how many prisons it is prepared to build and how much expenditure it would approve for a massive prison building programme. We will oppose the Bill because it is fundamentally misconceived and will damage programmes to prevent crime.

Sentencing is only a small part of fighting crime. Policing, preventing crime in every community and teaching young people the practical skills of parenting and citizenship and making them feel that they have a place in society will all be severely damaged by the transfer of resources involved in the proposed Bill, yet they are essential if we are to tackle crime.

The Conservative party, which is in office for just a few more months, has seen a doubling of crime, despite taking the opportunity to introduce a new Criminal Justice Bill every year. Each Bill was supposed to contain the answers to the problems of crime. Now, the Government are engaged in last-minute gesture politics, bringing forward proposals that will not work and that will not even come into force until long after the Government have gone for good. They cannot be taken seriously.

5.55 pm

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): I do not know why the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) says that it is gesture politics to promise to build 12 more prisons. We have built 22 prisons over the past decade and a half at a cost of £1.4 billion, providing 11,656 new places. If we have done it once, we can do it again. The right hon. Gentleman's remarks are just one example of the Liberal Democrats' ridiculous attacks on the Government.

The ludicrous speech of the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) should not pass without mention. As the Opposition see their lead in the public opinion polls slipping away, they are beginning to panic. As a result, the noise as they leap on to every passing bandwagon is becoming deafening. The whole country knows that their record on law and order is a disgrace. They have opposed or failed to support practically every toughening measure that the Government have introduced over the past 13 years.

Many of the ills in our society are due to the years of weak, wet, feeble socialism that the Labour party now rejects, but that found its way into all our Departments of State, including the Home Office. The Opposition seem to think that the public are less intelligent than they really are in noting such nonsense. They will get a big surprise when the next election comes if they stand on a law-and-order platform.

In contrast, my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is determined to protect people from crime. He has presented this country with a series of excellent

measures for the protection of society. They have the support not only of the police but of those whom we represent in this place. I shall come to those measures in a moment, but in passing I want to mention handguns. The Home Affairs Committee found that there was no rational case for banning handguns. That position was vindicated by Lord Cullen—someone who could not be considered to be a member of the Conservative party or to be looking at the matter through political eyes. However, there is a political imperative, because in a democracy a Government who ignore the deep feelings of a large number of people do so at their peril. So there is some justification for doing what the Government propose, despite there being no practical, rational case for banning just handguns.

On the Police Bill, I welcome the Government's response to the Home Affairs Committee's recommendations on organised crime—a national crime squad and closer liaison between the police and the home security service. I also welcome the Bill's provision on employees' criminal records—again, something that the Home Affairs Committee recommended in its report on the private security industry. As one who originally encouraged the Stalking Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson), I commend the Government for making the Bill so much more useful and effective after proper and due consideration than it would have been had it been rushed through.

The Home Affairs Select Committee has not had time to consider the issue of combat knives. I find it very odd, however, that, after the many years in which we have been talking about this issue and as recently as January 1996—during the passage of the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland)—Labour agreed that there was, as yet, no definition that could exclude combat knives. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) has suddenly decided that there is a definition for such knives. Unfortunately, he could not remember the definition, or there was not one, and he did not have it written on the piece of paper that he had in front of him.

The hon. Member for Blackburn told us that the police, or representatives of the police, have changed their minds on the subject. They said that there must be a definition. But where is the definition? The British public will laugh at the hon. Gentleman and at the Labour party for saying, "There is a definition, but we cannot tell you what it is."

Labour says, "There is no need for a definition for sales and display restrictions." But that is nonsense if one cannot define what it is that one cannot sell or display. Moreover, it is spurious nonsense, because anyone found with a combat knife in a public place without a good reason would be liable for up to two years' imprisonment under the Offensive Weapons Act 1996, which Conservative Members introduced and passed earlier this year.

I come now to the main issue that we are debating: the sentencing Bill. Ordinary people have grown fed up with what they consider to be rising crime. I do not think that it is necessary to argue about whether they are fed up with increasing crime or with an increase in reported crime because more people are reporting crimes. Whatever the facts, people are fed up with the situation and with the inability of the police, the courts and the criminal justice system to do very much about it. In any given part of the country, they are fed up with a relatively small hard core of offenders who are back on the streets a short time after being arrested, who then commit more crime. The public are fed up with the absurdity of judges telling offenders that they will go to prison for four years, and the offenders being out and about in a year or two.

So the Government are doing something about the situation. The Government have taken a string of action to reduce crime. That action has been effective, because crime has fallen by 10 per cent. over the past three years. There is more to be done, however, and we are not complacent about the situation. The proposals have the people's overwhelming support, as measured in public opinion polls.

I must make one very important point. The proposals are not justified only because they are popular, but because, in our free society, our criminal justice system works only if it has the approval and support of the people it is protecting. Public approval and support are important for the containment of crime. Without that support, witnesses will not come forward, jurors will not serve—or, if they do serve, they will not convict—and crime that should be unacceptable if a society is to remain healthy and free becomes more acceptable. That is why it is vital, first, to restore honesty to the sentencing process.

Under these proposals, the sentence served will—more closely than ever before—match the court's sentence, with a small discount of about 16 per cent. for co-operation and good behaviour, which will be continually assessed. There will be no early release and parole, and time off will not be a right regardless of good behaviour. I am sure that the public want those measures, and that they will support and encourage them. If the measures result in an increase of about 10,000 or 11,000 prisoners, so be it—we will build those prisons. It is ridiculous to say that what we have done once before we cannot do again.

It is not only necessary and sensible for the system to ensure that the sentence served by prisoners is nearer the sentence delivered by the judge, but—if we are to have public support—we must put a stop to the more persistent and the worst offenders. Who are they? They are offenders who simply cannot get violence and hatred out of their systems. They are those who cannot stop inflicting serious sexual violence on women and children. They are those who make a profession of crime, such as the professional burglar—the crime that most people fear, because of the desecration of their homes and prized possessions, and the shock of catching villains in the act. They are those who push drugs to our children and to young people in schools, in pubs and on the streets.

Those offenders get up every morning to go to work with their tools, cocaine, heroin and amphetamines packed in their bags, and they come back at the end of the day. That is their work, and they are professionals. The public, whom we represent, expect—they have a right to expect—the Government to do more than they have so far succeeded in doing to stop those types of crime.

So people over 18 years old who are convicted of a serious violent or sexual offence and who have one previous conviction for that type of offence will receive a life sentence. It will not necessarily be a lifetime in prison, but they will be released only if they no longer pose a danger to the public. What on earth is wrong with that? The public have a right to be protected.

[Sir Ivan Lawrence]

A life sentence is already available for rape, attempted murder, the most serious wounding and having sex with a girl who is aged 13 or under, but the point is that offenders rarely receive a life sentence in those cases. Too often, they are released to offend again, after which they still do not receive life sentences. A sample taken from 1993-94 shows that only one in 10 of those convicted a second time received a life sentence. In 1994, only 10 people out of 217 convicted received a sentence of life imprisonment for a second rape or serious violent assault. Unless those people receive a life sentence, they must be released after serving two thirds of their sentence, even if the authorities believe that they will try to murder, rape or wound again.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

6.5 pm

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I have already declared my interest in this subject. So much has been said about crime, the need for deterrent sentences and the need for this or that new power, but no one has ever gone back to the roots of what causes crime. Where is crime caused? Who commits it? We know that certain juvenile criminals are repeatedly arrested and released. They get out on bail and are perhaps put into the care of their family or local authority. Then they commit one offence after another, increasing the crime statistics. The hon. and learned Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) will then—quite rightly, because we have never tackled the problem head on—tell us about someone committing 417 offences.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you once travelled across the Atlantic to Massachusetts with me and other hon. Members to observe the old Massachusetts experiment. In that experiment, if a youngster was delinquent, he was taken out of society until he could prove that he was safe to be re-admitted to it. Had we done that in the United Kingdom, we would not have youngsters committing 417 offences, because they would not have committed three offences before they were deemed to be delinquent and put into care, custody or control. Moreover, they would have had to prove themselves before they were released from that care or custody.

Why do not we examine some of those ideas? I have advocated such ideas for the past 10 years, but they have fallen on deaf ears because they are not cliché ridden or headline grabbing. We must think through where and how we combat crime. When we begin to think through the issues, we discover—as Massachusetts discovered, all those years ago—that the adult crime rate also decreases if we take a delinquent off the street and keep him off until he learns not to be delinquent. The child who is a criminal and gets into bad habits often becomes the young person in his or her 20s with whom those who work in the criminal courts deal every day.

Perhaps we could start at the right end for once, instead of for ever starting at the wrong end—when the crime has been committed, the victim has been hurt, and the offender, if he was unlucky, has been caught.

I welcome the Police Bill, which is why I intervened on today's speech by the Home Secretary. It has always seemed to me to be nonsense that the decision in Regina *v.* Preston and the constraints of section 9 of the Telecommunications Act 1984 stopped people talking about bugging or matters of that nature. We all know that there are such practices and surveillance devices. Perhaps the matter can now come into the open, evidence can be adduced and proper safeguards erected.

As this is a short debate, I must be careful not to address too many issues. I therefore propose to deal with only one other. The cliché that the sentence must reflect the crime should be examined with considerable care. It is too glib and easy to say, "He got four years, but did only two." There is much more to it than that.

Some of us are old enough and experienced enough to remember when the Government—the current Government under the same leadership—introduced the Criminal Justice Act 1991, sections 28 and 29 of which liberalised sentencing. Every lawyer in the land told them that it would not work, but it took about a year and a half for the Government to realise that they had made a complete and utter mess.

If we are to sentence, let us sentence the offender and the offence. Let us do it honestly; no one is against that. The idea that a person can have two or three strikes and is then out is not fair. I shall give a simple example involving a section 18 crime of violence. If I go up to my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) and hit him on the head with a bottle and it cuts him, that is a wound and it was inflicted with intent. Under section 18 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, the maximum offence currently is life, even if it is a first offence. Suppose that I am 17 and stupid when I do it. At the age of 21 I am involved in a pub fight. I may or may not be the cause of it, but I am convicted. Again there is a wound, and again it is said that it was inflicted with intent. Under section 18 do I then—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) has obviously forgotten his law—if there is a wound and if there is intent, section 18 applies.

Mr. Nicholls: Will the hon. Gentleman give way for a tutorial?

Mr. Bermingham: No; just sit down. If the hon. Gentleman had dealt with as many cases as I have over the years, he would recognise that I know what I am talking about, even if he does not.

In the case that I described, a second sentence would be imposed—and a potential life sentence. That is ridiculous. The matter must be examined with great care. Exceptions must be defined, as must the application of section 18, which has become a commonly charged offence.

I dealt with rape in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), so I shall not do so again. There are so many issues to be considered. Are we to reconstitute the Parole Board so that it can consider all the relevant matters? What would that cost?

On pleas, should we consider the present situation as opposed to the proposals? The accused would get one fifth off for pleading guilty; currently the proportion is one third. What incentive would there be to plead guilty? Guilty pleas should be encouraged, as they save a great deal of money and court time.

If remission is to be removed, the views of prison officers should be taken into account. They deal with prisoners day in, day out. The way to discipline and

control prisoners is to give them an incentive to qualify for remission. Removing that incentive will stir up trouble. The prison system will become overcrowded beyond belief with people who have nowhere to go and no hope. The only thing that their idle hands will do is cause trouble.

Let us think logically about sentencing. Let us begin with the causes of crime and consider how we can deter crime among juveniles. If they are still committing crime as adults, of course they must be made to pay, but that must be done in a sensible and constructive way, providing a disincentive to entering the criminal system. Those who do enter it should emerge rehabilitated.

6.13 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough and Horncastle): I welcome the Queen's Speech, but it is a "Nine o'clock News" version rather than a Reith lecture version. The two main parties are competing to load on to a Christmas tree more and more populist measures. The individual measures may have some merit, but there is great danger in a race between the two Front Benches to get as many of these measures as possible on the statute book by May. We may be in danger of producing over-hasty legislation that will not stand the test of time.

I have made known my views on the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. Each year we seem to become a less free and more censorious society. I did some research in the Library this morning. I noticed that in 1979 we passed 1,770 statutory instruments, whereas in 1995 we passed 3,345. There is a common view in Parliament that society's problems can be solved by banning pursuits that, up to now, have been legitimate. If I believed that violence could be reduced or massacres prevented by banning ownership of particular weapons, I would be the first to advocate that, but there is insufficient evidence, I fear, to warrant such a view.

I was speaking last week to a Labour Member whom I shall not name. She disagrees with her party's policy on guns. She said that in one London borough last year there were 700 gun-related incidents to which the police were called. Every one of those incidents involved illegally held guns. By banning legally held guns, we will leave in place up to 1 million illegally held guns. There seems to be a "Witches of Salem" witch hunt against a part of the community which, up to now, has been exceptionally law abiding.

Mr. Budgen: On the matter of illegally held guns, there is a dispute about the figures, which range from 1 million as the lowest estimate to 2.7 million as the highest.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend cites an extremely worrying figure. Nothing that we can do through prescriptive legislation will affect such a serious problem.

I am worried about the stalking Bill as well. Would Romeo have been guilty of stalking Juliet? There must be a definition. We cannot simply pass in a few months legislation that will put at risk practices that hitherto have been considered legitimate, if rather odd. There must be a proper definition so that the courts can be certain that an ordinary person—a lady—is being made to suffer intense, physical, personal fear.

We have heard, rightly, that there is no proper definition of knives. We need a clear definition with regard to the paedophile register. None of us has any time for paedophiles, but we must consider these matters carefully. If we must wait until the next Parliament to produce properly framed legislation on stalking, paedophiles or guns, so be it. That is the function of Parliament.

We commissioned Lord Cullen to study a specific matter, which he did extremely carefully. We should have allowed him to publish his report; a short statement should have been issued on which people could comment; after a few weeks there should have been another debate in which we could express our views, and draft legislation should then have been produced. If it meant that we could not pass that legislation by the May deadline, so be it—at the beginning of the next Parliament we would at least have ended up with legislation that would stand the test of time.

I support the Home Secretary on minimum sentences. I have suggested that course of action for many years, but the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) is right: that alone will not solve the problem.

I wish that we had the time and the majority—which, clearly, we do not—to debate a Queen's Speech that got to grips with the real problems in society. The series of measures that we are debating is merely a palliative. They cannot address the real problems. We need to start, as the hon. Member for St. Helens, South made clear, right at the beginning. Hon. Members may not be aware that 33 per cent. of children under the age of five are raised on income support, or that our rate of taxation on working-class families, where the father is working and the mother is at home looking after the children, is one of the highest in Europe.

The Budget is probably as important as any measure in the Queen's Speech, if not more important. I hope that the Chancellor addresses the problems of society not simply with a cut in the base rate, but by using the benefit and tax system to encourage children to be brought up by parents, with one parent looking after small children full time.

In the debate about morals, freedom in society and law and order, we hear that there should be more emphasis on civic values in school. There is a danger that there will be increasingly faddish courses based on the latest fashion. We already have provision for daily religious assemblies—the legislation has been on the statute books since the second world war. Let us enforce it. Let us ensure that, at least for half an hour each day, all our children have a simple prayer, psalm or gospel story. Those stories have been around for 2,000 years. They have some effect in instilling basic civil, civic and ethical virtues in children.

The Government propose to introduce a Bill to address the problem of social security fraud. We cannot simply address the issue at that stage. Why are youngsters being paid to do nothing? Is it surprising that we are creating a desperately unhappy, purposeless, valueless underclass when we pay youngsters to do nothing? Should not we have an individual-based social security system that encourages youngsters back into work and training? Most of the crime that we are considering is committed by youngsters aged between 15 and 25. Every youngster should be nurtured by society to make a contribution. If that means having a fully functioning workfare system, a Bill should be proposed in the Queen's Speech—or, if

[Mr. Leigh]

we do not have a sufficient majority, in the next Queen's Speech—to bring in a workfare system for young people, because the problem starts early.

We could go all through society. What sort of Queen's Speech do we really want? Our social security system is breaking down. At the moment there are three working people to every retired person. By the time I have retired, there will be only two working people to every retired person. We have £6,000 of unfunded pension liabilities for every retired person in the country. I do not blame the Government because they do not have the majority, but there is nothing in the Queen's Speech to solve that fundamental social problem. The Select Committee on Social Security will soon produce a report on how to address the problem. It has been addressed elsewhere in the world by the creation of properly funded personal pension systems in private companies, so that everyone has an individual pension and can be secure in old age.

I wish that there were proposals in the Queen's Speech for a Bill to extend the voucher system, so that we could have true parental responsibility throughout the school years, not just for nursery education.

One theme runs through what I have said: we cannot solve society's problems simply by bringing in fashionable legislation at the last moment to ban this or that. Conservatism is about nurturing the individual. We must try to nurture ethical and responsible individuals before school age, at school, while they are seeking work and when making provision for the education of their children and for their pensions.

That is the sort of Queen's Speech that we should have. I very much hope that, after next May, we shall have a majority to enable to us to put it through Parliament.

6.23 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): It is unlikely to come as a surprise to Ministers that I have chosen to address my remarks to that part of the Gracious Speech which deals with organised crime and terrorism.

The Gracious Speech says:

"The fight against terrorism, organised crime and drug misuse and trafficking will remain a priority".

What does that mean? The need to protect society from the sophisticated and professional threat posed today by terrorism and organised crime requires effective detention and deterrent measures before we can begin to think about the length of sentences.

I am astonished that, apparently, the most daring proposal under consideration for hindering organised crime is for a draft Bill to open the way for voluntary identity cards. I suggest to the Home Office that terrorists and criminals are unlikely to be volunteers, unless the measure is so innocuous as to have little or no relevance in the fight against crime.

I know the Home Secretary's dilemma. He must face the obstruction and ridicule of that small but vocal bevy of bleeding hearts who are, allegedly, so eager to protect our civil rights. I cannot take too seriously the protestations of those who consider the civil rights of terrorists and drug barons worthy of precedence over those of society, which has had to carry the brunt of the Canary Wharf, Manchester, Hyde park and Warrington bombings, or over those of parents who grieve for children who die through drug abuse.

I have no regard for those few misguided, malicious and treacherous hon. Members who seek to promote the interests of IRA terrorists such as Gerry Adams. By their actions, they demean our democratic system.

The problem that any Home Secretary faces is that organised crime is so elaborate that it will not be overcome unless every one of us is prepared to pay a share of the price required. I believe that we may have to sacrifice some of our rights as individuals to underpin the rights of society. That is where the Home Secretary must start.

The Home Secretary must embark on an intensive, coherent and co-ordinated public information campaign. The public have a right to know what organised crime costs them, not least in their pockets. For example, the state loses nearly £600 million in tax revenue in one year because of tobacco smuggling. What is the Home Secretary going to do about that? In this age of instant communication and worldwide travel, alcohol, drugs, gambling and the financial markets are all areas in which huge illegal fortunes are being made and where the standards of our society are being corrupted.

I do not believe that retribution is solely dependent on longer prison sentences, although the professional criminal who gambles for enormous stakes at the expense of society must pay a heavy price in that respect. For a hardened criminal and a terrorist, retribution should be a balance between the length of sentence and tougher, more austere prison conditions. It is time that the man in the designer suit—there are many such criminals—understood that prison is not about cellular phones and a free office courtesy of Her Majesty's Prison Service where he can conduct business as usual. He should find it a miserable place, where every vestige of his corrupt existence is effectively challenged.

Real retribution must become what it once was—being subjected to a rigorous, disciplined regime in prison and to the reality that the evildoer, even on release, will never be able to enjoy his ill-gotten gains.

The Nick Leesons of this world should not be elevated to folk hero status, entitling them to private visits from all and sundry, especially not cheque-book journalists and publishers. He is no folk hero. He knew the implications of what he was doing. He, and others, such as the Maxwell dynasty who preyed on their employees, are scum and should be treated as such.

The press has a part to play. The Home Secretary must seek to educate society through the responsible and objective elements of the press. The press must accept responsibility and promote, not diminish, our legal system by its presentation of law and order issues.

Turning specifically to terrorism, I commend to the Home Secretary's careful attention an article in *The Observer* yesterday which examined the way in which the IRA's financial business is organised. It will come as no surprise to learn that Gerry Adams was the architect of the complex multi-million pound business which is IRA Murder Incorporated. Terrorism needs finance. To deal effectively with that problem, we need new thinking from this administration.

Currently, politicians in Northern Ireland have had to create structures and arrangements for the rehabilitation of an organisation that has made it patently obvious that

it has not the slightest intention of abandoning its adherence to violence and insurrection. Instead, IRA-Sinn Fein rejected the otherwise unanimous acceptance by the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation of the need for political consent as the basis for a political way forward.

The IRA, unlike Loyalist terrorists, has a strategy that is intended to take it into the next century and beyond. It does not intend to deviate from that strategy. It has, therefore, to be opposed, but opposition that depends merely on conventional policing, including the work of the intelligence services, will not be enough. Instead, there must be effective action on the financial front where the terrorist consistently crosses the murky boundary between terrorism and what is foolishly called ODC—ordinary decent crime. The setting up of the terrorist finance unit in Northern Ireland was a start, but more needs to be done.

One of the biggest problems arising from organised crime and terrorism is that Joe Public does not know and is not told enough about what it all means. Having been kept in the dark, he treats the issue as though it is someone else's problem. The public in general has to be actively recruited, encouraged to support the authorities and, most importantly, protected when it does so. The use of informer evidence should be re-examined. Ten years ago, we almost succeeded in that, but our public relations were totally inadequate and we failed to withstand IRA propaganda, particularly in the United States.

So-called supergrass or converted terrorist evidence must be permitted within strictly controlled conditions. In that respect the world has changed in the past decade. The United States now knows the treachery of the IRA and has experienced terrorism at first hand.

Converted terrorist evidence has worked in Italy. There was a time when the mafia ruled supreme and no one dared challenge its awful authority, but that has changed. While the United Kingdom system of law and order has served us well in the past, it now needs to be radically reviewed. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux)—the present and the previous leader of my party—have advocated the use of investigative magistrates, endowed with wider powers than the police to call witnesses and to ensure their protection afterwards. That idea was mooted again yesterday in *The Observer*.

The Administration could learn from the way in which other countries deal with terrorist incidents. I have advocated the introduction of quite stringent measures to deal with terrorism and criminality. I do so not because I wish to see the creation of authoritarianism in our country, but because there have to be new, potent measures to protect society.

Incumbent upon any Administration with the courage to embark on such an effective programme will be the responsibility to ensure that the state is beyond reproach in its implementation of those measures. With every new initiative, there will have to be a transparent system of checks and balances, not to ameliorate the effect on the offender, but to reassure society.

6.33 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): One of the closing remarks in the speech by the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) struck me as particularly right. He said that the first obligation on the Government of the day was to protect the people. That overriding obligation runs through the law and order theme in the Queen's Speech.

Part of the current debate has been to assume that some of the appalling events of recent months, particularly the murder of Mr. Lawrence, suggest that our society is fractured and the fact that a young person was capable of behaving in that way means that there is something rotten about our society. I do not agree. The fact that someone could murder Mr. Lawrence is evidence not of a fractured society, but of the eternal battle between good and evil. Those of us who take pride in our society feel that, despite all the complex problems that a sophisticated country faces as we approach the second millennium, we have a fine and decent society that should be protected.

There is an obligation on us to use the language of good and evil—unfashionable as that may be. I do not consider the murder of Mr. Lawrence to be evidence of fracture, but of a society under siege. A society that has confidence in its own worth and believes in its virtues and the sense of common purpose that most of us feel represents a corpus of values that is worth protecting to the last extremity.

One subject that has not been mentioned so far in the debate—perhaps because it has become increasingly unfashionable—is the role that capital punishment might have to play in any proper penal system.

I am delighted that the Government are committed to building 12 new prisons. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) said, we should believe that as it has already happened in the past. However, in time, we shall need more than 12 extra prisons if we constantly incarcerate the most odious scum that society can produce. If we continue to lock up rapists and murderers from the time of their conviction to the end of their natural lives, we may have to consider what happened in the United States where it was thought that capital punishment had been abolished for ever—it has been brought back.

When my constituents spoke to me about Dunblane—the same is true for every hon. Member—it was clear that, had Hamilton survived they would not have wanted to know why he went off the rails. They would not have wanted to know whether he had an unhappy childhood. They would not have been concerned—as the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) was—that had he been put in prison, he might have been deprived of hope. They would have known what they wanted to happen to Mr. Hamilton: they would have wanted him to be taken to a place of execution and executed.

Although I greatly respect the views and judgment of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor) in these matters, he should face one fact. He says that there is a political imperative for banning handguns which goes far beyond the demands of logic and reason, but if there is an imperative to be followed, it leads in another direction too. We know the views of the parents of Dunblane on handguns and the House will deliver what they want, but we also know what their views on the restoration of capital punishment would have been had Hamilton survived.

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

The House will respond with commendable speed by doing what parents want when it coincides with what we want, but time and again, in regard to capital punishment—which is not a party political point—the House debates what the people of the country want. There will come a time—in 20, 30, 40 or 50 years' time—when we simply cannot have our gaols bulging with the very worst creatures in society when the public demands that some of them at least should pay the ultimate penalty.

I do not understand how anyone can believe that the principle of minimum sentencing is wrong. It is not unknown to the criminal system and where it exists it works well. It is something that I have called for over the years, and at times I have been told that it was quite impossible. Why should it be impossible? What could be wrong with a mandatory life sentence for a second offence with the provision that in exceptional circumstances a judge could say otherwise, if it provides a mechanism for dealing with those who are unable to control their urges and satisfy the parole board that they are safe? Some may still subscribe to the idea that property is theft and feel that it is unfair to have minimum sentences on burglars, but the abhorrence of offences of trafficking class A drugs cuts across ideas about education, background, left, right, Conservative, Liberal, Labour or whatever. How can anybody deny that someone who has been convicted of a second offence of trafficking in class A drugs should not receive a minimum sentence of seven years? Such a sentence seems entirely appropriate.

I was having a discussion recently with some judges over lunch. That shows how catholic my eating habits are. Given my views, it shows how catholic their eating habits are as well. One judge asked me whether I realised that if the proposals of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary went forward, it would not be the views of the judiciary that counted but those of the man in the street. I thought for a moment that I was being treated to some sort of exercise in heavy judicial wit, but the comment was truly meant. When I said that I, as somebody elected by people, thought that the ideas and views of ordinary men and women about criminal sentencing should be taken into account—not as final writ without any qualification—my comment was regarded as truly extraordinary. I am afraid that the judiciary will learn in due course that what ordinary people believe in passionately ought to play a part in framing policy.

One can never stand still; one should always think about measures that could be introduced in future. Speaking as somebody who has practised criminal law for well over 20 years, I should say that the inability of the jury to know, except in the most exceptional circumstances, the previous convictions of those standing before them leads to many outrages. On many occasions I have heard a gasp from a jury when, having acquitted someone, its members have suddenly discovered the knowledge that they have been denied—that that person had a string of previous convictions—and that the defendant has to stay behind because other matters are pending against him. It is not beyond the wisdom of a competent judge to advise a jury and direct its members that the mere fact that a person has previous convictions does not mean that their guilt must be assumed, but it should be taken into account.

If the ideas that run through the Queen's Speech and inform this debate appeal to the public—as I believe they do—the public need have no doubt about who will be capable of delivering such an agenda with passion and conviction. The simplest proposition of all, that the prosecution should be able to appeal against an over-lenient sentence, was fought tooth and nail and derided by the Labour party when it was introduced. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) took a great deal of time during debate on that proposition to say what he thought about it. How on earth can a party that cannot even summon up the collective will to support the right of the prosecution to challenge an over-lenient sentence come to this House, let alone go to the country, and speak with conviction? The law and order matters in the Queen's Speech are right, correct, effective and go with the grain of what people want. When people consider that, they need have no doubt about which party to look to in order to deliver it.

6.44 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. I must declare an interest. As many hon. Members know, I am a parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation. I think that it is only right that I should remind the House of that fact in this debate.

I was surprised when I heard in this year's Queen's Speech that we were to have another crime Bill. The Government have introduced more than 30 crime Bills in 17 years, and they still have not got it right. When there is no crime Bill before the House of Commons, there will be a gap in all our lives.

I was even more astonished to discover that the proposed crime Bill did not include measures to combat paedophiles and stalking—two issues about which the Government have made a great deal of noise. Indeed, until Monday last week, the Home Secretary, no less, led us to believe that legislation on those two issues would be introduced as private Member's Bills.

I was particularly surprised because, in May, I shared a platform with the Home Secretary when he addressed the Police Federation conference in Scarborough. Then he said that he would introduce legislation to combat stalking "at the earliest available opportunity".

There we have it. Until Monday last week, he was planning all along to introduce a private Member's Bill himself. Having undergone that experience myself in the last Session, I would happily give him some tips.

Perhaps the real reason why the Home Secretary made that announcement to the Police Federation conference in May was that, just before he spoke, the conference had unanimously voted to press for legislation to combat stalking. The Home Secretary received no applause for his announcement at that conference. The Government had just wrecked a private Member's Bill on stalking introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson). Clearly, the police, like the rest of the society, simply no longer take the Government at face value.

Members on both sides of the House agree that Bills to combat stalking and paedophiles must get on the statute book as soon as reasonably possible. When, day after day, our papers feature stories of how this stalker cannot be arrested or that paedophile was known to the police but not the local school, it is no wonder that the public have

lost faith in the criminal justice system. By dealing with those two high-profile issues effectively, we in this House can play our part in restoring public confidence in the criminal justice system.

Thus, unusual though it was, I welcomed the Prime Minister's U-turn on Wednesday, when he suddenly let the Home Secretary off the hook. The Home Secretary will not be queuing with us to sign up to introduce a private Member's Bill tomorrow morning.

I welcome some of the measures that the Government have announced, such as those to combat organised crime. The establishment of a national crime squad and a more developed role for the National Criminal Intelligence Service will help fight organised crime. We must ensure that an atmosphere of co-operation rather than competition is fostered between the various crime-fighting agencies, and that there is a smooth exchange of information between them.

I am sure that the Government were inspired in part by the excellent report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs on organised crime in November 1994. That report noted that organised crime in the United Kingdom was

"a cause for serious concern",

and that

"the fight against organised crime must involve more than just the normal law enforcement agencies".

Another measure that I would have liked to see in the Queen's Speech was a statutory requirement for local authorities to work with the police on crime prevention strategies. Two weeks ago, I took part in a national conference in Manchester on anti-social behaviour, where I learned of the excellent work being done by local authorities, co-operating with the police across the country.

In partnership with Gwent police, my own Caerphilly borough council has been particularly active in that area of crime prevention. The council has appointed a crime reduction officer. Regular meetings are held between him and the police, and crime prevention panels, involving members of the community, are being set up throughout the borough. Partnership at a local level between the police, local authorities and the community can reduce crime.

There are a great many demands on local authority resources, but only by placing a statutory duty on councils to undertake crime prevention work in conjunction with the police can we ensure that prevention remains at the top of the local authority agenda. As all hon. Members know, the public's faith in the criminal justice system is very low at present. If local authorities are not seen to be taking steps against those whose anti-social behaviour causes havoc and misery in our communities, the public will lose confidence in their councils.

Such a loss of confidence is just part of a downward spiral. If people think that the police take no action when crimes are reported, they will not be prepared to make witness statements, and will feel frustrated. People also become frustrated when criminals are not caught—none more so than the police. When officers cannot tackle stalkers, they become frustrated. When they cannot tackle those responsible for anti-social acts in our community, they become frustrated. When they see convictions fail because the public, disillusioned by the criminal justice system, are no longer prepared to make witness statements, officers become even more demoralised and frustrated.

A recent Home Office study found that, on high-crime estates in Britain, 13 per cent. of crime reported to the police by victims and 9 per cent. reported by witnesses resulted in people being intimidated. The report said that there was

"a general unwillingness on the part of the public to come forward as witnesses"

and that less than a third of people interviewed had reported crimes that they had witnessed. Those findings are clearly disturbing. We need to restore the public's faith and confidence in the criminal justice system.

As other hon. Members have said, we could help to improve the conviction rate by increasing the number of officers patrolling our streets. The Government must think that that is a good idea, because they keep promising to do so. They promised an extra 1,000 police officers before the 1992 general election and a further 5,000 at their conference last year, but where are those officers? That is what my constituents are asking me.

Since 1991, the Government have spent nearly £15 million recruiting special constables. Why do they not show a similar enthusiasm for expanding the establishment figures of the regular police force? Compared with 1992, 1,000 fewer officers now serve in Britain. Welsh police forces are threatened with the loss of £4.6 million if the Government decide to extend the area cost adjustment to the rest of England and Wales. That will not improve law and order for the people of Wales, but will result in cuts and fewer officers on the streets. How many more promises will the Government break?

The Minister of State, Scottish Office (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Touhig: I would normally give way to the right hon. Gentleman but I have only 10 minutes in which to speak.

If the public no longer have confidence in the criminal justice system, it is because they no longer have faith in the Government. The country wants to pass sentence on the Government, and that sentence will be a stiff period in opposition. We shall then have a Government who truly begin to fight crime, and who, I hope, will not need to introduce a crime Bill year after year.

6.50 pm

Mr. Nicholas Budgen (Wolverhampton, South-West): I shall confine my remarks to the Government's proposals on guns, particularly handguns—

Mr. John Carlisle: Pistols.

Mr. Budgen: I have always called them pistols. My hon. Friend rebukes me and I have rebuked others. But we must all be fashionable occasionally.

I also wish to say a few words about the Government's proposals on gun clubs. Gun clubs used to be regarded as highly honourable, patriotic organisations, set up in much the same spirit as the Territorial Army. Historically, many of them were set up after the South African war, when many people who lived in urban areas and were prevented by draconian laws on poaching from exercising skills with guns in the countryside, were encouraged to set up their

[Mr. Budgen]

own sporting rifle and pistol clubs in urban areas. They have been regarded as highly responsible and potentially patriotic people ever since. Although they are a minority, they have never previously regarded themselves as threatened.

Many other minorities know that they are threatened, such as those who indulge in game shooting and the quarter of a million people who go hunting. As soon as they perceive themselves to be threatened in any way, they are quickly on to their parliamentary representatives, urging them to protect their rights.

Curiously, the urban people who have so honourably and responsibly run their gun clubs—the people of Burnley, Bradford and Birmingham—have been abandoned. Their natural representative, the Labour party, has been so anxious to support the high-minded middle-class people of Islington and Hampstead that it has forgotten many of its traditional supporters. I hope that the Tory party will not make that mistake. We have many supporters in urban areas—natural Tory patriots who regard their membership of a gun club as part of that patriotism.

Whenever there is a hue and cry, contrary to what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor) says, it is the role of the High Court of Parliament to take into account public opinion; but we do not have the high honour of being Members of Parliament to be a lynch mob. We are assembled here to weigh carefully the rights and liberties of every section of the community, and gun club members have as much right as anybody else to have their views carefully considered when they are unpopular.

Unfortunately, it has been put about that some sort of deal has been done between the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland on what sort of shooting should be continued in clubs and the use of what I agree should be described as pistols. I am all for deals on public expenditure, and deals must take place between constituencies and ministries. There is nothing immoral about that. But when it is a question of taking away the rights and liberties of a substantial section of the community, there must be some principle about it. That cannot simply be done by a deal dependent on whether somebody has a marginal seat and whether he is running in front of the wind of public opinion. The public must have the sense that their liberty has been taken from them only out of great necessity and principle.

In his statement to the House on 16 October, the Home Secretary set out proudly, not reluctantly, how he would take away the liberties of ordinary, decent, law-abiding, patriotic citizens. First, he said that he would go further than Cullen in banning the custody of single-shot handguns remaining in people's homes. I think that that is justified—

Mr. John Carlisle *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Budgen: My hon. Friend takes a different view. He is entitled to his view.

The second extension of the Cullen proposals, however—that high-calibre pistols should not be used in the highly controlled environment of a shooting club—is justified simply by one sentence:

"We believe that a distinction needs to be made between high-calibre handguns, which are principally made for police and military use, and .22 rimfire handguns, which are largely intended for target shooting."—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1996; Vol. 282, c. 832.]

Surely it is not the purpose for which the handgun is made that is important but the use to which it is put. Some heavy-calibre pistols may originally have been manufactured for police or military purposes, but, once they are in the controlled environment of a shooting club, they are used for the peaceful purpose of shooting at targets and no other purpose.

Moreover, let us look at the Government's response to Lord Cullen's report and why they say that they want to go further. On page 5, paragraph 24, we do not see much of an argument explaining why it is all right for people to use .22s in gun clubs but not all right for them to use heavy-calibre pistols. We know that 80 per cent. of pistols—160,000—will be taken out of use. May I be so impertinent as to suggest that, if you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, wanted to take up a life of crime, you would not pinch a pistol from a gun club, but would find out where somebody had an illegally held handgun or rifle? As about a million of those are presently in the public domain, it would be much easier to get one of them than to break into a gun club.

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): There are many more than that.

Mr. Budgen: My right hon. and learned Friend knows much more about the Bar than I do, and is a regular and serious operator at the Old Bailey. I am sure that he is right to say that there are many more than that, but I am taking the Government's figures. They say that there are at least a million illegally held firearms; at most, there may be 2.7 million. I am trying to use the figure that is least advantageous to my argument.

It is difficult to see why 45,000 people should be deprived of their rights because of the outside chance that someone seeking to commit a crime may break into a gun club. Of course the parents of Dunblane have rights, and those who feel very strongly and emotionally about the use of all handguns should have their case considered carefully. However, Parliament is not the place to reflect the emotion of the moment. We must try to establish some principles so that someone who is deprived of his liberty believes that he has been deprived justly.

At present, I cannot discern any principle in the Government's distinction. I hope that I shall be persuaded to the contrary, but I hope also that the process will be slow, careful and conciliatory, as 45,000 people must be persuaded as well.

7 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South–East): Before I raise the issue of crime, which is the subject of tonight's debate, I shall refer to other elements of the Queen's Speech that concern me and probably some of my colleagues.

There are no positive initiatives in relation to the national health service. The Coventry and Warwickshire hospital in my constituency has provided a service for

many years. Many people in Coventry have much affection for that hospital, but, in the longer term, it may be threatened with closure and, in the short term, its role will be diminished. That concerns me and my constituents. The Queen's Speech contains no major proposals in relation to homelessness or increased funds for old age pensioners. I touch upon those issues as part of the general debate.

We must put in context the issue of crime and the crime Bill to which the Home Secretary referred. Ministers boast that they have turned the tide of crime, yet it is on the increase. For example, there were 9,000 recorded acts of violence in the west midlands last year, and the number of notifiable offences increased by 7.8 per cent. Some £227 million-worth of property was stolen—an increase of 94 per cent. on 1988.

Yet while there is more crime in Coventry, more criminals are getting away with it. The clear-up rate for attempted murder and wounding in the west midlands is 11 per cent. down on the rate six years ago. Criminals are three times more likely to escape conviction now than in 1980. To paraphrase a former Prime Minister: criminals have never had it so good.

Many problems—such as anti-social neighbours—remain untackled. The crime Bill and the Queen's Speech fail to introduce measures to tackle the rising tide of disorder caused by anti-social neighbours, yet it is fast becoming the issue of most concern among residents, tenants and owner-occupiers.

Earlier this year, I advanced proposals to enable victims of anti-social behaviour to give evidence against their aggressors. My Witness Protection Bill is a sensible and a practical proposal to deal with a problem that is ignored by the Government. It was received warmly by the national tenants associations and by all sections of the community—both the private and public sectors—in Coventry. However, the Government failed to respond to my initiative. It is not surprising to find that the crime Bill does not tackle anti-social behaviour. The people of Coventry and beyond will be disappointed to learn that the Government have failed to act once again.

Those people will be disappointed to learn also that the Government have no plans to ban the sale of combat knives. Last year, two young people in my constituency were stabbed. In addition, there were several shootings. The local community was shocked and grief-stricken by those stabbings, and people were particularly alarmed that the weapons used were easily available. I believe that the Government should be held partly responsible for those crimes, as their record on the control of knives is chequered—to put it mildly.

In May 1995, I asked the Home Office about its plans to ban the sale of knives to children. The Minister replied that no measures needed to be taken, as they would have little effect. Events have moved on since then. Despite repeated warnings from Opposition Members and others, it took a tragedy to force the Government to reconsider their position.

I welcome the Government's change of heart, but it does not go far enough. It is surely possible to frame a law that clarifies the difference between combat and household knives. That must be within the scope of the Home Office, if only it had the political will. However, it appears that the Government do not have the will to act: they simply tinker around the edges.

Measures such as minimum sentences instead of greater consistency in sentencing; automatic life sentences instead of greater honesty in sentencing; and abolishing parole instead of introducing reviewable, indeterminate sentences which would protect communities better will do nothing to tackle the real problem of low conviction rates. That is a glaring example of the Government failing to recognise the key issues of concern to the public. The Government are interested in one thing: the election. They are not concerned with protecting the public. If they were interested in safeguarding our streets, they would reconsider the measures that I have outlined.

7.5 pm

Mr. Phil Gallie (Ayr): At the outset, I apologise to my right hon. and learned Friend and to the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) for not being present for the beginning of the debate. I made the mistake of travelling from Glasgow airport to Heathrow instead of from Prestwick to Stansted and, as a consequence, I suffered a two-hour delay.

I listened to the opening speeches in the debate on the Gracious Speech on Wednesday and I was pretty dismayed by the Leader of the Opposition's presentation. Despite his comments about negative campaigning, his speech was filled with negatives, from beginning to end. That contrasted with the positive contribution of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who responded in a reasonable way to the one positive proposal advanced by the Leader of the Opposition—regarding measures against stalking and paedophiles. However, I am somewhat concerned about the introduction of legislation on stalking, as I believe that definitions of stalking will be difficult to clarify, particularly when individuals live in close proximity to each other.

I commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland for the way in which they have attempted to deal with criminal law in recent times. My right hon. and learned Friend has been in constant dispute with the courts regarding his interpretation of what is right and just, but it seems to me that his interpretations are very much in line with those of the public at large.

I listened with interest to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who said that the law is the same for everyone in this country; it is not simply for the lawyers and the judges who operate within the criminal justice system. Respect for the law must be maintained across the land because if people lose respect for the criminal justice system, society will suffer.

The Gracious Speech did not concentrate simply on the Crime (Sentences) Bill or the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill, measures to which I shall return. It went much further than that. It referred to developments in education, which I believe will have a positive effect on standards in society in the longer term, and also developments in health and primary care. It commented on future legislation. In the environmental sphere, there will be legislation on coastal protection which will improve our quality of life. The Gracious Speech also foreshadowed the introduction of the police Bill, which is a very important step in the battle against organised crime. All the measures are designed to make the United Kingdom a safer and more pleasant place to live in.

The social security Bill contains important compensation provisions. In considering crime and the criminal justice system, we should recognise that the

[Mr. Phil Gallie]

victims should benefit from compensation, especially with regard to the pain and suffering element of that compensation. I look forward to that matter being dealt with by the Bill.

The firearms Bill is important to everyone in Scotland, because what happened at Dunblane fills us with deep regret. However, I have some reservations about the powerful campaign to ban all so-called handguns. I believe that other factors should be considered and that in the main the Government have got it right. Yesterday I heard the Lord Provost of Glasgow say that he looked forward to the day when Edinburgh and Glasgow could co-host the Olympic games. I asked whether a handgun ban would automatically knock the United Kingdom out of consideration for hosting games. The right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed (Mr. Beith) suggested that a handgun ban might have an effect on whether Manchester could host the Commonwealth games in a year or two. If a ban does not rule us out from hosting the games, it would certainly rule us out from competing in them.

If we ban handguns, would it not be logical to go further and ban all guns? I believe that that would be wrong and that it would kill off sporting interests that we have had for many years. I wonder about the tradition of show grounds, where we and our children have all enjoyed the air gun stall; would we ultimately have to scrap air rifles and air gun facilities and stores?

On combat knives, I wonder whether political opportunism rather than reality might not be the message of the day. It is already illegal to carry on the streets a blade more than three inches long. When I hear of deaths through crimes of violence I have to ask whether the perpetrators are using combat knives, or kitchen or industrial knives; I would suggest that the majority of attacks with knives are made with domestic, not combat, knives.

That would be of particular interest to people in Scotland. Over the weekend, five people became victims of extremely serious knife attacks in the west of Scotland. We have legislated and banned the carrying of knives, but still such things happen. What would happen with handguns? I suggest that the situation could be the same: we ban handguns and that drives them underground to the extent that the situation is more dangerous than under the limited controls that the Government intend to put in place.

There is to be an education Bill and I believe that there is much that we could do about discipline. Perhaps it would be a great step forward in instilling some discipline if we were to bring the belt back in Scottish schools. Perhaps there should be other penalties, such as withholding child benefit from parents whose children are persistent absentees or persistently disrupt classes. We should consider such matters, and perhaps the Bill could go a little further.

I warmly welcome the intention to make sentences mean what they say. My constituents cannot understand why someone who gets a four-year sentence should be out after two years. I argued against that two or three years ago, and I was ridiculed for it by the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), among many. Only recently, however, Lord Macaulay said that my arguments had won the day, and he is quite right, although they are not just my arguments but those of my constituents, of the people of Scotland and, above all, of common sense.

Lord James Douglas–Hamilton: It was Lord McCluskey who said that—not Lord Macaulay, who is a very senior judge.

Mr. Gallie: I thank my right hon. Friend for that correction.

I welcome the change—it was an amendment for which I pushed—allowing the procurator to appeal against solemn court judgments that are seen to be lenient. I believe that that has been highly successful and I look forward to that right being extended to sheriff court judgments by the Bill on criminal proceedings in Scotland. That is an important step forward.

My constituents keenly await the introduction of the right of the police to confiscate alcohol from under-age drinkers. That is a testing matter for my constituents, who experience constant problems with young—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. I call Mr. Soley.

7.16 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): I want to concentrate on family issues, crime and crime prevention. I have been commenting on those issues since well before the recent media coverage of the alleged moral crisis that we face. In 1994—the United Nations Year of the Family—I chaired an all-party committee on the family; many of the recommendations in our report concern the questions that we are discussing now.

It is a tragedy that it took Dunblane and the murder of Mr. Lawrence to make everyone sit up and take notice. The media should recognise that it is important to pick up such issues as early as possible, and that many of them should have been addressed in 1994, the Year of the Family. When people pick on the media and say that they cause violence, they frequently blame television without recognising that newspapers—especially the tabloids—have a problematic way of presenting crime and that they increase the fear of crime by the repetitive reporting of certain cases.

The current general debate about the family should not panic us into thinking that everything is disastrous. Many good things are happening within family groups and in society as a whole. Many of the young people whom I meet have a high standard of moral behaviour and are deeply concerned about society and about the environment. We are in danger of belittling what they are doing and saying if we carry on pretending that everything is bad.

I caution hon. Members against looking back at some golden age that in my judgment never existed. I went to school in the 1940s; there were failing schools then and there was plenty of violence in and around our schools. I do not doubt, however, that the situation is much worse now. *Hansard* will show that I have spoken on the issue in the House over many years, and that the Government were warned about what would happen. In the early 1980s I said that the crime rate would rise faster here than in other European countries if we continued with some of the social and economic policies that were then being pursued.

I take no satisfaction in saying that I also predicted that there would be a riot in our prisons, before the riots that took place in the early 1980s, and I warn the Government that it will happen again if we continue to use prisons as dumping grounds for people with multiple problems, giving them the impression that we have locked the door and thrown away the key and that even if they behave well they cannot expect any improvement in their conditions or any hastening of their release time. We then expect prison officers to deal with that crisis. That is neither fair nor responsible.

My next point relates to parenting and crime. Again, there is a danger at the moment that we assume that all crime is the result of bad parenting. Bad parenting is a crucial factor in the causation of crime—I do not doubt that—but it is not the sole factor. Much is also down to the social and economic structure. One reason why parents often fail is that they are tipped into crisis by an economic or social problem that they face—frequently, for example, homelessness or unemployment. If families with young children are put into bed-and-breakfast accommodation—for example, when their houses are repossessed—or if one of the parents of a family that is only just coping, only just holding together, is put into long-term unemployment, the children are more likely to get into trouble. That is why crime goes up when unemployment is higher and tends to go down when it is lower. That is one of the reasons why we must get it right.

If I had a single message to get across to the Government today, it would be to say to them what we said in 1994 in our all-party parenting committee: they must have a policy on the family. This is not about marriage or single parents: it is about all types of families, because families come in different shapes and sizes and it ill behoves this place to start moralising to people about what kind of family they should have. Many hon. Members—particularly Conservative Members in recent years, but it could apply equally well to Opposition Members—will fall by the wayside if we start moralising in that way. It does not help. Instead, we have to try to help families, and particularly the children, to cope well.

The one recommendation that I would make would be that a sub-committee of the Cabinet should be set up to look at family matters and to co-ordinate between Government Departments and outside agencies, including local government. People throughout the country are crying out for such co-ordination. We could have aims which, though simple, would affect the crime rate. For example, we could say that no child will be kept in bed-and-breakfast accommodation for more than a month or two.

Another good way to deal with crime committed by young people would be to ensure that any child expelled from school, as increasingly happens, is back in some full-time education structure, be it a school, a special unit or one-to-one tuition, within a week or so of being expelled. Otherwise, they end up adrift in society, lose their place in the educational queue and become liable to crime.

The same applies to parenting education. One cannot just dump parenting education on schools and expect it to work. The policy on it needs to be thought out. Nobody in the Government or the country at the moment—other than voluntary groups and one or two people who are ahead of the field on this—is giving much thought to that.

Let us get tough on crime. My great criticism of the Government is that they have never been tough on crime, in the sense that they need to stop crime happening. They are soft on crime. On punishment, they think that they are hard, but in fact they are just muddled. If they were to say to a hardened criminal, "We are going to lock you up for life if you carry a gun, and you will get the same sentence if you kill the person you faced," the criminal might as well kill that person. To go down that rather stupid road would endanger the public. We can ban the sale of guns. In 1985, when I was shadow Minister for home affairs, I put it to the House that there should be a standing committee of the Home Office to consider the question of imitation guns. At that time, two youngsters had been shot while holding imitation guns that the police thought were real—understandably, in the circumstances. There was also Hungerford. We should have taken action there and then.

What about knives? Who can believe that it is beyond the wit of the House to legislate to prevent the open display and advertising of killing knives? Of course it is within our capacity, and we should have legislated against that ages ago.

We should also have a proper policy on crime prevention. Every local authority and police force should be required to come up with a crime prevention policy to target crime. There is one bit of hope for the Government, and it does not come from them. Crime levels may drop, but that is because unemployment is falling and police and local authorities now have good crime prevention policies. We have cut burglaries on one estate in Hammersmith by 66 per cent. in two years, but we did that only by crime prevention policies between the police and local authority. If we can do it in Labour-controlled Hammersmith, the Government could ask for it to be done throughout the country, but the police and local authorities have to take the lead and they should be given encouragement to do that.

7.24 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I begin my speech on the home affairs debate on the Loyal Address by applauding the Government for all the measures that have succeeded in halting the rise in crime in my constituency. The Bournemouth police division is experiencing its second successive year of falling crime. Particularly encouraging to my constituents is the dramatic decrease in burglaries of domestic homes—so far this year, 34 per cent.—while crime in general has decreased, by 13 per cent. I thank the Government for those measures and for the greatly increased resources and police manpower that are making my constituents more secure in their homes and safer as they go about their business.

Under the Conservatives, since 1979, spending on the Dorset police has increased by 112 per cent. in real terms—by £57 million. Police strength has risen and there are an additional 467 officers and staff. I understand that we are to obtain a further 66 officers following last year's announcement of an extra 5,000 police over the next three years, and, for the first time this year, the Home Office will pay the security costs of the Conservative party conference, which took place in Bournemouth a couple of weeks ago, to the tune of £1.5 million, all of which is good news for my constituents.

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Nevertheless, despite those achievements, the chief constable of Dorset remains concerned that his force remains undermanned and under-resourced, particularly in comparison with other areas. For example, the population-police ratio for Dorset is 1:527, compared with the average of 1:494 for all the non-Metropolitan police forces. Two months ago, one of my constituents, the mother of a 16-year-old boy, telephoned 999 to report that her son had been assaulted by a number of youths in an attack involving knives and CS gas. The father subsequently went off to confront the youths alone. The mother complained to me that the police did not respond to her call. Apparently, in attempting to respond to her call, the police were diverted to other calls; it was proving to be an exceptionally busy evening and all local officers were already committed to other duties, including the policing of an AFC Bournemouth football match.

I accept that difficult decisions had to be made that evening, but personal experiences such as that are rightly encouraging my constituents to press for more police for Bournemouth. I hope that the Government will fully accept and implement the recommendations of the Elliot report, which found that Dorset's present area cost adjustment does not adequately and fairly reflect our costs. The recommendations would mean extra resources for the Dorset police authority.

The success of Dorset police in reducing crime in Bournemouth is attributed to more effective intelligence-led policing, leading to the conviction and imprisonment of persistent offenders. I pay tribute to the police for that. It is also put down to habitual burglars receiving longer gaol sentences from the courts. In the light of this local experience, I welcome the proposal in the Queen's Speech for a new crime Bill providing for stiff new minimum prison sentences for professional house burglars. Because so much crime today is drug related, I welcome the stiff new minimum prison sentences for persistent dealers in hard drugs. Only by keeping such hardened criminals locked up for longer can our constituents be better protected from them and others deterred from following their example. I hope that, while in prison, criminals are made to spend their time more productively. I believe that prisons should be profit making, that prisoners should work to pay compensation to their victims and pay for the cost of their accommodation.

Of course, longer sentences may mean heavier demand on prison places. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is already responding to that with more places and new prisons. However, I urge him to consider the position of people who end up in prison for minor offences, such as non-payment of television licences or default on fines, when that was not the court's intention. Richard Tilt, the head of the Prison Service, recently referred to that. Community work and curfew orders were intended for such people, and electronic tagging was intended for young offenders. Prisons should be a last resort, to be used for people who pose a real threat to the rest of us in the community.

I welcome the Government's decision to introduce legislation to curb stalkers and to establish a national register of child sex offenders. The cases of two of my constituents were referred to me recently. Their quality of life is being destroyed by stalkers, one of whom is apparently working in collusion with others. Those tragic cases can be dealt with only by new and effective legislation.

The establishment of a paedophile register has been welcomed by my local newspaper, the Bournemouth *Evening Echo*, which has given a lead with its "protect our children" campaign. It has pioneered the establishment of a register available to key groups working with children in the community. That campaign was in response to a one third increase in the number of Dorset children facing violence, sexual abuse and neglect. It has already been picked up across the water in France by newspapers in Cherbourg. Given the events that have taken place in Belgium, it should be emulated there and throughout the European Union. Just as there is a single market for jobs, we should establish common standards of protection for our children. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scottish Office will deal with that matter in his winding-up speech. Why cannot the lead taken by the Bournemouth *Evening Echo* result in a Europewide register available to all?

I welcome the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. It is a fair and realistic compromise between the Cullen recommendations and the reasonable demand of gun owners and clubs for the retention of target shooting with low calibre pistols, which, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary reminded us, is an Olympic sport. Given the figures quoted in the media, I suggest that the amount to be set aside for compensation is totally inadequate. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister give me an assurance that it will adequately compensate not only for guns but for ancillary equipment, such as holsters, magazine pouches and shell slides, which will become useless, and possibly illegal, under the Bill?

Bournemouth and other seaside resorts have a problem with houses in multiple occupation and hostels, which attract benefit claimants from inner cities and from the Irish Republic, who are often encouraged by the advertisements of commercial organisations. Constituents complain that some of those places are centres for crime, drugs, prostitution and other anti-social behaviour. They adversely affect my constituents' quality of life, and threaten the viability of our tourism industry, on which our local economy and jobs depend. People will not want to take their families for a seaside holiday in a hotel next door to such places.

I welcome the special control provision in the Housing Act 1996, which gives local authorities the powers that they previously lacked to respond to this problem by closing the places that management and landlords clearly cannot control. It is essential that resort authorities apply for those new powers and use them to reverse the present decline. I hope that Bournemouth borough council, which is controlled by the Liberal Democrats, will use those new powers. As a result, they will revive the tourism industry in parts of the borough, and the quality of life of my constituents will no longer be threatened. I thank the Government for responding so positively to this problem.

7.33 pm

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): People in my constituency and elsewhere do not understand what the Government claim they are doing to make their lives safer. People know that crime has doubled, and that

violent crime has doubled and then increased by a fifth, because they are the victims of such crime. No measure proposed in the Queen's Speech deals with their concerns.

It is unclear how 22 new prisons and an extra £500 million a year to keep convicted criminals in prison longer will make the lives of my constituents safer. If I could choose how to spend £500 million to deter, prevent and detect crime, I am not sure that I would build new prisons. How many closed circuit television schemes would £500 million provide? That would stop the present ludicrous practice of schemes having to compete against each other for funds—a process that shows the great need for such schemes in many parts of the country.

In Erdington high street, traders, who already pay the business rate, must now raise £50,000 to enter a lottery to get a matching amount out of the Home Office. On Friday, I attended a meeting of a group of people from Erdington neighbourhood watch. It was one of several such meetings that I have had across the constituency in the past few months. Those people are concerned about changes made in the organisation of West Midlands police. They believe that Erdington police station delivers a worse service at a time when crime along the high street has grown. For long periods, the police station is run by what they describe as "green jumper" civilians rather than police officers. They are worried that liaison between the police and neighbourhood watch groups is to be passed to a civilian, so that there will be even less contact between the police and the public whom they serve.

In the Birches Green and Stockland Green areas of my constituency, we have held public meetings involving the police and city council officers to discuss ways of building partnerships to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour. Work led by Birmingham city council, for which no specific grant is available, has been innovative and ambitious in building and developing a community safety strategy. The aim is to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, to reduce the fear of crime and to improve responses to issues of public concern. The strategy is broader than mere crime prevention, and enables the council to examine social and economic causes of crime and anti-social behaviour.

The city's track record led to Home Office funding for a three-year study to evaluate that work. The report was submitted in June, and it is believed that it makes the case—made as long ago as 1991 in the Morgan report—that more progress could be made in community safety if local authorities had a statutory responsibility to deliver those services.

I shall briefly mention three steps that have been taken under that initiative. First, in May, a community partnership day in Druid's Heath brought together community groups, residents, city council departments and other agencies, and led to the drafting of a neighbourhood action plan to respond to the concerns of local residents about policing, youth provision and drug misuse. Secondly, the city council, West Midlands police and the West Midlands probation service have signed a tripartite agreement that lays the foundations for an expanded inter-agency commitment to community safety. Thirdly, and interestingly, community safety packages are part of the curriculum in all schools in the city. They encourage citizenship and responsibility among secondary school students and are entitled BRUM—being responsible, understanding and motivated.

The Government must understand that community policing will succeed only if it involves the community. People should take more responsibility for what goes on in their areas, with back-up from the police, the city council and other agencies. People also need to feel that the criminal justice system and the police are on their side. It does not help when, at the Government's behest, guidelines are issued to the police that lay down when they should and should not charge people with assault.

In a recent case, Mr. Leonard Watts was punched in the face during a vicious road rage attack. He took the driver's registration number, and drove straight to the police station despite a cut and bleeding mouth. He was told by the police that they would not investigate the matter because, under those guidelines, the injuries were not serious enough to warrant a charge.

Neither Mr. Watts nor anyone else can understand that: it must be wrong on several counts. It means that in some circumstances the police, rather than the courts, decide the punishment. It means that, unless someone can afford a private prosecution, which can cost up to £1,500, the thugs can walk free. It means that, while violent crime is still rising, perhaps thousands of such incidents will simply vanish, although reported, because the police feel unable to bring charges. As Graham Wright, senior law lecturer at the university of Central England, said,

"There is a danger that the true crime picture will be distorted."

Chief Inspector Barry Evans, chairman of the West Midlands branch of the Police Federation said:

"We believe this is a cost-cutting exercise."

Whatever the reasons, it has gone down badly with Mr. Watts and many others.

A shopkeeper in my constituency spotted two young thieves in his shop, chased them, apprehended them, retrieved the goods and held them until the police arrived. In front of those two young villains the police said, "You have got the goods back. What's the problem? See your solicitor." How are young people supposed to be turned away from crime when they hear police officers saying such things? Why should the police deny the courts the opportunities to act on behalf of the community to turn these and other young people away from crime?

Even those working in the criminal justice system do not understand what the Government are about. Prison officers in Birmingham's Winston Green prison have written to tell me that the prison board is considering contracting out to the private sector the administration of finance, personnel and prisoner services in all 126 prison establishments and at Prison Service headquarters. Management estimates that that puts 2,510 jobs at risk. In their letter, the officers state:

"This revelation has angered the thousands of loyal, hard working Prison Service staff, who have responded to numerous changes and challenges in recent years and helped the service through difficult times."

I hope that I shall not be alone in endorsing what they say next. They state:

"We believe that the functions concerned should only be undertaken by public servants for reasons of integrity and confidentiality in such a sensitive, demanding and, at times, dangerous, area of public life."

I hope that the Minister will comment on that in his winding-up speech.

Increasing the number of police officers and building more and more prisons to keep more and more people locked up for longer will not, on their own, make our

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communities safer and it is wrong to pretend that they will. Community safety is best assured when communities relearn what living in a community is about and learn that some things can be done only by acting together. In one sense, it is rediscovering neighbourliness and recognising that the cost of crime for all communities is high and rising in economic and social terms.

A Government who have presided over a doubling of crime have shown that they are incapable of restoring a sense of safety to people and their communities. There is one last contribution that this Government can make. It is to step aside and make room for a new Government who know what needs to be done and will do it.

7.42 pm

Mr. David Martin (Portsmouth, South): This debate is a useful opportunity to raise some concerns that should be addressed in the new Session, either in the legislation proposed in the Gracious Speech or in other parliamentary ways. Many improvements that I have in mind for my constituents do not require legislation. I shall give two examples. I welcome the proposed health care Bill, which will offer doctors opportunities to set up even better and more diverse services for patients and build on the significant improvements that have been achieved in recent years, but I should like two more specific developments in the national health service as soon as possible.

First, more needs to be done to meet the reasonable concerns of people who do not want to share non-emergency wards with the opposite sex. Mixed-sex non-emergency wards are relatively new in the NHS. No doubt some hon. Members will remember the time when such wards would not have been introduced. At that time, single-sex wards were considered the only way to be treated in hospital. I am aware of the costs which it is claimed are saved and the shorter waiting time for beds in some cases, but the patients charter gives the patient a right to be told before admission whether it is planned that he or she should enter a mixed ward. If a patient prefers single-sex provision, those wishes should be respected where possible.

For the sake of respecting the dignity and comfort of patients, and to meet the concern of many people on this issue, which has been expressed to me and in petitions recently raised in Portsmouth over a longer time and in the local newspaper, more effort should be made in Portsmouth and nationally to provide real choice and separate provision, without unreasonable delay in admission or treatment. If necessary, the patients charter should be strengthened to make that clear.

Secondly, I urge the Government to make it clear that health care must include an automatic reminder for breast cancer screening for women over the age of 64. They currently have a right to such screening but, as there is no regular recall, many do not realise it, let alone take advantage of it.

I support the promised provisions of an education Bill which will strengthen teachers' powers of suspension, exclusion or expulsion of badly behaved pupils. The Home Office should be concerned to know where such pupils go and what they get up to when they are not at school. That was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley). The problem is already noticeable in Portsmouth and arises from truancy as well as from suspension or expulsion. The answer is that such pupils make nuisances of themselves on the streets.

The Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment must consider providing places which such pupils must attend. They could be called attendance centres or attendance units, but whatever they are called they should quickly provide some hours of the day that are more unpleasant than those at school. The centres should also be constructive and reform young people so that they can return to their schools and not make nuisances of themselves as before. Having to do something else when they are expelled, excluded or suspended from school would be not only a deterrent to persistently bad school behaviour but prevent children from roaming the neighbourhood with nothing to do but make trouble.

I welcome the inclusion in the legislative programme of Bills to deal with paedophiles and stalkers. Paedophiles cause immense suffering to children and their families, and the more information there is about particular people the better so that parents and the authorities have a better chance of protecting children from their evil activities. The criminal law has been added to over the years in an attempt to meet the curse of stalking which, with respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough and Horncastle (Mr. Leigh), goes well beyond the actions of Romeo pursuing Juliet. There have been some spectacular successes when there has been the will to bring a prosecution using existing law, but there is no doubt that further measures are required. They should improve present procedures, which have proved too costly or cumbersome to protect those who are literally terrorised by people who are often disturbed and violent.

I have considerable sympathy for the Government in attempting to square the circle on the proposed provisions for gun control, and considerable contempt for the opportunist party politicking of the opposition parties. The powerfully argued case made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen) will take some answering and I hope that I shall hear some answers in due course. In any change in the law, there has to be proper compensation for all those responsible people whose hitherto lawfully held weapons are to be banned and for clubs and businesses whose lawful activities will be made impossible.

I am pleased to see that the Home Office will be busy in this Session. I hope that means that there will be no more legislation on the extension of drinking hours late at night in densely populated areas in my constituency such as Southsea and Portsmouth. I do not welcome such legislation and I have consistently opposed it over the years. Residents in those areas will welcome the absence in the Gracious Speech of any such measures. Hopefully, there will be no parliamentary time to bring in any more.

One thing is certain, and it applies to all legislative programmes. Whatever we pass or do not pass into law, the great engines of Government churn on and the fuel for bureaucracy never fails. The endless offspring of earlier legislation—the thousands of statutory instruments and orders, of both domestic and European manufacture—pass year by year into our law and administration, mostly with scarcely a nod from members of some underpowered parliamentary Committee, let alone the vote of anyone on the Floor of the House. Such legislation is relentless,

never ending and pushing us ever closer to the continental system of government, with powerful functionaries and weak parliamentarians, in which Members of Parliament are at best irritants and at worst powerless to change much of any great significance.

That is one of the main reasons why I am strongly against any further integration into European economic and monetary union, and why I am, in principle, against our country joining a single currency, in whatever details it is dressed up in due course. I understand of course the difficulties of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on this subject and the formula for as much peace in the ranks as possible, but I have long made my opposition to a single currency plain and I will do so right up to the general election.

7.50 pm

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen): The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Martin) referred to his contempt for what he called the opportunistic Labour party. I assure him that it is nothing compared with the contempt of the people of Scotland for people such as him, who are totally out of tune with feeling in Scotland and who do not seem to give two hoots for the strength and feeling there, so I assure him that contempt is directed back to him across the Chamber.

In describing the Queen's Speech, the hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) referred to the positive way in which the Prime Minister had responded to the two measures on which Labour had offered co-operation. Rather than showing a positive side, it showed a weak Prime Minister. The thrust and tone of the Queen's Speech was designed, he hopes, to embarrass the Opposition. It, too, showed the Government's weakness and desperation. As they get closer and closer to their nemesis of the general election, they are scrambling about in an opportunistic way, with a Queen's Speech that is designed around, not a positive programme, but an electioneering programme to try to wrong foot the Opposition. That is weakness and deserves contempt because, instead of being used for the sake of Britain, the Gracious Speech is being used entirely for negative party interests.

I should like to spend some time on Dunblane, because people such as me better reflect national feeling in Scotland and throughout the UK than the hon. Member for Ayr. There is a revulsion against the importation into Britain of the gun culture. The right hon. and learned Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor) mentioned the fear of that gun culture being imported from America into the UK. That is important.

I take the point about gun clubs made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen). I understand how those people feel. They have been conducting this activity for a long period, but society as a whole wants to take action against a gun culture and against guns being regarded as a normal part of society. When it comes down to the potential use of guns, and to society wishing to show its disapproval of a gun culture, the rights of club members pale into insignificance.

I again condemn the Government for not allowing a free vote on the issue of whether there should be a complete ban on all hand guns. Other hon. Members have made the point about the deadliness of the .22 and the individuals who have been assassinated with that gun. There is no justification for retaining the .22 in clubs.

A knife culture has been mentioned. Unfortunately, we have such a culture. An increasing number of young people do not seem to realise the damage that can be done by knives, in particular the combat knife. They carry them as an act of bravado. They become involved in some silly incident that flares up. The knife is pulled out and used and, all of a sudden, young people face a charge of murder or serious assault, and the family of the victim must deal with the loss of or a serious injury to a member of their family.

Politicking has gone on. I am always amazed at the ingenuity of hon. Members on both sides of the House, who come up with ideas and with ways of getting around legislation and problems, but, all of a sudden, the Government tell us that, on this issue, there is no way they can distinguish between a kitchen knife and a combat knife. I do not accept that.

I am pleased that the Minister of State, Scottish Office, is here tonight because I have just received from him through the post a three or four-page résumé of how wonderfully the Government have been doing in Scotland in relation to his sector of responsibility. His letter states:

"1995 was the fourth successive year in which recorded crime in Scotland decreased",

but nowhere does he mention the violent crime figures. It would be interesting if he could respond to that in his winding-up speech—but not during my 10 minutes. Elsewhere in the UK, although crime might have been going down, violent crime seems to be going up. I would be interested to know what the Scottish figures are.

Closed circuit television schemes were mentioned. There was some mirth earlier in relation, I think, to the Bournemouth *Evening Echo*. I shall mention the *Rutherglen Reformer*, which has been behind the lookout CCTV scheme in the Cambuslang, Halfwayhouse and Rutherglen region. There has been terrific community support for that scheme and first-class work from the police. The scheme will be a first-rate contender for funding from the Scottish Office in the next few months.

I am putting in my plug to the Minister who will take the decision, but is it not ludicrous that, with the amount of money being spent, regions and communities are having to compete with each other for CCTV schemes, which are welcomed and wanted by the community and can serve a good purpose?

Although strictly speaking not in the Queen's Speech, the next issue I want to mention comes within the home affairs function of the Minister. His circular mentions that the Children (Scotland) Act 1995

"introduced legislation dealing with public and private law affecting children."

He makes the point:

"Consultation is presently under way on draft regulations, rules and guidance which will be required for full implementation by 1 April 1997. Part I of the Act will be implemented in November 1996."

As I am sure he is aware by now, I have written to him about a constituent of mine who raises issues that the Act clearly does not deal with. They relate to the rights of a father when there is a dispute between him and a mother regarding custody and/or access to a child.

My constituent maintains—he is backed up by charities—that people such as him are disadvantaged and that the rights of a father are not regarded equally within

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the law. I have written to the Minister asking for a meeting with my constituent to discuss his concerns. I hope that the Minister will agree to that meeting at some point.

There comes a time when society decides on change. I bear in mind the point made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West that the House is here to frame laws. I do not believe in populist laws, but there must be exceptions. The strength of feeling among people not only in Dunblane but the whole of Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom is a clear indication that they expect action. If it is an emotional bandwagon, so what? If we cannot be emotional about an incident such as Dunblane, we cannot be emotional about anything. We should use the determination arising from Dunblane to root out any possibility of a gun culture becoming established in the UK. That would be a first-class testimony to the people of Dunblane.

8 pm

Mr. John Whittingdale (Colchester, South and Maldon): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of the measures in the Queen's Speech. I had intended devoting the first part of my speech to a particular welcome for the Local Government and Rating Bill, but given the imposition of 10-minute speeches, I will save my detailed comments for another time. I will merely express my welcome for that Bill's provisions, which will provide a lifeline to many small village stores and post offices in my constituency.

I will concentrate on those elements of the Queen's Speech that relate to home affairs. Among the more controversial of them is the proposal to introduce minimum sentences for persistent burglars and dealers in hard drugs, together with automatic life sentences for persons convicted for a second time of a serious violent or sexual offence. I can understand the concern of the legal profession that those proposals represent a limitation on the freedom of judges to impose whatever sentence they see fit, but those measures are necessary to restore public confidence in our judicial system.

There have been too many cases of serious offenders being given sentences that are far too lenient, then released after serving only a fraction of the original sentence. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary referred in his excellent speech to a case in my constituency. The details are so horrific that I believe that it would be useful to the House to provide further information.

In July, Mr. Harry Bannerman of Asheldham was convicted of multiple rape. At the beginning of his trial, he changed his plea and admitted the rape and false imprisonment of a 67-year-old woman with drink problems and the rape, buggery and false imprisonment of a mental health patient at Severalls hospital in Colchester. Similar charges remain on file, including the rape of an 89-year-old woman at the Asheldham residential home for the elderly, which Bannerman helped to run.

If that were not enough, it transpired that those were not Bannerman's first convictions. He had a history of offences going back 25 years, to when he was gaoled in 1971 for the rape of a nine-year-old girl whom he had lured into a derelict building and the indecent assault of a 12-year-old girl a few days earlier. On that occasion, Bannerman was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was let out, only to be gaoled again in 1975 for three years, for four offences of child stealing. In 1980, Bannerman was convicted of the rape of a woman at knifepoint and gaoled for eight years. It seems extraordinary that Bannerman should have received only an eight-year sentence. The judge's description of Bannerman's behaviour on sentencing him this summer of "verging on the Satanic" was no exaggeration.

The public are entitled to ask why Bannerman was released after his second conviction for rape—particularly as the first was for the rape of a nine-year-old child. Bannerman is now serving a life sentence, but if he had been given life in 1980, the chances are that he would never have been free to commit his latest appalling crimes. We must address that failure of the judicial process.

Under the proposals of my right hon. and learned Friend, Harry Bannerman would have been sentenced to life imprisonment in 1980. It is possible that he might have been released subsequently, but only under licence and when persons in positions of responsibility were satisfied that Bannerman was no longer a danger to the community. For that reason alone, I strongly support my right hon. and learned Friend's proposed measures—and to achieve them, I am willing to accept a curtailment of the freedom of judges.

After the tragedy of Dunblane it was right for the House to consider any measures necessary to ensure that such a tragedy could never happen again. The Cullen recommendations are sensible and I am pleased that the Government have moved swiftly to accept them all. I welcome the improvements in school security, vetting of persons working with children, and increased police powers to refuse applications for firearms licences and to revoke existing licences. My reaction will be shared by every responsible gun owner throughout the country.

I would like the Government to go further in some areas. Controls on the availability of air guns should be reassessed, particularly in relation to the possession of such weapons by young people. Earlier this year, a pupil at the Philip Morant school in Colchester was shot in the eye with an air gun while quietly riding his bike. The youth responsible, who was a member of a gang, shot his victim without any provocation. The result is that the victim has permanently lost the sight of one eye and the fear that any operation to remove the pellet could lead to loss of sight in his other eye.

The youth responsible was not evil in his intent. He was charged with committing the offence, but he was so horrified at the consequence of his actions that he committed suicide shortly afterwards. That double tragedy came about as the result of a young person being able to obtain and play with an air weapon.

It is already an offence for anyone under the age of 17 to purchase or hire any firearm, including an air weapon. Perhaps the existing law is sufficient and the problem lies in the law not being properly enforced. The easy availability of air weapons suggests that there is scope for tighter controls.

There seems little doubt that had the firearms rules been properly enforced, Thomas Hamilton would never have been allowed to possess a handgun. Despite that, I recognise the public's wish for far greater controls. The

impracticality of Lord Cullen's suggestion of disabling methods leads me reluctantly to accept the case for a total ban on home possession of handguns—although I anticipate difficulties. One of my constituents is the national squad director of a pistol team and tells me that he regularly shoots at 30 different clubs, as well as competing abroad. A ban on home storage will make such participation far harder for my constituent. The House will have to address that matter during the Bill's progress.

I am saddened that it is felt necessary to go beyond that measure and to outlaw completely pistols of more than .22 calibre. Many of my constituents are members of gun clubs and enjoy target shooting with pistols. I have done so at Bisley, along with other hon. Members. I understand the resentment of responsible target shooters that their sport is to be banned because of the actions of one lunatic who should never have been allowed to have a gun in the first place.

I welcome the Government's commitment to pay compensation to gun owners, although I suspect that the true cost will prove higher than estimated. The Government are proposing to remove 160,000 guns. I understand that the average cost of a handgun is £600. The Home Affairs Select Committee was quoted a figure of £700. Full compensation for those weapons could total £96 million, and that figure does not take account of the cost of associated equipment such as ammunition, magazines, sights and storage equipment.

Mr. Budgen: Does my hon. Friend also favour compensation for those businesses that produce handguns and run ancillary activities, as they may be bankrupted?

Mr. Whittingdale: I agree that those businesses have a legitimate case for compensation. It is something that we must examine.

The cost of the extra security measures that gun clubs will be required to install is likely to be unaffordable for many of them. The consequence of the Bill may be that it becomes impossible for any sportsman to pursue target shooting with any calibre of gun because gun clubs will no longer exist. I understand the public feeling on the issue and why the Government have felt it necessary to act. However, it is a tragedy that the right of thousands of responsible and law-abiding target shooters to enjoy their sport may prove to be the last casualty of Dunblane.

8.10 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The Home Secretary outlined five important Bills, each of which could involve the House in full debate, quite justifiably. I want to talk about what should have been a sixth Bill, but instead was a shattering omission from the Home Secretary's speech.

This parliamentary Session will end with a general election on or before 22 May 1997, yet this country has a wholly inadequate system of electoral registration. It is creaking and corrupt and it must be replaced with a modern system. On modest estimates, about 3.5 million people—7.5 per cent. of those entitled to be registered—are missing from the electoral registers. In November 1994, an internal memorandum from Dennis Roberts, the director of statistics at the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, said about my figures:

"Surely the estimate produced by Mr. Barnes MP is broadly correct."

Why do I believe that so many people are missing from the electoral registers? One way to arrive at an estimate is to compare the eligible population with the numbers actually registered. That is a simple method. There are mid-year population estimates and the appropriate population groups can be examined. Based on that comparison, the shortfall is 2 million people. The latest figures for England and Wales for 1996, which I have just obtained from the Treasury, show that 95.3 per cent. of the eligible population are registered, which means that 4.7 per cent. are missing. In 1983, the registered figure was 97.7 per cent. That is a fantastic change within that period. The position is worse among attainers—those who are coming up to voting age and who should be appearing for the first time on electoral registers.

The shortfall of 2 million people does not tell the whole story. Registers exaggerate the true number of people registered. For example, sometimes people who have died are still on registers. Other people have moved. They may not be on a new register. Some may be unlikely to get a postal vote. There are also double entries. Many people are just carried over from old registers.

There is a huge time lag between registering and the production of the register. People are expected to reply in October, but the register comes into operation the following February. The register is based upon October residence. Therefore, the registration lasts for 16 months. In 1991, the Hansard Society said that registers were 16 per cent. out of date by the time they were finished. Research shows that between 7.4 and 9 per cent. of people are missing from registers.

In 1993, Stephen Smith of OPCS investigated the 1991 electoral registers and his survey shows the categories of people who are missing. For those living in rented, private, unfurnished accommodation, the figure for missing people is 19.4 per cent.; for inner London it is more than 20 per cent.; for the age group 21 to 24, it is almost 21 per cent.; for attainers at 17, who should be coming up for registration, it is almost 22 per cent.; for people who are black it is 24 per cent.; for those who have moved in the past year it is almost 28 per cent. Others in that category must also be taken into account as they often turn out to be in the wrong place and do not take advantage of postal or proxy votes.

Given the nature of our system, it is not surprising that for those from the new Commonwealth who are settled in this country and who are entitled to be included on British electoral registers, the missing figure is 36.6 per cent. For people living in rented, private, furnished accommodation—those who are moving around, who are on their bikes looking for jobs—the figure is 38.2 per cent. Those figures should worry Parliament greatly as they show the state of the electoral registers on which we depend to come to this place on behalf of those whom we represent.

There has been no research into missing registrations among homeless people. As those eligible to register have to be residents, and therefore generally would have to have residences, by definition homeless people are massively excluded. A few have managed to get on to the registers, but about 90 per cent. are missing. Home Office regulations and circulars to electoral returning officers should be changed to rectify that position. The law needs to be changed to remove the residency qualification so that homeless people can qualify, within constituencies, to vote.

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What are the consequences of under-registration? Some 3.5 million people lose their basic democratic right—the building block on which a democracy should be based. Furthermore, as I have shown, those missing in the greatest numbers are not a cross-sample of society—they are special groups. That means that there is a serious impact on election results. It also distorts opinion polls, which do not make use of the registers, but merely ask people whether they are on one. They do not get correct answers. In fact, the Labour party's position in the opinion polls is sometimes shown to be better than it really is. The matter should be put right.

In this time before the general election, the Government should introduce a decent system of electoral registration. That goal could be achieved with a rolling electoral register, such as they have in Australia. I introduced the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill—in 1993, and again in 1995—to achieve that aim, which was supported by all Opposition and by some Conservative Members, although not by the Government.

The category of "homeless" should be changed and the term "resident" redefined. We have talked a great deal about the importance of definitions, which is an area in which the Government could greatly assist us. Disabled people should have good access to polling stations. Although they may be registered to vote, they cannot exercise their right to vote as easily as the rest of us.

Electoral registration is an immensely important issue, and the Government should do something to enhance it before the next general election.

8.20 pm

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on crime and the Home Office's proposals. The issues are very important in my part of the world—north Wales—because, last year, 41,645 crimes were recorded, a 79 per cent. increase on the figures in 1979, when my party was last in office. It is also a 20 per cent. increase on the figures of five years ago. In north Wales, there has been a 96 per cent. in violent crime since 1979, and large increases in criminal damage. The chances have greatly increased of people in my constituency and in the North Wales police area being affected by every type of criminal activity—such as assault, vehicle theft and burglary.

In real terms, the statistics mean an increased chance of old-age pensioners being affected by sneak robberies and distraction robberies, an increase in car crime and violence, and an increase in the use of shotguns, other firearms and knives in the North Wales police area. Those increases have occurred when the "party of law and order" has been in office.

The conviction rate has decreased dramatically in north Wales. In the past 15 years, there has been an 80 per cent. increase in crime, and a 10 per cent. decrease in convictions.

Mr. Stephen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hanson: I do not have time. We are operating under the 10-minute rule, as the hon. Gentleman would realise had he been in the Chamber earlier.

The number of police officers has remained fairly static in north Wales over the past 17 years, during the time in which the Government have been in office. We have slightly more than 1,300 officers in north Wales, which is only 6 per cent. more than we had in 1979, since when there has been a 77 per cent. increase in crime. The demand for police services is obviously outstripping their resources.

In north Wales, there is great concern that the area cost review being conducted by the Home Office will result in funds for police forces in Wales being redirected to police forces in south-east England in particular. I have received representations from one of my local authorities—Denbighshire county council—and from others in north Wales about the potential threat to funding. I urge Ministers at least to maintain police funding levels in Wales at current levels. In addition to increased crime, we face a major child abuse inquiry, the costs of which will fall especially hard on the police and deplete their resources.

In the past few years, crime has risen faster in the UK—while the "party of law and order" has governed us—than it has in any of the other 16 western nations. Since 1987, crime has increased by 42 per cent. in the UK. I do not think that the crime Bill will take the long-term action necessary to prevent crime.

The Bill's impact will be to achieve an increase in inmates. An additional 11,000 gaol places are anticipated to be necessary, as are 12 new prisons, and another £3 billion to run the system. This increase is occurring at a time when there are 57,000 people in gaols, and when gaols are filled to record levels. Since 1979, 22 prisons have been built, and a further 11,000 inmates have been put into them—yet crime has doubled. We must examine more than the "one-club approach" of sentencing and gaoling people to prevent crime, although sentencing is and must remain an important sanction.

We must examine detection, prevention, police numbers and a long-term strategy. I commend to the Minister the suggestions by my hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael). They have presented crime prevention measures that will help to reduce criminal activity in north Wales and elsewhere. Closed-circuit television is an important factor, but the question of which local authorities will receive funding for it is like a lottery. I should like CCTV to be made more readily available.

We must support youth services and imaginative schemes for early intervention in cases of potential troublemakers. We must examine issues of truancy and unemployment. In my constituency, the areas with the highest crime rate are often those with the highest rates of unemployment and poor housing. Other areas in my constituency reap the whirlwind of the breakdown of the social fabric caused by unemployment and poor housing.

We must examine ways of preventing the supply and abuse of drugs, and offering treatment to abusers. We must re-examine recreational facilities. Today, I received a letter from a constituent in Flint, who raised concerns about the lack of recreational facilities, the knock-on effect on young people and the fact that idle hands potentially turn to crime. We must examine suggestions by Labour Front Benchers for child protection initiatives, and for helping parents to bring difficult children into line. In particular, we must examine the issues of a paedophile register and combat knives.

The main message that I would like to send to the Government is that some of the money spent on prisons and increasing prisoner numbers could be spent on preventing criminal activity in the first place. Prevention and punishment go hand in hand, and we must consider both issues to make a difference.

On the issue of a paedophile register, I should like to mention the case of Sophie Hook. She was taken from her uncle's garden, not far up the coast from my constituency, by an individual with a history of offending, who was known to the police. There was recently an incident in my constituency in which an individual who had offended previously entered a guilty plea at Chester crown court for indecent assault on an eight-year-old child and was fined £200 by the judge. That sentence has horrified the parents, created absolute revulsion in my community and caused a great deal of damage to people's confidence in how those matters are handled.

The fine imposed on that offender was, of course, insufficient punishment. The point, however, is that the perpetrator of the assault has moved from my constituency to England, where he will be free to perpetrate his acts again and again. It is well known that sexual offenders will not go away, but will continue to offend. The police, local authorities, social services and the education department in the area to which he moves will not know that he is there, because there is no paedophile register. That is unacceptable. The sentence is unacceptable, and the lack of a register is unacceptable.

I hope that the Bill's proposals on a paedophile register will be examined in detail. It would bring a great deal of comfort to my constituents, who have been traumatised by the case, to know that the Government and the Opposition are pressing for measures to ensure that such a case is not repeated.

I welcome the crime Bill's inclusion of action on combat knives. It is not acceptable for AMK Warrior "skull-crushers", with curved serrated blades, to be on sale in shops for £197; for Combat Smatchets with double-edged blades to be on sale for £295; or for bowie knives, commando knives and machete-type knives to be on sale. My local authority, and certainly Flint town council, have pressed hard for the introduction of standards in nightclubs and other public places, to ensure that knives are not brought in. I believe that it is possible to create a definition to ensure that combat knives are banned. This week, my local police are considering the possibility of equipping police officers with chain mail protectors against knives. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) said only last week, such knives are not used for peeling potatoes. They have one purpose: threatening, intimidatory behaviour. The Government should be able to produce a definition so that such knives could be banned.

This weekend, I took the kids away to Blackpool, as I thought that they would like to see the lights. We stopped at the amusement arcade there to have a go at some of the games. In the corner was a live video machine with a handgun which people aged between 16 and 20 were using to shoot real people on videos. I do not consider it acceptable for such machines to be in amusement arcades at this time. I do not want to see live action video machines being used for that purpose.

Finally, I have an advertisement from *Country Landowner* magazine, which states:

"An ideal present and useful training aid. Recommended for ages 4-9".

The object described is a life-size shotgun, which is advertised as suitable for young children. Whatever else we do on the subject of guns, let us make sure that we decry the gun culture, and do not introduce our young people to using handguns.

8.30 pm

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am extremely grateful to you for allowing me to catch your eye at this juncture in the debate. I have an apology to make to the House. Because of constituency and other engagements and visitors from the constituency coming to the House this afternoon, I did not have time to pay full attention to this important debate, other than briefly during the Front-Bench exchanges. I was absent after that, but I hope that no hon. Members will feel that I did not pay sufficient attention. I will, of course, read the *Hansard* report of the entire debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) on the immense amount of content that he introduced in the short time available to him. That was an object lesson in how to speak in the House of Commons when time is short.

The hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who is a colleague of mine on the Select Committee on European Legislation, raised some interesting points about electoral qualifications and systems, which need closer examination. I would guess that, in the debate today, he was the only hon. Member who spoke on such matters, which are of great interest.

I share some of the hon. Gentleman's anxieties that the general psychology of public participation in the election process is diminished by the social and economic factors he mentioned, and also by physical factors in the past. The psychological intensity of the commitment of many members of the public—hundreds of thousands of them—is diminished by a feeling that worries me as a Member of Parliament—that the House of Commons has somewhat lost its way in serving the public.

Whatever our party allegiances, we represent the political views of thousands of people and provide clear party platforms within the adversarial structure of the Chamber and the parliamentary tradition, much of which is good and valuable, but which also has its drawbacks.

I get the impression that there is a tremendous ground swell of public demand for politicians of all parties to tackle certain issues rigorously and vigorously; yet there is also impatience and frustration among the public who feel that politicians are indulging their own detailed—but legitimate—arguments. Of course, that is indispensable and I make no complaint about it, but it does not meet the public's objectives.

One of the matters about which people are deeply concerned is the seemingly inexorable rise in crime in recent decades. It is right, per contra, to congratulate our present Home Secretary. He is an extremely robust, clear-cut and decisive Home Secretary, for which we should be grateful. He has considerable talent, and his own forensic legal experience, and has shown that, in recent years, there has been a fall in crime figures in

[Mr. Hugh Dykes]

certain leading categories. In my constituency, there has been a recent sharp fall in the number of burglaries and violent assaults and in various other categories.

I pay tribute to the work of the police, not only in my area but in general terms. All too often we take their work for granted. The work of the police at all levels, from the chief superintendent down to the newest constable, is probably one of the most stressful jobs in society. We in the House of Commons should constantly remind ourselves that one of our first duties is to uphold the strength of the police, in psychological and resource terms, so that they feel that they have the backing of the mother of Parliaments in fulfilling their task.

I pay tribute to my local police force, under an excellent chief superintendent and his senior colleagues, and to the entire corpus of the four stations in my area. They have achieved considerable results in controlling crime, supported by a much more realistic attitude on the part of local magistrates in proper sentencing. Sentencing should be severe when the crime is heinous, and that message is gradually getting across, within the limits of the legislation and what the lower benches can do, of course.

Mr. Den Dover (Chorley): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Dykes: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not give way; speeches are subject to the 10-minute rule, and I have a number of points to make in a limited time.

The factors to which I referred have been something of a turning point in the self-confidence of the police, which leads to the development of a much more positive attitude to community relationships. For example, police visits to local schools were often resented, but are now more easily accepted. The police in my area and elsewhere also do outstanding race relations work.

There is still something of a problem in the Metropolitan police in this respect, mainly south of the river and among younger police officers. However, the problem is not so evident north of the river, and one must pay tribute to the great efforts being made there. It is essential for us to continue to support the police, so that they feel that they have the backing not just of one party or only of politicians wishing to gain a short-term advantage but of the whole House.

A recurrent theme of today's debate—it is, of course, the subject of a Bill to be introduced this Session—is that of weapons of violence. There is still time for the Government to consider allowing a free vote on handguns and on the relevant legislation, which I believe is to be published in the middle of this week—I am only guessing about the timetable, and perhaps the Minister replying to the debate can give the House further details. Indeed, it may already have been referred to today.

Weapons of violence are another example of a topic on which the public want the House to take unequivocal and decisive action. I confidently believe that it is possible to construct wholly logical and coherent legislation framing a complete prohibition of handguns for private use. I think that gun club members simply have to accept that, although I know it may be hard. There may be schedules in the relevant Bill to provide for the exclusion of, for example, Olympic sports pistols, but I would not go further than that. That also has to be examined with care because we know what can happen even with low-calibre guns, which can still be destructive or even lethal. They are different from agricultural shotguns. There is a distinction between various types of guns, and it can be satisfactorily encompassed in legislation.

Knives pose a more difficult problem, and are, in a way, more worrying than handguns. They are not so much on the public's mind at the moment, but they are receiving attention thanks to some dramatic press conferences. Handguns have a higher profile because of recent dreadful tragedies, but knives are more worrying, and a harder subject for Parliament to grasp.

There is already a long list of prohibited knives, yet there are other knives which are obviously weapons of violence and destruction and which must not be associated with the old tradition of the schoolboy carrying a penknife, or the scout with a legitimate scouting knife on a camp site. We need to act, because the public want Parliament to tackle the problem.

We shall shortly see the text of legislation dealing with minimum sentences, but we have to be careful not to excessively limit—I apologise for the split infinitive—the discretion and power of the judges. I believe that there is to be more flexibility in that legislation, so the Government have taken on board the need for it—I hope so. Although it is intrinsically and originally the high court of Parliament, I do not think that it is possible for this place to limit too precisely the discretionary power of judges, particularly senior judges, in dealing with heinous crimes of violence and the worst kind of criminal offence such as murder. It is up to us to let the judiciary make the final decision, perhaps within the framework of tighter legislation, if that is deemed to be in the public interest.

There has been a visible growth in crime in every country in the western world. We often lose the ability to distinguish whether the press is now reporting crime far more than before. Many people, particularly those of older generations, feel that there was a lot of crime in the old days as well, but that it was less well reported, because the press did not have the sensationalist attitude which is now creeping into local newspapers.

Those points show that the debate on home affairs and crime and punishment—particularly what we should do about sexual crimes—is one of the most important. Parliament has a lot of work to do, and it will be important for politicians of good will on both sides to get together on this crucial issue—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order.

8.40 pm

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): One wonders what the Government have been doing for 17 years. Some 31 criminal justice Bills have come before Parliament in that time, and we are still no further forward on tackling crime. I wholeheartedly agree with some of the Government's sentencing policies. I agree with their attitude towards paedophiles without a shadow of doubt, because 95 per cent. of them go on to reoffend. I also agree on double rapists. If my party gets its act together, I hope to be supporting the Government at least on those two issues.

I want to talk about drugs. The other week, I asked the Library to dig out some figures on drugs. We have a problem with drugs, although most of us, particularly the Government, bury our heads in the sand. I should like to take a minute to announce the figures, because this is the first time that the Library has compiled such information.

Between 1987 and 1995, the amount of heroin in circulation increased by 167 per cent. The figures for methadone, a heroin substitute prescribed by doctors, went up in the same period by 686 per cent. In the same eight years, the figures for cocaine went up by 320 per cent. The death rate among young people taking drugs has been running at 37 per cent. over the past eight years. The illegal drug industry—which is connected to crime; the police will not deny that—now runs at £5 billion, but we are still burying our heads in the sand.

I have written to the Prime Minister to ask for a national inquiry or even a royal commission on where we are going on the drug issue. I have given the House the Library's figures on the enormous increase in drug circulation. I shall quote figures later on the connection with crime. Now is the time to sit round the table with the people who know. We should get organised and see whether we are doing the job properly.

The police say that there is a direct link between drugs and firearms. Drug gangs use firearms. It is said that 80 per cent. of crime is committed because of illegal drug taking. If that is the correct figure, my God, somebody had better get their head out of the trough and get something done. Let us have a national inquiry to see where we are going.

The police do their job as best they can. I have no grumbles about the police. They do the best job possible with the resources they have. However, I get a bit upset about one or two things and I worry about some of their tactics. For example, the police allow some drug dealers to deal because information comes back to them about petty criminals. Allowing a drug dealer to stay in business if he gives little bits of information about who is burgling this and who is burgling that might keep the figures down in the local area, but I am not sure that it is the answer. A national inquiry might get to the bottom of such issues.

Last year, the chief constable of Avon and Somerset said:

> "I am in no doubt that the abuse of illegal drugs is responsible for the majority of recorded crime. Solve the drug problem and the crime wave will reduce."

Nobody took any notice of him.

Where are the drugs coming from? We do not make drugs in this country. We may try, but the real stuff comes from abroad, so we should look at Customs and Excise. What is going on there? Over the past three or four years, at least 700 Customs and Excise officers have lost their jobs. A port in my constituency had three Customs and Excise officers—two part-time and one full-time. They have all gone—replaced by a fax machine. If that has happened in one little port in my constituency, what has happened throughout the land?

Where are the customs officers coming from? They do the best they can—I cannot blame them. They have had some good successes. They are like the police—they can do only what their resources allow. If we can stop drugs coming into this country by using more resources we could crack a little bit of the crime.

It is all right saying that we can put drug offenders in prison, but I would hazard a guess that some drug pushers on council estates would take a chance on seven years in prison. Some of these people are desperate. They are drawing dole, or they are on income support of £47 a week. Some Conservative Members may think that an enormous amount for someone on a council estate to live on, but it is not.

Those people are getting into the drugs game because, once they start to supply drugs, they are on at least £100 a week on top of their dole. They will take the chance of supplying drugs. Who do they supply them to? They supply them to the young ones. How do the young ones get the money to feed the habit? Of course, they go burgling. Some of those burglaries spill over into violence.

We have a problem with drugs. "Tackling Drugs Together" was the Government's answer. I am not saying that that was wrong, but we have not got to the bottom of the problem. In my area we shall be launching a programme called "Living for Learning" to educate kids. I think that we have now accepted the need for education. At one time, some people argued against educating kids, but we have to accept that we must have local initiatives, setting up organisations to work within the drug culture.

The most important aim is to cut the supply of drugs. They are coming through at an enormous rate. I have given the figures to the Minister and the Prime Minister. The figures are unacceptable. Those drug dealers are causing up to 80 per cent. of crime in this country. Until we get that settled, we will get nothing settled. I call on the Prime Minister and the Government to set up a national inquiry to work out where we are going. Let us get round the table and sort out the issue once and for all.

8.48 pm

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) who made some profound points that we would all do well to ponder. As he rightly points out, drugs are a scourge of modern society, affecting the entire western world. They are at the root of so many of our social problems, particularly crime.

I sometimes feel that our debates on home affairs are conducted in a vacuum, because the criminal law is only one constraint on human behaviour. Not so many years ago, there were other powerful constraints, most of which, sadly, have fallen away, leaving only the criminal law as our defence against deviant behaviour. We all know that the criminal law is not up to the task.

What are those constraints? They include respect for others and the realisation that every right has a reciprocal responsibility. There was respect by men for women, but when one can read articles and see photographs in a family newspaper that a few years ago one would have found only on the top shelf of a seedy newsagents, is it any wonder that respect between men and women has weakened?

There was respect between parents and children. In the 1960s, as teenagers became more financially independent, respect began to break down; given some of the half-baked left-wing ideas in our schools, is it any wonder that respect between parents and children has weakened?

Respect for religion used to be a powerful constraint on human behaviour. People really worried about what would happen to them when they died. They regarded the

[Mr. Michael Stephen]

laws laid down in the Bible as rules by which they should lead their own lives. Perhaps bishops and the other clergy would do better if they spent more time trying to reinforce belief in religion and the laws laid down in the Bible, rather than dabbling in politics, as they so often do.

Respect for the police has also been undermined. Is it any wonder that young hooligans laugh at the police when a policeman who seeks to impose reasonable corporal punishment on some young hooligan is dragged into court and fined?

Is it surprising that young bullies in schools laugh at their teachers when, only last week, a teacher who made a brave attempt to stop bullying in her school was criticised and will be dragged before a tribunal?

It is all upside down. Why has it happened? There is one common denominator. I shall not seek to blame it all on them, but they must take a substantial share of the blame. They are the television editors and producers. When people with low standards of personal behaviour are portrayed on our television screens every day, is it any wonder that young and impressionable people imitate that behaviour?

It is no answer for the television producers to say, "We just reflect society." They do not, and they know it. They know that they are in charge of the most powerful medium ever invented for moulding ideas and changing behaviour. Why else would people pay tens of thousands of pounds for a few minutes advertising time on television? They must accept their responsibility.

Television has another charge to answer: it is often the thief of time—the time that parents should be spending with children, husbands should be spending with wives and communities should be spending together.

Television has also served to undermine respect for Parliament. The main responsibility for undermining respect for Parliament among our constituents must rest with us. If we spend our working day trying to make out that other Members are crooks or incompetents, as we so often do, is it any wonder that the public begin to believe that we really are crooks and incompetents? We all know that it is not true, and that hon. Members on both sides of the House work extremely hard and conscientiously for their constituents.

Television trivialises and sensationalises everything. I doubt very much whether the well-informed and thoughtful speech of the hon. Member for Blyth Valley will be broadcast on television. I doubt very much whether any of today's proceedings will be broadcast on television, except perhaps an ill-tempered exchange across the Dispatch Box. If respect for Parliament, the monarchy and all our institutions is undermined, is it any wonder that crime and lawlessness are increasing?

We should also consider the rise of single-interest pressure groups. Many of them are responsible, but some are not. Some say, "Elected Parliaments and Governments are a complete waste of time. If you want to get anything done, you should take the law into your own hands. Go and sit down in the road. Go and smash lorries. Go and sit in trees. Don't care about democracy." Their activities are extremely dangerous, because the liberty of British people rests here in the House, and in our hands as their elected Members of Parliament. We cannot abdicate our responsibility to single-interest pressure groups, or, indeed, to judges.

Expectations of what Governments and Parliaments can do have run far ahead of their ability to deliver, and that causes disillusionment. To some extent, we are responsible for raising expectations that we know cannot be delivered. We should think carefully before we do it in future.

The general breakdown of society is often blamed on my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Thatcher. That is nonsense. In so far as our problems stem from increased prosperity—we have more cars, videos and everything else to steal—perhaps she is responsible. [*Laughter.*] However, when we consider that that phenomenon has been taking place since long before my right hon. and noble Friend became Prime Minister—it has been happening for 30 years, not just in Britain, but throughout the western world—it is easy to see how silly was the laughter from the Labour Front Bench when I suggested that the responsibility did not rest on the shoulders of my right hon. and noble Friend.

Governments can do only so much, and this Government have done it. Funding for the police has increased by 100 per cent. since we came to office. More prisons have been built to protect society against dangerous criminals, and new powers have been given to the courts and the police.

I have, however, one criticism of my party, and that is that we listen too much to the siren voices of the left-wing criminologists and other do-gooders within the criminal justice system, who were in and out of the Home Office almost every day. Fortunately, we have got rid of them, and we now have a Home Secretary and a ministerial team who are determined to roll back the liberal ideas that have done so much damage to our country.

Some judges say that prison does not work, but, with the greatest respect to them, that is none of their business. [*Laughter.*] I hear more silly laughter from the Opposition. There was a time when the judges imposed a self-denying ordinance on themselves. They did not descend into the political arena to take part in party political debate, because they knew that their value to our society rested upon the fact that they were impartial and were seen to be so. If the judges forfeit their impartiality, this nation will be losing a priceless asset. I warn the judges of the danger of departing from the very wise rule that they once imposed on themselves.

We should put dangerous criminals in prison. Prison works because it deprives them of the opportunity to commit further crimes. While they are in prison, however, there are opportunities to help criminals to come to terms with their offending behaviour. I commend to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench the work of the Addicted Diseases Trust at Downview and other prisons. It does excellent work, and, we should give it even more support than we do.

8.58 pm

Mr. George Robertson (Hamilton): Not surprisingly, I shall not follow the hon. Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) down the strange alleyways in which he seemed to find himself.

I intend to speak about Dunblane and firearms, and it is probably the first time that I have done so without the presence of my opposite number, the Secretary of State for Scotland. It is a strange occurrence, but I am sure that the Minister of State will be a good substitute. The

Secretary of State is in Luxembourg, fighting the cause of Scottish beef in the various channels available, and we wish him well in that regard if not in any other.

I find this speech slightly awkward on another count as well. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen) made an allegation about a deal between the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Home Secretary. In military circles, I think that that is referred to as friendly fire. I am not in any position to know whether deals were done or not. Perhaps the Minister will address himself to that point in his winding-up speech.

In this debate, we are considering a number of pieces of legislation, some of which we have seen and others that we have yet to see. Inevitably, the focus of attention has been on the Crime (Sentences) Bill, for England and Wales, and the Government's more poetically entitled—one might say even literary—Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill for north of the border. The debate has also concentrated on the Firearms (Amendment) Bill, which apparently we are to see for the first time later this week, and which we shall certainly speed on its way to Royal Assent before Christmas.

The issue of firearms is, of course, serious. It crosses normal party divisions and arises out of a horrific event which took place on 13 March in the town where I live and which the Secretary of State for Scotland represents, and a 200-page report by Lord Cullen that has taken seven months to produce. The issue is serious, sober, and crosses party boundaries. I for one was much saddened by the approach taken by the Home Secretary in his opening speech. His tone—and, indeed, the content of his speech—was not what the British public would have expected on a subject that has carried the country with it. I hope that when he reflects on what he said, and on how it sounded to the House and the country, the Home Secretary will regret the way in which he put it forward.

The Home Secretary said that his proposal for a partial ban on handguns on a whipped vote through the House of Commons would somehow allow the people of Dunblane—by that, I think that he means the parents of the murdered and injured children, the injured teachers and the family of Gwen Mayor—to draw a line under the events of 13 March. As somebody who knows those people and lives in the same town, I have to tell him that a partial ban on those weapons of destruction, those easily concealed, easily carried and all too easily used handguns, will allow no line to be drawn. Nor will such a ban draw a line under the real fear in the wider community that the remaining 40,000 handguns—20,000 of which are semi-automatic repeater pistols—will continue to represent a serious danger to public safety.

Although we shall be debating the matter again when we see the Government's precise proposals, I should like to make three simple points in considering what has been said in this debate. Dealing with the menace represented by handguns is not some sort of sop to the parents of Dunblane. Their feelings are deep, profound and understandable to any human being, but they were not the only reason why people were shocked to learn that on 13 March 200,000 handguns were held in homes all over Britain. Thus the demand for a full ban on the civilian use of handguns comes from every part of Britain and every kind of person, not simply from one small community that was afflicted by evil on that day in March.

The hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Carlisle), who participated earlier in this debate but has since evacuated the Chamber, said that the Dunblane parents and those who spoke for them were hysterical and emotional. He referred specifically to Mr. Les Morton, one of the bereaved fathers who spoke on the day that the Cullen report was published. His comments touched a new low for a Member of this House. He is an individual known for hysterical response on occasions: I am glad, however, that Tory Members dissociated themselves from what he said on that day. I only wish that the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister had done so publicly as well, as that might have mended some of the wounds caused by what the hon. Gentleman said.

This issue naturally concerns emotion and the point that must be grasped is that it has been under consideration for the past seven months. None of us was absent from the debate that took place in the country. I accept that we were waiting for Lord Cullen's report. Lord Cullen is a learned judge who was chosen in consultation with this side of the House. I helped to write the terms of reference that he worked towards, and I asked the parliamentary question that led to his appointment to look at the circumstances surrounding the shooting. But he is not a royal commission. Neither is he some oracle nor the fount of all knowledge. We saw what went on at the hearings in the Albert hall in Stirling. The Secretary of State and myself gave evidence to the inquiry and saw the evidence as it piled up.

If the debate that took place during the summer in communities all over the country—in pubs, clubs, homes and the street—was soured or influenced, it was because, regrettably, a number of factors politicised it. The first reason for that was the premature publication of a report by the Select Committee on Home Affairs. It did not have to report: it spent only a day considering inadequately evidence that Lord Cullen was to consider in greater detail. It divided on solely partisan grounds because the Conservative majority on the Committee would not listen to arguments put forward by my hon. Friends on the Committee. Nobody should underestimate the report's impact on public opinion, and how it hardened the public's views and stopped them keeping an open mind until Lord Cullen had reported.

As I said during the Home Secretary's opening speech, the Sunday newspapers on 13 October also had an impact on public opinion, not only on the opinions of Labour Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and myself, who read those newspapers and wondered whether that really was the Government's view in advance of Lord Cullen's report being handed to them. But we had no reason to believe that that was not the official line.

Mr. Howard *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Robertson: I hear the Home Secretary's protestations of innocence. We have listened carefully. There was a degree of amusement when he protested his innocence in that regard. Somebody briefed the press. It was somebody close to the Home Secretary, the Home Department or the Conservative party brief. It might have been a false trail or designed to test the water, but the line told people that the Government appeared to have come to a soft conclusion. That hardened public opinion. When

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we found out, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn asked the Home Office, while I simultaneously asked the Scottish Office, whether we could see, on Privy Council terms—we all know the meaning of that—the Cullen report before the statement on the Wednesday morning. Naturally, we had to discuss the contingency arrangements in the event of certain evidence being in Lord Cullen's report. No announcement was made until we had seen the content of Lord Cullen's report, which backed up what we had said in May in our evidence to the inquiry.

The second point is that even the Government have gone beyond Lord Cullen's recommendations, so no Conservative Member can fairly criticise the Labour party for going further than the Government. The Home Secretary said that they had considered Lord Cullen's analysis but had disagreed with some of his conclusions. We agree with the Government that some of Lord Cullen's conclusions seem strangely adrift from his good, comprehensive and well-summed-up analysis. All we ask the Government to do is to go one stage—albeit an important stage—further, and to ban all handguns in civilian use.

I commend the changes that the Government have made. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen) was right when he implied that there was some dishonourable deal between the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Home Secretary, but I commend the distance that the Government went, because it was certainly further than most of us expected. However, it is still not enough. To leave in private hands 40,000 lethal handguns, 20,000 of them automatics, with the same firepower that they have always had, and the same devastating impact on the individuals at whom they may be fired, is still a serious risk to public safety.

The Scottish Police Federation, which originally said that it would be prepared to countenance an exemption for single-action pistols, has now said that that would leave a dangerous loophole in the law. The most devastating argument of all, cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn in our brief statement two weeks ago, lies in the words of the British Shooting Sports Council. In evidence published in paragraph 9.68 on page 121 of the Cullen report, it said:

"no matter what system of checks and paperwork is maintained in such circumstances, it would be a simple matter indeed for a shooter intent in recovering his guns to enter a competition, provide evidence to his club secretary that he had done so, recover possession of the complete gun together with ammunition for it, and perpetrate an outrage."

That is the gun lobby—the British Shooting Sports Council—saying that a partial ban on handguns is fatally flawed. I do not see how the Home Secretary can shrug off the evidence not of those who are opposed to handguns but of those who want to keep handguns for sport.

The third point—perhaps the most important of the whole debate—is expressed in a plea to the Home Secretary and to the Government to keep the issue non-political. Inevitably, the issue is political with a small "p", because it is a great issue of public concern, but this afternoon the right hon. and learned Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor) attacked the Government's proposal and the hon. Members for Harrow, East (Mr. Dykes) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Hughes) supported the case for a total ban; it is also true that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) holds a view different from that of Opposition Front Benchers. This is a great public debate across party lines.

Who can deny that there will be huge passions and that political parties will be involved? What passions in the public arena can escape the involvement of political parties? In the past seven months, however, despite temptations and provocations, we have managed to maintain a reasonable degree of consensus, and I hope that it will be possible to continue that until Christmas, when the Bill receives Royal Assent and becomes law. That can happen only in one circumstance—if the Government allow Conservative Members to have a free vote. There will be a free vote for Opposition Members irrespective of the Government's decision. We have said that that is the right way to proceed. If we say that it is the right approach for the Government to adopt, that must apply to the Opposition as well. Some Members may find it convenient to be away from the House when the Division takes place. There will be others who might find it convenient to go through the Government Lobby. But let the will of the House be expressed through a free vote.

On this great issue, where passions run so strongly through national newspapers, individual journalists and writers and the vast majority of the public, let us avoid a whipped vote by the Government. Whatever the result of a whipped vote, however that is achieved and whatever the majority may be, it will not have the sustainability of a vote taken freely by individual Members accepting their own responsibility on such a great issue at a defining moment for this Parliament.

The Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Prime Minister and the Government generally cannot escape from the fact that if they try to dragoon the issue through the House on the marshalled votes produced by the Government Whips some time in December, that will become an issue in the general election. That must be because that is the nature of our process. It would be a bitter and sad day for democracy if we were left in that position.

Handguns are special and the issues surrounding them are in turn special and difficult. Thomas Hamilton, whom the Secretary of State for Scotland and I both, to use the wrong figure of speech, crossed swords with in the past, took 743 bullets with him when he went on 13 March to Dunblane primary school. He fired 106 rounds, causing 58 wounds and killing 18 people, including himself. He injured 15 people. He used two legally held semi-automatic handguns. It took only four horrifying minutes to do that damage. No other weapon could possibly create such havoc and so much desperate damage. That is why handguns are special. That is why only a decision that is made freely in this place by the country's law makers will lead eventually to legislation on handguns that will stick.

The Government have shown in the past week that they can change their mind, even at the last minute. I hope that before we come to the day when a decision on handguns must be made they will consider all the implications and all the arguments. I hope that the Home Secretary will listen to his right hon. and hon. Friends as well as to Opposition Members and come to the right conclusion for his party, his country and for Parliament.

Another feature of the Queen's Speech that affects us all is beef. The Government will produce two Bills, one for England and Wales and one for Scotland. They will be strangely different, and I shall return to that matter. Inevitably, I wish to concentrate on the issues that relate specifically to Scotland.

My right hon. Friend—I almost referred to the Secretary of State as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mr. Forsyth), which might have been a terrible mistake to make, especially if anyone from the Scottish press had been listening. The Secretary of State for Scotland is in Luxembourg talking about beef. My hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) brought me a piece of paper this evening, which I hope somebody has faxed to the Secretary of State. On it was a question from a Conservative Member, the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey), asking the Secretary of State for Defence whether British beef is purchased by the armed forces for their own consumption in the United Kingdom. The Under-Secretary of State replied:

"The majority of our requirements are, however, for frozen beef, which is not readily available from the British market and I understand that on cost grounds the majority of beef joints have been sourced from south America, predominantly Brazil and Uruguay".

So the NAAFI buys Latin American. The Secretary of State for Scotland, who as I have said is in Luxembourg and supposed to be defending the interests of Scotland, might want to take that on board.

We have had 17 years of Conservative Government. This has not been the first day of a theatrical performance from the Home Secretary, coming along with yet another definitive answer to the crime problems that have affected us. I tried to see whether I could find adequate words to describe the situation in Tory Britain after 17 years of this Government, and these words came to mind.

"When parents dare not let their children go out to play; when senior citizens who have given a lifetime of service to the community are forced to spend their sunset years—which should be among the most rewarding in their lives—as prisoners in their own homes; then we have reached a point where action must be taken."

Those are the words of the right hon. Member for Stirling, Secretary of State for Scotland, in September last year when he was appointed to a job in the Cabinet—a job which, he tells us, he has coveted all his political life. It is a description of Tory Scotland by a Tory in 1995. It is not something of which the Conservative party can be proud, because it is all too accurate. They have had 17 years to get it right, so why should anybody believe that suddenly, startlingly, they have the answer? *[Interruption.]*

The hon. and learned Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) has now joined us to make yet another contribution to law and order by shouting from below the Gangway. His party has had 17 years, and now we are told that they have the answer.

Sir Ivan Lawrence: I apologise for not being here earlier. As the hon. Gentleman will accept, the wind-up speeches started early this evening, because many hon. Members were told that they could speak for only 10 minutes, so the debate has been shorter. Why do he and his hon. Friends bang on as though the world has not changed at all over the past 17 years, as though the situation with crime, families, everything, has been static and that all a Government had to do was to improve things over 17 years? The world has changed immensely, and unless he realises that by dealing with the matter sensibly, he will be thoroughly incredible to the people outside.

Mr. Robertson: Of course the world has changed, and crime has got much worse, but every year we are faced with Conservative Ministers who tell us that they have the answer. Now, six months before the election, without the faintest possibility that any of this stuff will be in place and working beforehand, they tell us that after 17 years they have spotted all the social undercurrents, all the serious problems that are there, that they have discovered the defects in the prison system, the police system, the sentencing system, and here it is, in one Bill. Actually, the Home Secretary has half a dozen Bills, but the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill is an omnibus Bill for Scotland that is supposed to sort it out. *[Interruption.]* The hon. and learned Member for Burton asks about the defects of socialism. He has put his finger on it. I thought that the Conservatives had eliminated socialism over 17 years. They always have to blame somebody else. I do not think that the people are convinced by these arguments.

I regret the Government's approach to crime, which is a serious issue, and I speak as the grandson of a police officer, the son of a police officer and the brother of a serving police officer. Indeed, I think that my son will, within the next year, become a police officer as well, so I do not speak from the crevices that the hon. Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) spoke about, which could be defined as weak, do-gooding liberalism. I speak from the genuine, deep concern that my constituents feel about the way in which crime impacts on them. But from the Conservative Government we just get excuses. "Blame somebody else". There is no apology for the policies that have failed, no confessions that they have made mistakes in the past—no contrition at all, just sound bites, headlines and yet another Bill.

Mr. Robert G. Hughes (Harrow, West): Perhaps we can test the hon. Gentleman's view about law and order and people who commit crimes. What view does he take about the two serving Labour councillors who, in a dawn raid, committed criminal damage at the home of the Deputy Prime Minister and say that they would be proud to do it again? Does he condemn it, as I do, or does he condone it?

Mr. Robertson: If anyone, including a Labour councillor, breaks the law, he should be dealt with by the law as severely as anyone else—and that goes for Tory councillors, a few of whom have been involved. We are all equal under the law. The hon. Member for Harrow, West should not use hand-picked examples that are good for the local newspaper, although I know that he needs to recover some of the ground that he may be sacrificing down here. I think that he spoke, very properly, about what is genuinely the issue. The law is the law, and it should apply to aberrant Labour councillors, as well as to Westminster city councillors, whose aberration goes way beyond anything that most of us would consider to be normal.

Mr. Gallie *rose—*

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman has woken up. As he is in the last few months of his parliamentary career, I shall give way to him.

[Mr. Robertson]

Mr. Gallie: I have heard all this before from the hon. Gentleman, and he usually gets it wrong. We heard about his background and his close links with the police. What do the police think about stop-and-search laws? How important have they been to the control of criminal elements in recent times? Has the hon. Gentleman always voted in support of stop-and-search powers for the police?

Mr. Robertson: It is rather curious. I do not know where the hon. Gentleman comes from and what he is talking about. We have always been in favour of the police having appropriate powers. There is nothing in this huge Bill about stop and search. Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the police should have powers that his right hon. Friend has not included? Is he being critical of the Conservative Front Bench? A number of measures are not in the Bill.

What is most remarkable about the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill is that the Secretary of State for Scotland has proposed it as the great answer to the problem of the Scottish crime wave. The Bill should be called the Repeal of Ian Lang Bill. It is ironic, but perhaps just, that the Minister of State, Scottish Office, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton), is present as he was the junior Minister who wound up the debate on 19 October 1992, when the Government were proposing exactly the opposite of what is in the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill.

The then Secretary of State for Scotland, now El Presidente at the Board of Trade, said:

"There are those who argue that the sentence of the court should mean precisely what it says—a fixed number of years in custody."

That is what the hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) said in his speech. The then Secretary of State continued:

"The Government believe, however, like the Kincraig committee, that a better approach is to allow, within the compass of the total sentence, for a period in custody, and a period in the community during which the offender will be encouraged to resettle under supervision."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 238-9.]

That was the Government's position in 1992, just after they had won a general election in Scotland. Now, only three years later, they say, "All that was wrong. Sorry we got it completely and totally wrong, and we are now going to turn the whole thing completely upside down." No wonder the public are not convinced that this Bill is the answer.

The public saw the new Secretary of State for Scotland emerge into a society afflicted by crime and criminals, as he described it in *Flourish* magazine in September of the year in which he was appointed. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy) spoke movingly about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell), in a significant speech, pointed out the way in which ordinary people are affected by the crime wave. The public are not convinced by the Government's consultation process, because although 99 per cent. of those consulted were opposed to the Government's proposals, the Government still brought them forward.

The day after the consultation period ended, the front page of the Scottish *Daily Mail* said, "Forsyth proposes new laws for drug traffickers." Those new laws were not included in the initial consultation. Moreover, yesterday's Scottish edition of *The Sunday Times* included a brand new idea produced by the Secretary of State for Scotland. Its headline said:

"Forsyth to tag teenage tearaways."

There is no mention of tagging in the English one.

Mr. Howard: There will be.

Mr. Robertson: The Home Secretary says that there will be. That is an amendment already notified and another memory lapse, like who told the Sunday newspapers about what the Government intended to do or who was in the Front-Bench meeting that decided the U-turn on the Bill on paedophiles and stalkers. The newspaper report states:

"Although the Bill refers only to offenders aged 16 and above, Michael Forsyth, the Scottish secretary, is considering extending tagging to juveniles. A senior source said, 'We are now exploring with officials the dispersal of electronic tags for children and we will consult on it.'"

At each stage, the goalposts move further. It seems that the Secretary of State for Scotland is not interested in consulting, but only in deciding. He is not interested in having a fight with criminals, but in the publicity that goes along with having a fight with the judges. He is not interested in public welfare, but in his own constituency survival. That is highly regrettable in terms of law and order in a country whose people, as hon. Members have said throughout the debate, are deeply worried about the impact on them of crime and criminality.

The Bill is not right and proper at this time. We shall look at it carefully. We may not oppose it on Second Reading because it might be appropriate to look at some of the issues in detail in Committee to see whether matters can be improved. We are in favour of being tough on crime and on the criminals who are making the lives of so many people in Scotland a complete misery—and we always have been. The people of Scotland will not be convinced by a Government who have been in power for 17 years and who have been getting it consistently wrong in every one of those years now saying, "We have it right at last." They are not convinced—and nor are we.

9.31 pm

The Minister of State, Scottish Office (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton): The hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) has set out his position fully and with some passion.

The debate has been overshadowed by the appalling tragedy and atrocity which occurred at Dunblane. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) spoke about hearing of it with horrified disbelief. We owe it to our countrymen to put in place measures that will provide far greater safeguards for the public. That is why we are determined to implement Lord Cullen's recommendations, after receiving his powerfully argued report.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary said earlier we are acting quickly on Lord Cullen's recommendations—as we promised. There are three key areas of action. First, we have supported Lord Cullen's recommendations on improving school security. The action plan for each school is a workmanlike approach which will improve security for all school users.

We have backed it by committing ourselves to a special grant towards security measures and my right hon. and learned Friend will do the same in England and Wales. We think that councils should have as much discretion as possible on the measures to be undertaken.

The second key area concerns the vetting and supervision of adults working with children and young people. Here again we have accepted the Cullen report recommendations, including the important innovation of accreditation by a national body of clubs and groups working with young people. However, we have gone further. The Queen's Speech foreshadowed legislation to improve access to criminal record information by bodies which will include those who work with young people. We are also producing a Bill to require sex offenders to notify the police of any change of address so as to protect the public, and especially children, from these dangerous criminals. I endorse what my right hon. and learned Friend said about the merits of that Bill, which will apply to Scotland as well as to England and Wales. That was welcomed by the hon. Members for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) and for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell), by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and by my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Martin) and for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson).

There may be objections on civil liberties grounds, but we believe that the protection and safety of our country's children and young people must have priority. Therefore, sex offenders should be easily identified and traced to ensure the safety and well-being of our families, and particularly young children. To that end, we are determined to ensure that the police are given every assistance in the prevention and detection of crimes of this nature, and the measures proposed in the forthcoming Bill will achieve that. Therefore, it is important to get this necessary legislation on the statute book as quickly as possible. I welcome the support that the Opposition have offered and their co-operation in putting through that Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East asked whether we could have a Europewide register of sex offenders. I say to him and the Bournemouth *Evening Echo*, which he mentioned, that the Government's proposal is to require paedophiles and other serious sex offenders to notify the police of any changes of address to improve the prevention and detection of future offending. Obviously, that scheme cannot be applied outside the UK, but we expect co-operation between enforcement authorities throughout Europe. Such co-operation is vital. We are actively considering with our European partners the means of improving co-operation in the fight against child abuse.

We are going further than Lord Cullen recommended on firearms, which is the third key area of action. We accept his view that a partial ban on handguns is the right solution. The Bill to be published later in the week will implement the partial ban, which is somewhat stricter than he envisaged.

As Lord Cullen made clear, our action must be proportionate and just. Hon. Members will, I am sure, accept that he acted impartially and took account of expert advice. He did not recommend a total ban. His preference was for disabling handguns when not in use. He had very good reasons for coming to that conclusion. The Government's position, which my right hon. and learned Friend has described, is clear and is based on the need to secure public safety. I strongly commend it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Mr. Budgen) said that we must have some principle. We do. Lord Cullen's statement at chapter 9, paragraph 108 of his report was:

> "It is not enough to consider what would be practicable and effective. No assessment of what should be done would be complete without considering what would be proportionate and just."

He went on to say in paragraph 113:

> "I do not consider that the banning of handguns for target shooting or the banning of shooting clubs would be justified."

A difference of opinion has been expressed in the debate. Some hon. Members have said that we are going too far and others say that we are not going far enough. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham, my hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough and Horncastle (Mr. Leigh), for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for Wolverhampton, South-West and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, queried whether we were going too far. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor) and the hon. Members for Hamilton, for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley) and for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy) said that we were not going far enough.

I agree with Lord Cullen, but we have reached the view that his suggestions for disabling weapons of that sort would not go far enough to protect the public. We have therefore decided to ban the private ownership and use of all handguns over .22 calibre. Those of less than .22 calibre will also be banned, except in clubs that meet the highest standards of security and have been so approved by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

It is worth noting that, as soon as the legislation comes into effect, every handgun currently in private hands will have to be handed in to the police. The immediate effect of the legislation will be the removal of all handguns from private ownership. Those weapons will be returned to their owners only if the club in which they intend to store them meets the required security standards, or they will be destroyed.

The House should not underestimate the significance of the measures being undertaken, which will lead to the destruction of 160,000 handguns and will rightly give Britain what the Home Secretary has described as some of the toughest gun control laws in the world.

Mr. Stephen: Many of the handguns that would have to be handed in under the new Act are of special historical or technical interest. Will the Government consider making special arrangements for those weapons to be preserved in some suitable place?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Yes. Indeed, that has happened in the case of amnesties. I remember one gun being handed in which had been used by monks. It was hidden in the middle of a bible. I do not know what use it was put to, but it went to a museum. In unusual circumstances, that will happen, provided that the gun is appropriately disabled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, South and Maldon (Mr. Whittingdale) raised the subject of ancillary equipment and compensation. The Home Office is examining compensation arrangements and my hon. Friend's points will be considered.

[Lord James Douglas-Hamilton]

The Government were asked to take a collective view on Lord Cullen's report and have done so. Our considered view is that legislation is the right way ahead, and we shall bring a Bill before the House in the usual way. The Prime Minister has made it clear in the House that the Government have formed a judgment of what is right, and we will invite the House to support that view.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made a significant statement, when he promised his party's collaboration and support in implementing Cullen's recommendations, which I regard as extremely important. We will welcome that support in respect of not only the Firearms (Amendment) Bill but essential provisions which are likely to appear in the Police Bill and the Bill for the sex offenders register.

Mr. George Robertson: The Labour party has made it clear that it will support the firearms legislation and speed it on its way. There is much in that proposal with which we agree and of which we strongly approve, as will be revealed in debate.

I return to the partial or full ban on handguns. The Government managed to offer a free vote on two alternative Government clauses for the Sunday Trading Act 1994 but are unwilling to do the same in respect of an issue that the Government know is of considerably more importance—in which the conscience as well as the judgment of individual hon. Members can be called into play. Why are the Government standing so firmly against a free vote on handguns?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: That is a completely different issue. The 1994 legislation involved Sunday openings, which are traditionally free vote country.

We strongly believe that Cullen's recommendations should be acted on, and we want them on the statute book as soon as possible. I seek to persuade those of my hon. Friends who feel that we are going too far that not only I but my Secretary of State strongly take the view that it was thoroughly obscene that Thomas Hamilton could have in his home the amount of armoury and ammunition that he possessed. We have announced that guns of the type that Hamilton used will never again legally be held by private citizens. That firm and decisive response is strongly expected by the public.

I must take issue with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed in respect of identity cards. The Government are extremely serious in our plans to introduce a voluntary identity card scheme. The Home Affairs Select Committee recommended a further period of consultation once the Government have decided on detailed proposals for the introduction of ID cards. We will publish a draft Bill which will provide a full opportunity for further consultation on that important issue.

The key aim of the Bills that we are bringing forward is greater protection for the public. The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis), who sadly cannot be present, is entitled to a reply to his impressive speech on the need to confront organised crime as effectively as possible. We are committed to doing so. The Security Service Act 1996 already enables the Security Service to support the fight against organised crime. The new package of measures which we will bring forward in further legislation will include the creation of a national crime squad for England and Wales—a Scottish crime squad already exists. We also propose strengthening the central contribution made by the National Criminal Intelligence Service to the overall response to organised crime. Services provided by NCIS will include strategic analysis of the threat from organised crime, acting as the gateway to Europol and Interpol. NCIS will have a UK-wide operational remit.

The hon. Member for Islwyn asked about policing. In the three years from 1996-97, South Wales constabulary's share of the funding for the 5,000 additional police officers promised by the Prime Minister will amount to another 118 officers.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) raised issues involving community policing. In recent years, there has been widespread consensus on the need to reduce imprisonment for fine defaulters and to give the courts greater flexibility when dealing with persistent minor offenders for whom a fine is not suitable. Accordingly, the Crime (Sentences) Bill contains powers for the court to impose a community service or curfew order instead of a fine, if it is satisfied that a fine would not be an appropriate punishment, or as a penalty for fine default.

Mr. George Robertson: Will the Minister tell us what is in the Scottish Bill relating to fine default?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I should be delighted to do so in a moment.

If the hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) would like to send me the information on the video machine that he found so offensive, I shall look into the matter.

I can tell the hon. Member for Rutherglen that we are interested in extending closed circuit television schemes, which we view as extremely effective in crime prevention.

I come now to the point raised by the hon. Member for Hamilton on real-time sentencing. He referred to the 1993 Act which reduced the maximum amount of early release available and aimed to restore meaning to the full length of the sentence by getting rid of unconditional release. It was a step in the right direction, but in my view it did not go far enough. Further tightening is required. The Government now believe that it is necessary to go further to protect the public, to maintain public confidence, to deter offenders and to ensure that the punishment really does fit the crime. A recent poll by the *Daily Record*—a paper not usually associated with support for the Government—showed that 93 per cent. of its readers supported the policy of honesty in sentencing. The hon. Member for Hamilton would be wise, therefore, to advise his colleagues not to vote against the Bill.

On restriction of liberty orders, we believe that, just as it is important that really dangerous criminals should be kept in prison until they are no longer a danger to the public, at the lower end of the scale minor offenders should be dealt with through measures of use to the community, such as community orders, supervised attendance orders and restriction of liberty orders. The restriction of liberty order will be introduced under the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill, which will add usefully to the range of sentencing options available to the courts. It will enable them to restrict the liberty of the

offender in the community in a way that reduces the risk of offending. For example, an offender could be ordered to remain at home between 8 pm and 8 am. That is a way of allowing offenders to remain in the community rather than going to prison. The pilot projects south of the border have been very successful. Further pilot projects will be monitored electronically. That method of monitoring has been tried out successfully. We will implement the policy in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen asked about statistics on violent crime. I can tell him that 1995 was the fourth successive year in which recorded crime in Scotland fell—it was down by 5 per cent. That was due almost entirely to a decrease in the number of crimes of dishonesty—mainly housebreaking and theft, which fell considerably. The number of non-sexual crimes of violence increased, but crimes of indecency fell. The clear-up rate for crime rose from 37 to 39 per cent., but there is no room for complacency. The fact that the number of non-sexual crimes of violence increased strengthens our resolve to ensure that we put the necessary measures to deal with that in place in the Bill.

I shall give one very good reason why we believe that automatic life sentences are absolutely necessary—it is because of the Maguire case, to which many Opposition Members referred. Maguire severely sexually assaulted a girl, went to prison for a considerable period, came out, severely sexually assaulted a second girl, went to prison for a second considerable term, came out and was then charged with assaulting a further girl. That charge was not proceeded with very far, but he then murdered another girl.

Under our proposals, that man would have attracted a life sentence after the second really serious offence. We believe that the public requires much more protection from dangerous criminals, who are likely to do enormous harm to women.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Will the Minister enlighten us as to why the Bill for England provides for a mandatory sentence for repeat burglary offences—it is seven years for the third offence—but there is no such provision for Scotland?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Yes, I shall. Circumstances in Scotland and England are not identical on that matter. The burglary rate in Scotland, for example, has decreased substantially. Moreover, Scots law has traditionally relied much more on common law. We believe that all the necessary powers are properly in place.

The hon. Member for Blyth Valley, who has temporarily left the Chamber, raised the issue of mandatory minimum sentences for drug offences. We are determined to fight against the evil scourge of drug dealing. Although courts already deal severely with dealers of class A drugs, those convicted of a third or further offence of dealing in class A drugs will face a minimum sentence of seven years. When I debated the matter with the former chief judge of Scotland before the Law Society, he went so far as to say that that provision was not unreasonable.

Drugs offences are contained in UK statute, and drug trafficking is a national and international business. Drug traffickers might well be encouraged to move their operations to Scotland if we do not have minimum sentences. It is therefore entirely appropriate that we should apply a British policy on that matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) has been a doughty warrior in introducing measures to control not only knives but under-age drinking. We do not seek to criminalise unsupervised under-age drinking, as that would drive the whole business underground, where it would be even more difficult for helping agencies to deal with the problem. We have announced that we will take legislative action to provide police with powers to confiscate alcoholic drink from under-age drinkers in public places. The police have said that they would welcome such a measure, which is practical and will offer a real prospect of reducing the nuisance that results from under-age drinking while reducing the scale and opportunities for such drinking.

The new powers will apply in all public places that are neither domestic nor licensed premises. That means that street corners, public parks, derelict property, shopping centres and all the other favourite haunts of under-age drinkers will fall under the new power. We have taken into account evidence on the measure from southern Ireland, which introduced similar legislation. It was discovered that problems arose because under-age youths were handing the drink to someone a bit older immediately before police arrived on the scene. We are getting around that problem by ensuring that drink can be confiscated if a person is suspected of supplying to someone under 18 years old.

We should be very willing to consider the suggestions of any hon. Member who has a workable definition of combat knives which distinguishes them from other knives, and effective proposals on how to control the marketing of such knives which will deal with the mischief without damaging legitimate businesses.

We believe that increases in sentencing powers are necessary. We have decided to increase the sentencing powers of sheriff courts and stipendiary magistrates. In future, sheriffs will be able to sentence to up to five years' custody under solemn procedure—instead of three years, as at present. Under summary procedure, in which a judge sits without a jury, the maximum sentence to custody will be increased from three to six months, and from six to 12 months for certain repeat offenders.

We are very much aware that there is considerable variation in courts in sentencing patterns. There may, of course, be good reasons for the variation. However, we have found that some of the variations seem to exceed what we might reasonably expect. That is why, in order to inform the public debate, we are to publish information on sentencing in those courts. We have also given the High Court specific statutory powers to develop comprehensive guidelines to ensure consistency in sentencing.

Where, exceptionally, a sentence is imposed which appears unduly lenient, the Crown will have the power to appeal against it. From Friday this week, the Crown's right of appeal will extend to all summary cases. That will allow the Appeal Court to review such sentences and whether they should be amended. That process was started in the higher courts by the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr. With those safeguards and the continuing attention being paid to judicial training, I am sure the new powers will be well used.

I turn now to certain statutory sexual offences in Scotland. The senior judge drew to our attention the concern of the judges that the maximum penalty for the

[Lord James Douglas-Hamilton]

statutory offence of lewd and libidinous behaviour towards girls did not enable the courts adequately to punish the entire range of offenders convicted before them of such conduct. We therefore propose to increase the penalties for three statutory sexual offences against girls from two years' to five years' imprisonment to give the courts the power that they need to impose sentences which reflect the seriousness of such offences.

We are determined that when offenders are released from custody effective supervision arrangements are in place to reduce the risk of their reoffending, and thereby increase public safety. The supervised release order, or SRO, is an effective tool to achieve that. In the case of specifically defined sexual and violent offences, the court must impose an SRO. In other cases, if a court considers that supervision of an offender is necessary to protect the public from the risk of serious harm on his release, it would impose a supervised release order. That will be for up to two years or one sixth of the custodial sentence, whichever is the longer. Exceptionally, in the case of serious sex offenders, it could be for up to 10 years. Any breach of an SRO can lead quickly to custody for any unexpired period of the order.

We are also dealing with mentally disordered offenders under hospital direction. We will discuss that thoroughly when we debate the Bill.

I have put in train in Scotland a measure to ensure that our emergency services have a working party to protect them from assault. The Government want to be sure that we are doing all we can to protect the fire and ambulance services and the police. The police forces have been equipped with new batons. We are funding research to provide more effective protection for the police against knives; we hope to find a suitable stab-proof vest. To ensure that these and other measures are adequate— *[Laughter.]* Such vests are available, but they are heavy and uncomfortable, and many police officers refuse to wear them. We are doing everything in our power to provide the means that will save the lives of our police officers. We will share with our colleagues south of the border any important information that we acquire.

We want to put in place the most effective means of informing victims before their assailants are released from prison. We also want more effective witness support schemes, which are being established in three sheriff courts. We will make certain that victims are given useful information about what will happen when they report a crime and what their rights will be. That will be presented in a leaflet.

We are significantly shifting the emphasis away from the criminal towards the victim. We are giving much more funding to victims. This year we increased funding to £1.28 million, so the work of Victim Support Scotland can be developed.

It must not be forgotten by the House that the Labour Opposition voted against the Attorney-General having a right to appeal against lenient sentences in the Criminal Justice Act 1988. They voted against other legislation relating to Scotland involving police powers of stop and search. They voted against the legislation giving the courts the power to impose longer sentences for persistent, violent and sexual offenders in the Criminal Justice Act 1991. I should also mention that Labour has, in the past, opposed the prevention of terrorism Act, and certainly failed to support it. For years, they were happy to put up with far too few police officers in Strathclyde, where the police were working under-strength. That is far from an unblemished record and it leaves a great deal to be desired.

We are determined to take crime by the throat. If Opposition Members want to claim to be tough on crime, it is time for them to stand up and be counted in support of our legislative proposals. We are putting together one of the strongest offensives mounted against crime in years. It is about saying no to half-time sentences for full-time crimes; no to repeat offenders; no to the private ownership of handguns; no to those who persist in stalking innocent citizens; no to sex offenders and their appalling crimes.

We will go ahead with the package of measures called for by Lord Cullen. We have an inescapable duty to fulfil that responsibility.

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

CONSOLIDATION, &c., BILLS

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Ainsworth be discharged from the Select Committee to join with the Committee appointed by the Lords as the Joint Committee on Consolidation, &c., Bills and Mr. Nick Hawkins be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

PETITION

Riding Schools

10 pm

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): The petition reads:

The Petition of citizens of the United Kingdom,

Declares that, since the introduction of the Uniform Business Rate in 1990, riding schools' rates have soared. Around 15 per cent. of riding schools have been forced to close as a result. Following the revaluation in April 1995 many riding schools have seen further increases in their rates assessments, in some cases as much as 60 per cent., leading to a rise in their rates liability.

In rural areas riding schools provide much needed business and employment. In towns they provide recreational amenities as well as vital green space in areas that are under considerable development pressure.

There are 3 million riders in Britain. An estimated two thirds of the country's current riders had their introduction to the sport at a riding school. Riding schools are under threat. An estimated 15 per cent. have closed in the past five years. Horses are expensive animals in terms of upkeep and management. Facilities to give people access to them are costly to build and maintain.

On top of spiralling costs, the revaluation of non-domestic rate bills in 1991 has been the final straw for many small riding schools, already operating with tight margins. I could give many examples. I should like to give one.

One Norfolk riding school owner, a pensioner, went out of business after 28 years when her rate bill soared from £760 to £9,000. Only six months ago, an Essex riding school with a predominantly urban clientele was hit by a 60 per cent. rate increase.

Riding schools are not big money spinners. They are a way of life for people who have devoted themselves to training and developing young people and adults as riders and horsemen. As such, they serve as a lively meeting place and a focus for the community, often providing teenagers with work experience, a sense of responsibility and social skills.

The Local Government and Rating Bill, announced in the Queen's Speech, to safeguard village shops and post offices does not provide the protection needed by riding schools, which have similar problems—

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Greenway: The petitioners request—

Madam Speaker: We are coming to the point now, are we? Very good.

Mr. Greenway: I thank you for your indulgence, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot indulge the hon. Gentleman. I have to adhere to Standing Order No. 132, as the House requires me to do, but the hon. Gentleman is coming to his point now.

Mr. Greenway: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The petition reads:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Environment to bring forward legislation to provide riding schools with either an exemption from rates or a clear cut provision of rate relief.

And the Petitioners remain, etc . . .

To lie upon the Table.

Industrial Accidents

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

10.4 pm

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): Amid the background noise of everyday political life, particularly in this place, it is easy to forget about the relentless drip of economic casualties caused by hazards at work. I initiated the debate to remind us that every day in my constituency a family has to come to terms with a personal disaster caused by an industrial accident that is usually preventable.

One of my constituents fell into a cement mixer which had a faulty safety grille. He was killed by asphyxiation and multiple injuries. A trainee hairdresser fractured her pelvis by falling through an unguarded opening while alterations were taking place in the salon. An escalator engineer was fatally crushed while working on an escalator in the Broadmarsh centre in the middle of Nottingham. A Bulwell warehouseman fell through an unguarded mezzanine floor opening and crushed his ribs. A garage worker was trapped in a car wash and broke his arm. A Nottingham heavy goods vehicle mechanic was crushed to death when the hydraulic arm of a truck he was repairing collapsed on top of him. A 17-year-old Nottingham construction worker recently fell to his death from scaffolding. A 60-year-old man was rushed to the Queens medical centre in Nottingham with a 12 in screwdriver embedded in his chest.

Those are just a few recent local cases in Nottingham. Hard figures are difficult to come by. As Christine Wood, regional secretary of the midlands Trades Union Congress, pointed out to me,

"One of our biggest problems is that the statistics are compiled on a sectoral basis and that makes it difficult to discern local trends."

Will the Minister take another look at how Health and Safety Executive statistics are compiled and see whether they can pinpoint black spots so that action can be taken more readily?

The Conservatives are finally putting the squeeze on the HSE. The highly respected HSE staff have lost 67 inspectors since 1993 and overall staff numbers have been cut by nearly 10 per cent. over the same period. There are now only 30 inspectors covering Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. In addition, the HSE is losing a large proportion of older, experienced inspectors.

We also know that there is not one medical adviser to the HSE on station in Nottingham and the east midlands, inevitably making the prevention of accidents less likely and advice less readily available.

Much health and safety work is done by the environmental health officers employed by Nottingham city council. While their numbers are constant, over the years they have been given more activities and more premises to cover. As a result, they may not visit some businesses for many years. That has a direct effect on the health and well-being of my constituents.

Local employers would like the HSE health and information service to be developed, but the current Government appear to have a policy of benign neglect towards the HSE and health and safety generally. For example, believe it or not, the European Health and Safety

[Mr. Graham Allen]

Week began on 7 October. The HSE in Nottingham placed an advertisement in the *Nottingham Evening Post* but, according to local sources, it was given little encouragement or resources to promote the initiative further. Last week, I called the chamber of commerce and carried out a quick survey of some of the major employers in Nottingham. None of them knew about European Health and Safety Week. A great opportunity was missed for propaganda about health and safety among employees and employers.

Similarly, the Government have done very little about penalties, which are small and getting smaller. The average fine in the midlands region is 40 per cent. lower than it was last year—a paltry £2,087 per prosecuted offence. The Government are flying in the face of the good employers and seem to be telling the worst employers that even serious breaches of safety at work are nothing much to worry about.

Jenny Bacon, director general of the HSE, and Frank Davies, chairman of the Health and Safety Commission, said at the launch of the annual report of the HSC last Wednesday that they thought fines were too low. Indeed, they have been disappointed at the response to a letter that Mr. Davies wrote in *The Magistrate* urging the use of high penalties.

Rather than prosecuting dangerous employers in Crown courts, where large fines or gaol sentences can be imposed, 99 per cent. of all health and safety prosecutions go to magistrates courts. Magistrates can fine companies up to £20,000 but consistently fail to do so. Will the Minister take this opportunity to give the House his view on the greater use of Crown courts for serious offences—I do not want to drown the Crown courts—tougher sentencing by magistrates and the allowance of appeals on small fines? Will he issue some guidance for magistrates or give them some advice?

We have just had a debate on home affairs, during which great play was made of allowing appeals against lenient fines and sentences. Will the Minister consider extending such an approach to health and safety, where injuries and damage can be just as great as those caused by more obviously criminal activity? The Court of Appeal recently called a High Court fine of £100 on British Steel for a safety offence "derisory", but could do nothing about it. Similarly, the HSE has no power to appeal against a fine that it considers too lenient. Such things affect the way in which employers act in my constituency and the fate of my constituents at work.

We will join the Confederation of British Industry and the unions to get tough on the tiny minority of employers who compromise the health, and sometimes the lives, of their employees. We will of course work with good employers to promote best practice through industry and welcome the HSE's "Good Health is Good Business" campaign.

Thirty million working days are lost each year through work-related injuries and ill health—eight times more than are lost through strikes. The bill for workplace accidents and ill health in the United Kingdom totals £16 billion—equivalent to 15 per cent. of all those companies' profits. In the present system, the good employer, properly committed to high standards of health and safety, can be undercut by the bad. From my time last year as shadow Transport Minister, I know of the cowboy trucking firms that push their drivers over the limit. One driver in Newark in Nottinghamshire was taped begging his boss for a rest break. He was refused that rest break and within minutes killed a young man on a moped not far from my constituency. Overwork and stress is a great killer and accident creator at work. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to tell us his latest opinion on the working time directive, which is to be judged by the European Court of Justice towards the end of this month, and whether, despite all the Government's delay and wriggling, he will undertake to abide by that ruling and introduce a maximum working week.

Businesses in my constituency want to comply with the rules and regulations and be competitive on the basis of good workplace conditions and high employee morale, but they need more Government support. The health and safety record in some sectors of Nottingham industry is of real concern—not least in textiles, construction and printing. The Government have all but destroyed the mining industry in my county, but for that which is left, there were 18 per cent. fewer mines inspected last year than the year before and even fewer inspections are planned for the year ahead. The mines inspectorate has lost 18 of its 60 staff since April 1993, and there are now just 22 inspectors of mines to cover the whole of England, Wales and Scotland—when privatisation has created a host of new problems.

Major injuries in the energy industry in the midlands have almost doubled over the past year, yet there is a constant problem of under-reporting of accidents. Union officials from the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers tell me that miners are pressured not to report accidents and are even offered prizes as incentives to keep health and safety records clean. Now, with assorted owners, each mine is considered separately, whereas before good practice in one mine was almost automatically transferred to others.

It is not just the traditional local industries that need attention. Poor health and safety is a many-headed hydra. As industry changes, new health and safety problems arise. There has been a huge growth in part-time jobs and casual labour in Nottingham. Small firms employing fewer than 50 workers now account for 99 per cent. of all firms. New technology helps people to work from home, but instead of support from the Government we have seen cuts in resources exactly when our health and safety mechanisms need to be most responsive to changing demands.

Fatal accidents in service industries in the midlands have doubled since last year. Greater Nottingham business link highlighted the fact that the small business community is particularly at risk, and that community is growing in Nottingham.

Similarly, we must focus attention on working conditions for the self-employed. Most responsible employers provide health and safety training for employees; the self-employed do not. This year's Health and Safety Commission annual report showed that the regional fatality rate among self-employed workers was 50 per cent. higher than among employees.

Awareness of repetitive strain injury is also increasing. The labour force survey puts self-reports of musculo-skeletal disorders at more than 500,000, which is by far the highest of any ill-health category. In

Nottingham, 132 calls have been made to the local voluntary RSI helpline so far this year, of which, sadly, 54 were from people who had been sacked or pressured to give their notice. Clearly, some employers in my area merely pay lip service to their health and safety obligations and threaten the livelihoods of RSI sufferers in their employment. Wendy Lawrence, secretary of the Nottingham RSI support group, said that managers told individual RSI sufferers that people like them made firms go bust, and refused requests for appropriate equipment. Only one prosecution this year under the display screen regulations hardly serves as a warning to that tiny minority of bad employers.

In the future, we must act far more quickly to prohibit processes or products whose lethal potential has been clearly established. Without a strong lead from the Government, it often falls to local trade unionists to become the front-line health and safety troops. Statistics prove that a unionised workplace is a safer workplace, despite Government cuts in training grants for safety representatives. In my city, the GMB has created Safety Measures Ltd. to offer a health and safety consultancy to employers. Many unions spend a lot of time on health and safety locally and, sadly, picking up the pieces when health and safety has not been effective. Peter Crowe, district secretary of the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades, currently has 149 active claims for industrial injury. Bernard Rutter, branch secretary of the Graphical, Paper and Media Union in Nottingham, lists 80 active claims, despite massive under-reporting of accidents in the printing business. In 1995, Nick Wright, regional secretary of Unison, instructed solicitors in 699 separate cases of industrial accidents or diseases.

Unseen by most of the population, Nottingham, probably like every other city, has an industrial injuries problem of epidemic proportions. Much depends on employers and employees, but the Government, too, have a role. They should introduce a charter of rights for people at work, giving employees greater protection against dangerous working conditions, including asbestos. They should give safety representatives elected by the work force improved rights, including a statutory right to recognition. They should introduce a new crime of corporate manslaughter to reduce the needless deaths that result from wilfully negligent employers. They should introduce an enforceable code of good practice, which would support sufferers of mental stress at work.

While a woman can still lose the use of her arms at work or a man can come into contact with asbestos or deadly diseases, there will be no room for cosy complacency on health and safety, which we see all too often. For the sake of my constituents and those of hon. Members throughout the land, I call on the Government to take action in partnership with employers and employees. If they do not, they will soon give way to a Government who will.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Sir Paul Beresford): I thought for a moment that we were to have an Adjournment debate about horses, but fortunately that did not happen.

Returning to the theme of tonight's debate, I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on securing the debate and I welcome him to his new responsibilities for health and safety. Unlike his predecessor, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), at least the hon. Gentleman is shadowing the correct Department. However, his newness shows and I do not agree with his approach. The country's health and safety results under this Government must be examined and the hon. Gentleman must put his statistics into perspective.

Any accident or injury at work is a serious matter. In the worst cases, the consequences can be death or long-term disability with all the suffering that family, friends and colleagues then endure. In lesser, but still distressing, cases it can mean pain, poor health and perhaps loss of earnings. We must do anything that we can sensibly do to reduce the number of accidents and their impact.

The hon. Gentleman talked about penalties, prosecutions and prohibition, but that is not the correct working approach, which is very different. I visited Nottingham last year to open the Health and Safety Executive's new area office for the north midlands. I wanted to see some of the HSE's work for myself, I wanted to see how effective the HSE was in Nottingham and, as a deregulation Minister, I was keen to meet people from Nottingham businesses in order to gauge the results of the working relationship between those businesses and the HSE.

The local employers were well represented. The big household names of Nottingham were there—Boots, Courtaulds, Raleigh and Toyota—as were people from small firms. I was encouraged by how positive they were. They sell health and safety in a forward-looking manner and they hold the HSE in high regard. It was clear that the HSE is improving health and safety awareness, while making their lives simpler and easier. The strategy is working: it is reducing unnecessary burdens while improving health and safety. The first phase of the HSE's "Good Health is Good Business" campaign is under way and it has proved to be effective and appreciated.

I also visited the McAlpine construction site at Her Majesty's prison in Sherwood. It is coming to grips effectively with the relatively new Construction (Design and Management) Regulations—a case of safety by forethought. The Nottingham area is full of examples of good health and safety practice and, as the hon. Gentleman settles into his shadow portfolio, I hope that he will realise that the Government's different, successful approach is the way forward.

The Boots site at Beeston employs more than 3,500 people. The company takes a proactive approach to health and safety, which has led to a 28 per cent. reduction in reportable accidents over the past four years. Not content with that, Boots is moving forward and is participating in a major HSE study of accident causation and costs, with the aim of preventing accidents in future.

Courtaulds Textiles, which has a plant in central Nottingham, has launched the seven health and safety principles programme which enjoys the backing of those at the very top of the company. All production managers attend a two-day training course and there is half-day training for all employees. Heightened awareness has brought an increase in accident reports, which has led to prevention and to a clear decline in the number of accidents in the first half of 1996. Investment in health and safety training pays off—that has been the HSE's approach for a number of years.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

In Nottingham, October marked the launch of the second phase of the HSE's "Good Health is Good Business" campaign. It coincided with the European campaign, so it was good timing. The hon. Gentleman was perhaps a little too selective in his speech, but he must realise that the combination of the two campaigns is working very well in Nottingham. In addition, inspectors from the Nottingham office have launched regional inspection initiatives on asbestos operations, dermatitis in the engineering industry and on radon. A series of exhibitions and seminars—which I hope that the hon. Gentleman has attended—and media events have been held throughout the area in order to drive home the campaign message. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should listen to what is being said. Emphasis has also been given to increasing the safety awareness of young people in the area, with events at local colleges and a good health pack directed at young people in the agricultural industry, if the hon. Gentleman has any agriculture in his patch.

We are talking about improving health and safety as a constant attitude so that it becomes second nature. As the hon. Gentleman has said, if proper attention is given to health and safety, business money will be saved. That is apart from all the safety considerations for individuals.

Our approach is working. The Government, employers and employees are working together on health and safety, as our record shows. The record has improved every year. Since 1974, the fatal injury rate for all workers—both employees and the self-employed—has fallen substantially. It now stands at 1.1 per 100,000 workers. That is the lowest ever level on record for the second successive year. The total number of fatalities has fallen in 1995-96 to 338. That is 338 too many, but the number is more than 10 per cent. down on the previous year.

The overall fatal injury rate for the self-employed has fallen again in 1995-96 to the record low of 1.6 per 100,000 workers. The hon. Gentleman should take his own statistics and put them into perspective. He will find that we are succeeding.

The United Kingdom's health and safety record is among the best in the world, and better than most of our major European Union competitors. On a like-for-like basis, the fatal injury rate per 100,000 employees in the United Kingdom was 1.4. In Germany, it was 3.0. In France, it was 4.8. The United Kingdom was at a level of one, shall we say. In Germany, the rate was twice that. In France, it was three times that.

Let us take injuries causing absences of more than three days. In 1989, in Italy, there were over 4,000 such accidents reported per 100,000 employees. In Germany, the figure was 4,700. In the United Kingdom, the rate was less than half at 1,910.

The United Kingdom's performance is due to a different, intelligent and balanced approach. We do not take the heavy-handed approach that is suggested by the Labour party. The HSE's approach has been to ensure that every fatal accident is investigated. Every major incident is investigated. Every high-hazard industrial activity will be visited by an inspector at least once a year. Every new business known to the HSE will be contacted within two months. Every complaint will be dealt with by an inspector.

Investigations, inspections and visits are important but the full effectiveness of our health and safety strategy derives from the total package, and that includes getting rid of outdated and redundant legislation, which is a burden on industry. We laid before Parliament a further 16 pieces of legislation last week. We want a targeted, proportional enforcement regime. We want simple, sensible guidance to employers, employees and the self-employed, and guidance that is understood. We want guidance that is goal based, not rule based. We also want proportionate regulation that assesses the costs of enforcement and acknowledges that no system is entirely foolproof.

The HSE inspectors are responsible for enforcing health and safety regulations in more than 650,000 business establishments. These range from oil rigs to mines, factories, farms and fairgrounds. There are more inspectors now than there were in 1979. There are now 1,443, with a further 30 being recruited. The inspectors work through co-operation, which is something that the hon. Gentleman does not understand. They advise and persuade. Only as a last resort is enforcement action appropriate.

A strategy of targeting inspections on high-risk or poor-record businesses is more effective, costs less money and saves more lives than the hon. Gentleman's uninformed and unthinking procession of visits to all businesses. The hon. Gentleman has made it clear that it is a case of new Labour, new regulations and poorer health and safety.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 29 October 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

WAYS AND MEANS

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,

Returns for Session 1994-95 of—

(1) Business of the House;

(2) Closure of Debate and Allocation of Time;

(3) Private Bills and Private Business;

(4) Public Bills;

(5) Sittings of the House;

(6) Special Procedure Orders;

(7) Standing Committees; and

(8) Select Committees

in the same terms as the Orders made on 14th December 1994; and

(9) Delegated Legislation and Deregulation Proposals, &c., showing:—

(A) the numbers of Instruments subject to the different forms of parliamentary procedure and those for which no parliamentary procedure is prescribed by statute (1) laid before the House; and (2) considered by the Joint Committee and Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, respectively, pursuant to their orders of reference, setting out the grounds on which Instruments may be drawn to the special attention of the House under Standing Order No. 124 (Statutory Instruments (Joint Committee)) and specifying the number of Instruments so reported under each of these grounds;

(B) the numbers of Instruments subject to parliamentary procedure, other than draft deregulation orders, considered by the House and by Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation, respectively, showing in each case the numbers subject to affirmative and to negative procedure; and

(C) the numbers of deregulation proposals and draft orders, showing for deregulation proposals the numbers in respect of which the Deregulation Committee recommended that a draft order in the same terms should be laid before the House, that the proposals should be amended, and that the order-making power should not be used, respectively; and for draft orders the number in respect of which the Deregulation Committee recommended that the draft order should be approved, and whether or not the recommendation was agreed upon Division, and those which the Committee recommended should not be approved, respectively, and in each case, the decision of the House.—*[The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

Merchant Ships

1. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on defence requirements in respect of British merchant ships. [348]

The Minister of State for the Armed Forces (Mr. Nicholas Soames): The defence need for merchant shipping is kept under regular review as part of normal planning.

Mr. O'Brien: I find the Minister's response disappointing and depressing. Does he agree with the British Chamber of Shipping which has said that Great Britain could not deploy its forces at the moment, because our merchant fleet is not available and we have to rely on overseas shipping? The policies of the Conservative Government have attacked the British merchant fleet bitterly. Will the Minister press the Government to give support to the development of the British merchant fleet so that we do not have to rely on foreign ships?

Mr. Soames: The hon. Gentleman, whose heart is in the right place, is a little out of date. Clearly, it matters that we have proper arrangements to be able to transport our crews and equipment where needed. The hon. Gentleman suggests that there is not enough shipping and, in 1991 during the Gulf war, of the 142 ships that were chartered only eight were United Kingdom flagged. That was because the Government believed that it was better to charter the necessary shipping at the Baltic exchange at the most competitive rate. The cold war requirements are now no longer the same and we do not need the major convoy tasks that used to be appropriate. Shipping is not always the only option. The Government have taken many steps to reinvigorate the shipping sector and it would be a problem were we not to take a close interest in it.

Tomahawk Missiles

2. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the current position on the procurement of Tomahawk cruise missiles. [349]

The Minister of State for Defence Procurement (Mr. James Arbuthnot): An order was placed on 16 October 1995 for 65 conventionally armed Tomahawk cruise missiles with the United States Department of Defence. Production is proceeding to plan, to an in-service date of 1998.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend's statement demonstrates that our armed forces are the best equipped in the world. Would not defence industry jobs be jeopardised by a future Labour Government who would not have the same level of procurement?

Mr. Arbuthnot: My hon. Friend talks about the painful consequences of electing a Labour Government, and the

hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) referred last week in a debate to the painful consequences of the defence review that he would like to introduce. What was he talking about? Was he talking about the painful consequences of reducing our commitments worldwide and thus abandoning our global role? Was he talking about the painful consequences of slashing the armed forces or of cutting our defence equipment budget or the simple painful consequence of the instability caused by a Labour Government? I think that we should be told.

Trade Balance

3. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the current trade balance between Britain and the United States in defence products. [350]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The balance of trade remains at around two to one in favour of the United States. That figure is based on the latest five-year average of bilateral defence trade.

Mr. Anderson: Can the Minister confirm that the current unsatisfactory imbalance of two to one will worsen unless the European defence industry can restructure to meet the challenge of the mega-merged US giants? In that context, will he tell the House whether the Ministry will continue to block the merger of the defence interests of British Aerospace and GEC?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Nobody has asked us whether we would approve a merger of GEC and British Aerospace. The important issue is that we do well in trade with the United States, which is our second largest defence export market. We have had major successes in the United States. Rolls-Royce and British Aerospace sell about £600 million-worth of equipment a year in relation to the T45 and AV-8B programmes. There is a refuelling programme which Cobham pursues, with £150 million-worth of equipment supplied.

We need an effective two-way street with the United States, as my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have argued on many occasions over the years. We have some good prospects for selling into the United States. The ASRAAM—the advanced short-range air-to-air missile—is a good candidate for such a sale. It is low risk and cost-effective, and would be an early solution to one of the requirements of the United States.

Mr. Bill Walker: Will my hon. Friend remind those who are critical of our collaboration with the United States on defence matters that probably the finest piston-engined fighter aircraft that came out of the second world war was British and American? It had a British Rolls-Royce engine and an American airframe: the Mustang. Without question, subsequent collaboration—especially between Rolls-Royce and the United States—has produced some real winners, as with British Aerospace.

Mr. Arbuthnot: My hon. Friend is right. With his experience of flying, I hardly need to add to his comments. We should also bear in mind the importance of the European dimension. The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made a good point, which I would not want to diminish, about the need to restructure European industry in order to compete with American industry. We try to encourage British industry to restructure across borders, not just within Europe but between the United Kingdom and the United States, because in the long run only large companies will be able to compete with the vast companies of the United States.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Does not the balance of trade in defence products between Great Britain and any other country, including the United States, depend on the enforcement of Government policy towards that country? The Government have a policy prohibiting trade in defence products with Argentina. Has Rolls-Royce sold engine parts for use in Argentine naval warships?

Mr. Arbuthnot: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary made a precise announcement on that last week, and I have nothing to add.

Land Mines (Bosnia)

5. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's assessment of the present number of anti-personnel land mines in Bosnia. [352]

Mr. Soames: IFOR estimates that up to 5 million mines, including anti-personnel land mines, may have been laid in Bosnia.

Mr. Gunnell: Given that our troops are daily facing hazards from those millions of mines, is it not inappropriate for the Minister and his Department to speak of modernising our stocks of such weapons? In view of the dangers that the mines pose not only to our troops but to civilians, we should not import, export or use those weapons at all. Should we not seek an international moratorium on their use, so that anti-personnel land mines can be cleared from areas where civilised people live?

Mr. Soames: I can safely say that we are doing all that the hon. Gentleman suggests. We are not exporting land mines; we are seeking an agreement to abandon their use. No one in the House would disagree with the hon. Gentleman's comments, although we might express them in a slightly more relevant way, by saying that we need to balance the humanitarian concern posed by the indiscriminate use of anti-personnel mines with a continuing military requirement.

The House will wish to pay tribute to the young men and women in Bosnia who are engaged in this extraordinarily dangerous and vital aspect of reconstruction, which makes service in Bosnia, as the hon. Gentleman said, especially hazardous. The House will wish to know that all our troops undergo comprehensive mine awareness training before they go. We deplore any injuries caused by these wicked weapons.

Sir Jim Lester: The indiscriminate use of land mines in civil wars in Cambodia, Vietnam and many other parts of the world has caused great concern and is largely responsible for the pressure to ban them. Will my hon. Friend confirm that Britain has played no part in exporting or supplying land mines to these countries?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has extensive knowledge of these matters. As he knows, the Government have committed more than £21 million to mine clearance projects around the world since 1991. I know that he will agree that unilateral renunciation by the United Kingdom would not reduce the dangers to civilians. To be effective, any international agreement to ban anti-personnel mines must include these countries of real concern.

Animal Experiments

6. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which species of animals are currently being used by his Department or contractors in connection with the development of weapons, vehicles, vessels, aero planes and hardware. [353]

Mr. Arbuthnot: My Department does not use animals in connection with developing weapons or offensive capabilities. Where absolutely necessary it does use a number of animal species to help develop protective measures and procedures to safeguard service personnel against the hazards that they may face on the battlefield and elsewhere.

Mr. Banks: Would the Minister care to answer the questions about the species of animals that have been used; about how many experiments are being done on them; and about how many inspections are carried out by the Home Office? Those are the answers that we need to know. Many people will find it grotesque that animals should be used to find more efficient ways of killing other human beings—or of protecting human beings.

Mr. Arbuthnot: That is just what I have said does not happen. We do not use animals in connection with developing weapons or offensive capabilities. All the work that we do complies with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. That involves inspections, announced and unannounced, by the Home Office. I have also set up an additional safeguard; I recently set up the independent Animal Welfare Advisory Committee to oversee animal welfare arrangements at Ministry of Defence research establishments. We do not perform animal experiments where it is possible to use any alternative—and would not wish to.

Mr. Wilkinson: Does my hon. Friend recall that Max Hoffmann described British first world war soldiers to General Ludendorf as "lions led by donkeys"? Can he assure the House, in the context of British participation in the projected European armaments agency—based on Franco-German armaments agencies—to develop weapons and equipment for the British armed forces, that there will be no question of Her Majesty's Government proving mulish or bovine in the pursuit of an objective that may militate against increased competition and access to British markets of high-quality American defence equipment?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Mulish or bovine? There will be no question of that.

Saddam Hussein

7. **Mrs. Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of Britain's contribution to the US and allied offensive against Saddam Hussein in September 1996. [354]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Michael Portillo): The US military response in September to Saddam Hussein's aggression in northern Iraq, did not directly involve British forces. As a contingency measure some forces were put at higher readiness. The full costs of these cannot be separately identified, but included the deployment of two VC10 tankers to Cyprus at a cost of £88,000.

Mrs. Clwyd: Why has the Department not replied as promised to points raised during the defence estimates debate? A Minister said then that any points that had not been answered would be answered in writing, but I am still waiting for a reply.

It would have cost $3 million to bring peace to northern Iraq in January this year, but the allies—of which Britain is one—delayed. In September, the United States spent at least $200 million—a part of which must have been paid by this country—on an exercise that has done nothing except consolidate Saddam Hussein in northern Iraq. Is that good value for money?

Mr. Portillo: My hon. Friend the Minister of State will write to the hon. Lady, who makes a number of assumptions that I do not share. She believes that a vigorous and expensive diplomatic effort to bring the Kurds together would necessarily have resulted in peace, but I am not sure that that would have been the case. One of her points in a recent speech was that a budget cut made it difficult for the Americans to pursue their diplomatic effort, and she suggested that we needed a more expensive diplomatic effort. She assumes that Saddam Hussein would not have chosen some other opportunity to remilitarise and to repress the population, but I believe that he would have seized any opportunity at any time to test the willpower of the international community. Money was required for a demonstration by the United States—backed by the United Kingdom—that we would not allow Saddam Hussein to get away with aggression, and I believe that money spent in that way is money well spent.

Mr. Brazier: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the costs of allowing Saddam Hussein to achieve his long-term goal—sovereignty over the area that produces most of the world's oil—would be literally incalculable? Would not it be totally wrong for us to stand back and leave the entire responsibility for containing that dangerous, powerful and evil man to the United States alone?

Mr. Portillo: I entirely agree that that would be a catastrophically expensive option, and the United States deserves—and, under this Government, receives—our support. As it turned out, the method used to demonstrate to Saddam Hussein that he would not be allowed to get away with remilitarisation did not involve the direct participation of British forces, but we were pleased to make certain contingency arrangements and to allow the United States to use Diego Garcia.

Bosnia

8. **Mr. Churchill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about British forces in Bosnia beyond the end of 1996. [355]

Mr. Portillo: If there were any international military force in Bosnia in 1997, we would expect it to be NATO-led and we would expect the UK to play its part alongside our allies.

Mr. Churchill: Does my right hon. Friend agree that IFOR has proved to be a powerful demonstration of NATO effectiveness, and that a key ingredient of its success has been the full participation of United States forces? Does he further agree that all the efforts made by our Government, our service men and women and our allies in the past four years would come to nothing if the United States does not extend its commitment to maintaining the peace in Bosnia beyond the end of the year?

Mr. Portillo: Clearly, the international community must be involved in Bosnia next year, and my hon. Friend's assumption—that that will involve a military component—is shared by many others. Any military component must involve the United States, and the US Administration have made it perfectly clear that a NATO operation would have to involve the US. The importance of alliance solidarity is well recognised by the US Administration, but they are waiting, as we all are, for the decisions—whatever they may be—to be ratified at the London conference at the beginning of December.

Dr. Reid: The Secretary of State will know that the presence of our troops in Bosnia has helped to save thousands of lives. If there is to be a continued presence, the Opposition will support British troops participating with our major allies on the ground. Does he accept that when the winter snows have melted and the refugees have returned, the tasks and conditions confronting any military force will change considerably and that it would be easy for such a force to be sucked into a civilian policing role? Will he therefore give an assurance that if our troops are to participate in Bosnia after the end of the year, they will have clear objectives, rules of engagement and tasks that will be within the competence and expertise of a military force and will not replicate tasks that should be carried out by a civilian police force?

Mr. Portillo: Of course, if there is to be a military presence next year, it will have clear objectives and the military will be asked to perform tasks suitable to the military. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for the policy that we have been pursuing. I am also grateful that Labour policies were not pursued over the past 17 years, so that the troops were available to send to Bosnia.

Mr. Mans: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if British forces are to be in Bosnia next year, they must be properly funded? Will he impress on his Cabinet colleagues—particularly the Chancellor—that that money must come from outside the defence budget or, if it is to come from inside the defence budget, that it must be in addition to funds that would have been made available were our forces not to be in Bosnia next year?

Mr. Portillo: It is, indeed, recognised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the costs of the IFOR mission are eligible for a claim on the reserve.

Gulf War Syndrome

9. **Ms Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his policy concerning Gulf war syndrome. [356]

Mr. Soames: The health and well-being of our service personnel is our prime concern. A very substantial body of work is being undertaken, including that by the Medical Research Council and in co-ordination with the United States authorities, on illness that may be associated with Gulf service. We retain an open mind and are determined to get to the root of this difficult and extremely complex question.

Ms Eagle: Is it not disgraceful that it took five years to discover that highly dangerous organophosphate pesticides were used by our Gulf war troops without protection and that that might have caused some of the problems of Gulf war syndrome? Will the Minister explain why he was not aware of that until recently?

Mr. Soames: The hon. Lady will know that those matters were aired during the statement on the defence estimates. I am happy to say again to the House that I share the profound concern of everyone that the information should have come to light so late. We deeply regret that it had not been brought to our attention before now and that such a highly pertinent factor should have been ignored. The hon. Lady probably goes too far when she says, in a general way, "without protection"—we do not know that it was without protection. The work that we have laid in hand—very extensive, important, detailed and thorough inquiries—will define and find out exactly the circumstances in which OPs were used. I give hon. Lady my assurance that, the minute that that information is to hand, I shall bring it to the House.

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: The House will be aware of the well-justified reputation of the Ministry of Defence as a good and caring employer. In that context, my hon. Friend will be aware that two of the possible factors put forward as causes of the alleged Gulf war syndrome—inoculations and insecticides—were employed to protect our troops. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the vigorous way in which he has dealt with this difficult matter, but will he give an assurance that he is making the maximum possible effort to speed up research, both on purely scientific grounds and to offset the understandable emotions generated by the issue?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend, who served in the Gulf along with my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). Both my hon. Friends are aware of the difficulties that arise in time of war, when everyone is under great pressure and action has to be taken to secure the health and welfare of our service

men and women. I give my hon. Friend the assurance he asked for: we will get to the bottom of the matter, which is why we have commissioned the finest medical research brains in the land—the Medical Research Council—to recommend what further research we should do. As soon as I have all that information to hand, I shall bring it to the House so that hon. Members can make their own judgment. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the views that he expressed.

Dr. David Clark: Does the Minister understand that withholding from the House for five and a half years information about the use of organophosphates on our troops in the Gulf, was not only inexcusable but emphasises the Government's half-hearted attempts to tackle the problem of Gulf war syndrome? Is he absolutely satisfied that the excellent work of Dr. Coker and his single medical assistant will be sufficient to examine and diagnose more than 1,000 personnel who served in the Gulf?

Mr. Soames: The hon. Gentleman always spoils a sensible case, ruining it with his presentation. He and the rest of the House should be extremely cautious about making links between what is important new information and a broad range of illnesses, which may or may not constitute a syndrome. As for the suggestion that we deliberately withheld such information, that is a gratuitous insult and a foolish thing to say. I have told the hon. Gentleman, as I have told the House, that no one regrets more than I do the fact that that information did not come to our attention earlier.

As for Group Captain Coker, I pay him tribute for the careful and steady way in which he has examined 782 veterans in the past two and a half years with his two medical assistants and a substantial range of other people who are conducting and assisting with the tests. I assure the hon. Gentleman that if we feel that we need more people, particularly on the medical assessment programme, we will take whatever steps are necessary as we always have done. It is a question not of money, but of finding the right way to get to the bottom of this fiendishly complex matter.

Royal Navy Submarine School

10. **Sir Robert Hicks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Royal Navy submarine school will move to HMS Raleigh, Torpoint; and if he will make a statement. [357]

Mr. Soames: The Royal Navy submarine school will move from HMS Dolphin at Gosport to HMS Raleigh at Torpoint, Cornwall. We plan that the school will become fully operational at its new location before the end of 2000.

Sir Robert Hicks: While welcoming the proposed move to Torpoint, may I emphasise the urgent need for that decision to be implemented sooner rather than later, not least to ensure the continuation of HMS Raleigh as a major training establishment and to help offset the adverse effects that have undoubtedly resulted for the area as a consequence of the changes in our United Kingdom defence requirement?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a powerful point. From the many representations that he and local Conservative Members of Parliament have made to me about that situation I know exactly what he means. I give him my assurance that the submarine school will transfer as soon as it is convenient and possible for it sensibly to do so. I am delighted to be able to tell him that the Plymouth area will gain 182 service and 16 civilian jobs—a powerful illustration of the central importance of the south-west to the Navy. I hear what my hon. Friend has said and I will make close checks to ensure that it is done as quickly as possible.

Mr. Miller: The Minister said "fully operational" in his response. Will he clarify whether that statement includes the submarine escape tower, which is located at HMS Dolphin? If it does, which will mean the building of a new tower, can he clarify at what cost? If it does not mean that, how will that facility be maintained?

Mr. Soames: The submarine escape tower will remain at Dolphin. As the hon. Gentleman may or may not know, considerable sums have recently been spent on refurbishing and updating it. The Royal Navy has, in its usual effective and sensible way, managed to combine the use of the submarine escape tower at Dolphin with the transfer of the major part of the submarine school to Raleigh. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, were we to consider making such a transfer, we would clearly consult widely. We would not do so if it were patently a waste of money.

Mr. Hawkins: My hon. Friend will recall that my father was a submarines officer, but he may not know that I served at HMS Raleigh as a cadet. Will he confirm that the move will not only be more efficient in terms of the use of the defence estate, but will move the training school closer to the submarine operating base at Devonport, which is particularly advantageous?

Mr. Soames: Indeed I will. All those of us who know my hon. Friend's powerful pedigree will be sustained and fortified by the fact that he made good use of HMS Raleigh. The move is a sensible and effective one. It is the right thing to do and the Royal Navy is pleased to do it. It has also, I hope, been recognised that the move will certainly not be the end of HMS Dolphin, which will continue to play an important part in the life of the Royal Navy.

RAF Sealand

11. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to announce a decision on RAF Sealand, Deeside, in respect of market testing. [358]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I expect to make an announcement on the market testing of RAF Sealand shortly.

Mr. Jones: I thank the Minister for the visit that he made and for his accessibility and that of his Department. Will he insist that the in-house bid is successful? May I remind him that great British companies such as British Aerospace, Siemens and Lucas back RAF Sealand's in-house bid? He might agree with me that the greatest fliers in the world should be supported by a military unit devoted to excellence and safety, and not by a company which is devoted to shareholders and profit.

Mr. Arbuthnot: As ever, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the work that he does for his constituency. I visited RAF Sealand at his invitation and had a most helpful and informative visit. I saw the work force of RAF Sealand and was most impressed by the work that they did. I shall take into account the points that the hon. Gentleman has made on a number of occasions, not least in the recent defence debate, and also the points that he has made when he has come to see me at the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Murphy: Is it not about time that the Government dropped their obsession with market testing and realised that, while there is nothing wrong with being business like, our armed forces are not businesses? Why does he not accept my hon. Friend's pleas on behalf of RAF Sealand, which is going through this business exercise simply for the sake of it when all informed opinion tells us that the 1,600 people who work there operate the best establishment of its kind in this country?

Mr. Arbuthnot: The hon. Gentleman is implying that if there were ever a Labour Government, he would drop all commitment to competition. The "Competing for Quality" initiative saves us hundreds of millions of pounds. It gives us value for money. It means that money is available to us to spend on equipment and personnel which otherwise would not be available. It obtains value for money while at the same time preserving flexibility and responsiveness. Those are benefits that it would not be sensible to give up. The impression with which the hon. Gentleman leaves me is that the armed forces could not trust a Labour Government on defence.

Sir Archibald Hamilton: Does my hon. Friend think that the reluctance of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen to accept the concept of market testing and the suggestion that the interests of shareholders and safety cannot be combined is a sign of old Labour or new Labour?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I do not think that it really matters. It is a sign of Labour. The problem is that we cannot trust Labour on defence. We know that under any Labour Government we would find a reduction in competition, a reduction in the defence industry of Britain and a reduction in the value for money available to our armed services. I simply repeat that we cannot trust Labour on defence.

Land Mines

12. **Mr. Pickthall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's estimate of the number of anti-personnel land mines currently emplaced throughout the world. [359]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The United Nations estimates there to be between 60 million and 110 million land mines emplaced worldwide.

Mr. Pickthall: As the next generation of land mines will be made entirely of plastic and therefore undetectable by currently available methods, does the Minister not think that now is the right time to ban entirely the export and import of land mines from the United Kingdom and to front up an international campaign to end the production of these evil weapons?

Mr. Arbuthnot: We have agreed that we wish to see the worldwide abolition of land mines. That is very important to us and we are working very hard to achieve it. We believe that land mines must be detectable. We should also like to see land mines made as self-destruct mines so that they no longer pose the dangers to civilians that we have seen far too widely. The land mines that our armed forces use do not pose the greatest threat to the world's civilian population because they are used by our forces responsibly and properly. That may not be precisely the answer that the hon. Gentleman wants to hear. We want a worldwide ban on land mines as soon as that can be achieved.

Mr. Robathan: Those of us in all parts of the House who want an end to the use of land mines that kill civilians welcome the Government's sensible lead on this matter. They are trying to stop land mines being produced and maiming civilians. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a bandwagon on to which many Opposition Members are jumping? They try to use the issue of land mines as a stick with which to beat the Government although, as my hon. Friend rightly says, no British land mines maim civilians anywhere in the world.

Mr. Arbuthnot: To a certain extent it is a bandwagon, but we should concentrate on the fact that the Government support a worldwide ban on land mines, so long as that can be achieved and agreed. The Government have paid almost £22 million towards the clearance of land mines throughout the world. We are world leaders in that area and we should take considerable credit for that.

Mr. Cunliffe: Is the Minister aware that the Manchester-based Co-operative bank has urged every bank in this and other countries to ban the financing of land mines? Those mines kill 24,000 people every year. As it is the Government's policy to oppose any further manufacture of land mines, will the Minister exhort, encourage and commend other banks in the United Kingdom and worldwide to do the same?

Mr. Arbuthnot: So far as I am aware, anti-personnel land mines have not been made in the United Kingdom for 10 years. We want an effective worldwide ban on land mines. That can be achieved only through international agreement. We are working with other countries to achieve such an agreement, and we shall continue to do so.

Sir Donald Thompson: Does my hon. Friend realise how glad we are to hear that we are clearing land mines? The world is strewn with these evil things. Will he encourage the United Nations and other agencies to persuade the polluters to clear up their own mess?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Yes, to a large extent we are doing that. Bosnia is an example. But it is not an easy task, and it requires skilled and courageous people. The skills that we can give people are very helpful. Sometimes this task must be done by people with the proper qualifications.

Bett Report

13. **Mr. Martlew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement concerning the Bett report. [360]

Mr. Portillo: In July I informed the House that detailed options were being developed to take forward the independent review's report, and that more work was needed on those options. Progress is being made, and I hope that a report will be produced later this year that will provide the basis for an information exercise within the armed forces.

Mr. Martlew: Does the Secretary of State recall that in February we were told from the Dispatch Box that a definitive statement would be made before the summer? We are now approaching Christmas and the Secretary of State is again delaying that statement. Is not the reality that the Government have thrown the Bett report into the dustbin for party political reasons?

Mr. Portillo: No. The reality is that it is important to develop systems which help to recruit and retain good people. That requires much detailed analysis. We must ensure that we get it right, and that takes time.

Mr. Key: Given the number of reviews to which the armed forces have been subjected in recent years, and given the unpopularity of the Bett report, will my right hon. Friend ensure that he does not take the advice of the report's author to do all or nothing, but that he is selective about the changes from which the armed forces would benefit?

Mr. Portillo: These decisions are in the Government's hands and not in the hands of the author of the report. The Government will undertake those measures that they believe to be in the best interests of the armed forces. I agree with my hon. Friend that such reviews can be the cause of some anxiety in the armed forces. For that reason, we have made it clear that we do not need a defence review, and especially not one with the painful consequences that the Opposition tell us would flow from the review proposed by the Labour party.

Defence Equipment

14. **Mr. Nigel Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of MOD defence equipment is procured in (a) the United Kingdom and (b) Europe. [361]

Mr. Arbuthnot: We estimate that over the past five years 91 per cent. by value of our direct equipment expenditure, including collaborative programmes, has been placed with United Kingdom industry, and 9 per cent. overseas. We do not have a breakdown of the overseas figure by particular area.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that response. Does my hon. Friend agree that procurement policy is important for the future not only of the armed forces but of defence manufacturing capacity in this country, so that we can retain research and development and a skills base in the United Kingdom? That applies not only to large firms such as British Aerospace, in my constituency, but to smaller companies such as the 127 small firms that have joined the Consortium for Lancashire Aerospace, which had a turnover of £3.5 billion last year.

Mr. Arbuthnot: I agree with my hon. Friend. The competitiveness that Government policies have introduced into British industry means that that industry has been successful throughout the world. That is a good story for my hon. Friend and his constituency.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [378]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Jones: Does the Prime Minister acknowledge the impact of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis on rural communities, and does he accept that that concern is compounded by the problems surrounding the Government's approach to the selective slaughter programme and the fact that different Ministers are saying different things to different people in different places? Will he take the opportunity to tell the House now whether he proposes to carry out the selective slaughter programme that he agreed in Florence, linked to a definite firm timetable for lifting the ban on British exports?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is certainly right about the impact of BSE on the rural areas. That is why we have provided so many resources to assist the farming industry through the difficulty. We agreed in Florence, some time ago, that we take decisions—especially decisions on selective culls—on the basis of science. What has happened since Florence is that several elements of the science have changed—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that the Opposition do not think that we should deal with the matter on the basis of the science. I happen to think that we should. First, the evidence suggests that the selective cull—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I want to hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: And I would like to educate the hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) about the basis of the science, Madam Speaker.

First, the evidence suggests that the selective cull will not be as effective in eradicating BSE as was thought. We are discussing that with the Commission. Secondly, we have new evidence on the possibility of maternal transmission, which is also being discussed with the Commission. That evidence needs to be assessed by us, by the Commission and by other European Union members. That is what is happening at the moment. As for the cull itself, pending the conclusion of that discussion, no one has definitively ruled out our proceeding with the cull. That will depend on whether the

cull is justified, either scientifically or in some other fashion. One impact of the extent to which the over-30-months scheme has proceeded is that some cattle that would have been caught by the selective cull have now been slaughtered under the original scheme.

Mr. William Powell: Does my right hon. Friend recall his visit to the Asian economic summit some months ago, and his subsequent visit to Korea? Is it not clear that that visit was one of the most successful visits abroad, if not the most successful, by a British Prime Minister in our history, bringing with it billions of pounds' worth of investment and tens of thousands of jobs? Does not my right hon. Friend deserve the congratulations of the House, and not least of the Opposition, because many Opposition Members' constituencies will be the direct beneficiaries of my right hon. Friend's efforts?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recalling the success of that visit to Korea. I very much welcome the inward investment that we have seen not only from Korea—I hope that in the future we shall obtain more for the same reasons as in the past: the good state of the British economy—but from other parts of the world. As much has come into this country as into the rest of western Europe added together.

Mr. Blair: Returning to the Prime Minister's reply about beef, does he recall saying categorically that the beef ban would be lifted by November and that the timetable was in our hands? When does he now estimate that the ban will be lifted? If he says that the selective cull will proceed in accordance with the Florence agreement, why did the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food say precisely the opposite in early September, which has caused all the additional cost and confusion?

The Prime Minister: What I just said, as the right hon. Gentleman will find when he reads *Hansard*, is that we are discussing the impact of the selective cull in the light of the new science. On that basis, we shall be able to decide whether it is justified to proceed with it or not. Those are on-going discussions. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman or anyone else in the House would wish us to proceed with a cull, which might turn out to be unjustified, until we have concluded the discussions with the Commission and the other member states. On the development of the over-30-months scheme, the House may be interested to know that more than 700,000 cattle have now been slaughtered and the slaughter rate has passed 50,000 a week, which means that we shall be able to make rapid progress on the backlog.

Mr. Blair: With all due respect to the Prime Minister, some Ministers say that the cull will proceed simply on the basis of science while other Ministers say that they must take account of other considerations and whatever is necessary to restore confidence. [HON. MEMBERS: "Who?"] I am asked to name them. In the past 24 hours we have had one position from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, another from the Secretary of State for Scotland and, at the last count, no fewer than four positions from the Minister of Agriculture, all of which are opposites. Does the Prime Minister accept that the confusion in the Government's position is doing immense damage to British interests and to the British farming industry?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman is confused. The reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) a few moments ago set out precisely and exactly where we are in the discussions with our European partners. Once we have concluded those discussions, it will be clear whether it is right and necessary to proceed with a selective cull. The right hon. Gentleman will recall his own agriculture spokesman saying in the past that we needed to be satisfied that this was justified. I agree with that comment. It might be, but we must examine the new scientific evidence that has been provided. It would be very unwise of us, and very unfair on the agricultural industry, if we did not do that.

Mr. Blair: If there is confusion, it is shared by the farming industry, most of Europe and, it appears, most of the Cabinet. In fewer than seven days since Parliament returned from the summer recess, the Government have been forced to make a U-turn on stalkers and paedophiles and to change their line on combat knives, and they are utterly sunk in confusion on the farming industry. Then this morning we had the extraordinary spectacle of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment popping up on the "Today" programme saying that she will bring back corporal punishment in schools, only to be reprimanded and contradicted within minutes by the Prime Minister, apparently on his mobile telephone from the train. Are not those the symptoms of a Government who have lost the capacity to govern and whose drifts and weakness are damaging Britain?

The Prime Minister: Every single word of what the right hon. Gentleman has just said is a twisted distortion of the facts over the past week. In opposition he may be able to spend his life springing public relations stunts; in government we deal with reality.

Sir Giles Shaw: Does my right hon. Friend agree that west Yorkshire has a long and proud tradition of excellence in education in local schools? Will he note that in many urban areas such as mine schools have coped well with difficult children over many years? Does he conclude, as I do, that the problems of Ridings school in Halifax must be uniquely difficult but deserve unique and urgent attention?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that the problems at Ridings school deserve and will obtain urgent attention. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has requested the Office for Standards in Education to make an immediate inspection of the school, which will commence today and be completed on Wednesday. My right hon. Friend expects to have that report by Friday of this week.

I will add a further point to comments made about schools in recent days. It would be wise for everybody to get the matter into proper perspective. Some comments, despite the two serious issues raised, have bordered on the absurd by taking the particular and assuming that that position applies more generally in schools. That is not the

case. The vast majority of pupils are well behaved and the vast majority of schools are orderly places, and we are determined that they shall remain so.

Q2. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [379]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. O'Hara: Christmas is coming and in Christmas catalogues that are easily available young and impressionable people are exposed to advertisements such as for the "Terminator terror sword . . . monstrous, double handled . . . 56 inches overall . . . absolutely awesone" and and "a commando knife complete with a blood channel—ideal Christmas present".

Will the Prime Minister accept the Labour party's offer to co-operate with the introduction of legislation, preferably before Christmas, to regulate such monstrous advertisements and proscribe the sale of knives and weapons whose only practical purpose can be as instruments of violence?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary said yesterday that there is no dispute about the desirability of banning such weapons where a workable definition can be found. We took extra powers as early as 1988 to ban a series of weapons, and a large range of them are banned. We have also banned the carrying of offensive weapons and given the police powers to stop and search for them—powers that the Labour party opposed and voted against when we brought them before the House. I hope that the leader of the Labour party now realises that he was utterly wrong to take that view. If we can find a proper definition—which has thus far defeated the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Police Federation and the Scottish Police Federation—we will certainly move as my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary indicated yesterday.

Mr. Gallie: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's two-centre approach to on-route air traffic control across the United Kingdom is essential to air safety?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that whatever it was that my hon. Friend might have said was well judged.

Madam Speaker: It was the sort of short question of which I approve.

Q3. **Mrs. Jane Kennedy:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [380]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mrs. Kennedy: Will the Prime Minister reply to the question put by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and explain how it was that this morning the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was so out of touch with Government policy on corporal punishment in schools that the Prime Minister had to track her down on her mobile telephone? I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on delivering for the first time in his career the smack of firm leadership.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has the grace to chuckle, and I am not surprised. I will tell the hon. Lady what I absolutely agree with—the Bill that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has drafted and will introduce to the House tomorrow.

Mr. Mark Robinson: Britain is back in front as the largest investor in the United States, ahead even of Japan. One million Americans are directly employed by British companies. Is that not a true example of Britain's performance overseas?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt about the extent of inward investment into this country and the extent of productive external investment from this country abroad. We are among the world's largest external investors per head of population, and it brings huge benefits to this country in returned dividends and profits. My hon. Friend is right: it is an indication of the strength of British industry and our overseas investment.

Q4. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [381]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Randall: Is the Prime Minister aware that 20 years ago the fishing trawler Gaul, which was based in my constituency, mysteriously disappeared with the loss of more than 30 fishermen? At that time, the vessel was near the coast of the old Soviet Union. In addition to fishing, the Gaul actually carried out military intelligence surveillance.

Is the Prime Minister also aware that some two or three weeks ago there was a programme on television entitled, "The Riddle of the Gaul", which uncovered new evidence regarding the mysterious disappearance of the Gaul? For the sake of the people of Hull who lost loved ones and friends as a result of that disaster, would the Prime Minister be kind enough to arrange that the new evidence be looked into with a view to carrying out an underwater search of the Gaul so that all the questions surrounding its disappearance can be settled once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I have no knowledge of what that new evidence might be, but obviously the hon. Gentleman has. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman sees my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. Of course we shall examine very carefully any evidence that may have been produced and decide how best to proceed.

BILL PRESENTED

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Secretary Hague, supported by Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Lang, Mrs. Secretary Shephard, Mr. Jonathan Evans and Mr. Gwilym Jones, presented a Bill to make provision with respect to the financial limit in section 18(3) of the Welsh Development Agency Act 1975: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 7.]

House of Commons Stationery

3.30 pm

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. With regard to paragraph (d) of the guidance on the use of House of Commons stationery, if a letter is sent out on House of Commons stationery, which starts with the words:

"I am replying on behalf of Tony Blair to your letter dated 3 September concerning our invitation to join the Labour party"

proceeds to enclose some information about joining the Labour party, is signed, apparently, by Mr. John Burton, agent to Mr. Tony Blair, and is sent out in an official franked envelope, is that a matter which should properly be directed to the Administration Committee?

Madam Speaker: It is a matter which, in the first instance, should be directed to the Serjeant at Arms, who will question those concerned. If there has been misuse of stationery or postage, those involved will be required to refund the amounts concerned.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[Fifth Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 October],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—[*Sir Norman Fowler.*]

Question again proposed.

Education and Local Government

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment which stands in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.33 pm

Mr. David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at the end of the Question to add:

"but humbly regret that while the Gracious Speech did introduce a number of measures already put forward by Your Majesty's Loyal Opposition, it did not also embrace other ways of raising standards in our schools including lower infant class sizes, better teacher training, stronger national targets for primary and secondary schools leading to improved literacy and essential qualifications for all; and further regret that the Gracious Speech highlighted measures which will increase division, undermine parental choice, subsidise private preparatory schools at the expense of state schools and will make it more difficult for the efficient delivery of education locally."

If we ever needed an example of it, we have today an example of the Government in shambles, in confusion, in a muddle and with a crew in charge that could not have managed to sail across the Solent, never mind around the world.

The Prime Minister's dictum of "Don't mess with Gilly" has become "Save me from Gilly's mess". When the right hand does not know what the far right hand is doing, no wonder it is not clear who is in charge, and no wonder there is no coherence, direction or vision from the Government.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I will give way. This is an early start.

Mr. Arnold: The hon. Gentleman wondered who was in charge. Will he tell us which party is in charge of the local education authorities in Calderdale and Nottinghamshire and has allowed certain schools there to get into such a state?

Mr. Blunkett: Of course, between 1992 and 1995, the Conservatives were running education in Calderdale. They forced through the amalgamation of the two schools. If they want to start throwing darts this afternoon, I shall throw a few back.

Last week, there was to be no Government Bill on a paedophile register and no Government Bill on stalkers. That was the case on Wednesday morning. By Wednesday afternoon, the Government had capitulated and seen sense. [HON. MEMBERS: "What has that to do with education?"] It has everything to do with a Government who do not have the first idea what they are doing, morning, noon or night. Last weekend, there was to be no ban on dangerous knives. Yesterday, there was the possibility of some ban, with a slight equivocation from the Prime Minister this afternoon.

On the "Today" programme this morning came the coup de grace. At 8.10 am, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was opening up the possibility of bringing back corporal punishment. By 11 am, the Prime Minister was on to her and had overruled. There she was, on a train somewhere trying to listen to a mobile telephone, hearing a crackling message saying, "Gilly, you've got it wrong again. Smacking is out"—

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Miss Whiplash.

Mr. Blunkett: It is not Miss Whiplash, but the Whip has intervened. The cane has been put aside for another era. Thank God for mobile telephones. If she had got off the train not knowing the answer to the question, all her Back Benchers could have continued running around with the media, as they have been, saying how enthusiastic they were about a good beating. Let us face it, the British people would like to give them a good beating if only they had the chance.

What a fiasco! Last Wednesday, the Government announced a Bill in the Queen's Speech. By the following week, they are not sure what is in or out of it, although apparently this afternoon they are.

Mr. David Ashby (North–West Leicestershire): The hon. Gentleman is talking about fiascos. Does he realise that his suggestion of a contract between parents and teachers has been rejected by every teaching union, including the headmasters? They all think that he is talking nonsense.

Mr. Blunkett: Ignoring the danger of apoplexy from the hon. Gentleman, let me make it clear that the Labour party is not in the pocket of the teachers' unions. We are not the poodle of any union leader. We do not jump to the television every time Nigel de Gruchy sneezes. That is more than can be said for the Secretary of State and her colleagues.

We have developed a coherent policy. We laid it before our conference a month ago, where it was agreed. The home-school contracts, which I shall deal with in a moment, were put forward back in 1988. There are no Johnny-come-latelies here. We have developed our policy coherently, through consultation.

Interestingly, that brings me to the other element in the new Tory armoury—the re-emergence of Conservative family values. We have all heard about those values over the past four or five years. I am reminded of the Parkinson syndrome, which developed a different view of the sort of responsibilities that Conservative Members so often preach about to others. Was it not amazing to find that, on Sunday, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was trying to alter the values forum document before it had even been published? Before we had even seen it and before people could make up their own minds, someone leaned on the Secretary of State at a party, dinner or press meeting, and she decided that the values forum document did not go far enough.

Let us have some cohesion as we try to build a genuine policy for the future of our country. Let us try to realise that economic and social policies have a major impact on the way that people behave towards one another. That is why the past 18 years have made a substantial contribution to the disintegration of Britain's social fabric, and why social cohesion is breaking down in so many of our communities. One cannot preach the sort of values and mouth the sort of platitudes that the Secretary of State mouthed this weekend when one has doubled crime and tripled the number of one-parent families.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): The hon. Gentleman speaks of preaching values. The Leader of the Opposition is against abortion, but votes for it because his constituents are in favour of it. When the education Bill is introduced and those of us who are in favour of discipline table an amendment in favour of corporal punishment, will the Leader of the Opposition vote for it because his constituents favour it, even though he is probably against it?

Mr. Blunkett: I understand that the hon. Gentleman has lots of experience of family life and its development. *[Interruption.]* If his activities and speeches are anything to go by, the hon. Member for Dartford (Mr. Dunn), who is shouting about gutters, knows all about them. There will not be an amendment—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I meant to say the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold), and I apologise to the hon. Member for Dartford. I was heading in the right direction, but had not quite located the right bit of the county—both hon. Members are to the far right of the Tory party, and develop the same policies.

The answer to the question of the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Mr. Marlow) is that there will be no such vote. As the hon. Gentleman does on occasions, hon. Members will take account of the Whip that will be imposed—as the Secretary of State for Education and Employment knows to her cost.

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech, and I am confused because I do not know what his policy is on discipline in schools and the Government's Bill. Will the Opposition support the Government's move to increase discipline in schools, and introduce new sanctions on unruly children? Will the Opposition support those elements of the Bill? What is the hon. Gentleman's policy?

Mr. Blunkett: There are only two elements of the Bill which is to be published tomorrow and which we will presumably debate over the next two or three weeks. The first is a complete return to a failed and bygone era of selection, and the second involves straight plagiarism, as the Government try to introduce our policies half-heartedly and without the necessary cohesion to ensure that they work.

[Mr. Blunkett]

The Government preach—in the Prime Minister's words—about opportunity for all, but in practice they intend to deliver it to the very few. That is the nub of the Queen's Speech as it relates to education, training and employment.

Dr. Spink: What is the hon. Gentleman's policy?

Mr. Blunkett: I hope that you will call the hon. Gentleman later, Madam Speaker, so that we can hear the pearls of wisdom that fall from his lips. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman seems to be applauding that, so I am sure that we are in for a treat later.

The home-school contract is just one part of the jigsaw regarding discipline and a partnership between schools and parents. It is a classic example of the way in which the Conservative party does not understand what is going on. If we divide parents, schools and the education system against themselves, we cannot move forward to provide the equal opportunity and high standards that Labour intends to offer to everyone.

Under the Bill, the home-school contract would be compulsory in some schools but not in others. That would have the same effect as the breakdown in status and selection in our education system: some children would be rejected by schools that consider them unteachable. Those children would then be dumped into what would become sink schools across the country.

I shall address head on the issue of the Ridings school in Halifax, which was raised earlier. It is a classic example of how division of the education system results in some schools struggling against the odds at the expense of the children and of the staff who are trying to teach them. If there are one or two grammar schools in every town—as is the case in Halifax—some children are automatically rejected and prevented from entering the school. If there is a status breakdown—so that schools have different status, funding, admissions policies and accountability—schools can avoid taking children whom they believe will disadvantage them.

As a consequence, some schools become secondary modern: they must cope with the children whom other schools will not take and whom other teachers will not teach. Those schools struggle in such circumstances. In Halifax, the problem was compounded by the union of two schools whose pupils and others who should have known better were known to be at each other's throats. Ultimately, the community and the town was divided, and there was division of educational opportunity. It is as simple as that.

The message from Halifax is very clear: we must reject selection precisely because it denies choice and fails to provide opportunity for all our children. It divides the education system, and it creates haves and have-nots.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Why does the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) send his children to school in Westminster when he lives in Lambeth? Why does the Leader of the Opposition, who lives in Islington, send his child to a grant-maintained school? What is so marvellous about the systems in Islington and in Lambeth that the right hon. and hon. Gentlemen choose to send their children elsewhere?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point entirely. I argue not for the denial of choice, but for an opening up of choice. My argument is that a selective system, with a grammar school in every town, which automatically denies 95 per cent. of the population the right and the opportunity to enter a school—based not on where people live, on geography or any other rational criteria, but on an examination that precludes children at the age of 11—is a denial of choice.

I think that it is time that we put that on the Order Paper. Let us be clear: the Government are offering the kind of choice that was offered to the passengers—even the luxury passengers—of the Titanic. First, there were not enough lifeboats. That is a classic case of creating a grammar school in every town and a secondary modern on every housing estate: 5 per cent. have opportunities and 95 per cent. do not. Secondly, the crew did not know how to launch the lifeboats that were available; and thirdly, no one had trained the passengers to use them. Ironically, although the luxury passengers had first access to the lifeboats, that did not save them.

As with selection in the modern era, provision can be made for the few, but it will not benefit them in the long run, because denying a good education to the many will undermine the economic fabric of society and the cohesion of our communities. It is a simple, known fact that selection destroys cohesion. The Secretary of State does not believe in that part of the Bill in any case; she fought hard against the Prime Minister to avoid having to include it; no one is in favour of it.

Only 1 per cent. of those consulted—15 out of 1,500—wanted the extension of partial selection. Only 41 schools have taken it up, and 35 of those were dealing only with art and drama, leaving only six taking it up for general selection. No one wants it apart from the Tory party, which, earlier this year, saw what it believed to be a chink of light.

Dame Angela Rumbold (Mitcham and Morden): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: In a moment.

The Tories believed that they could embarrass us. That part of the Queen's Speech is nothing to do with standards for all and everything to do with what they describe as clear blue water. Somebody must have pulled out the plug, because we will not be embarrassed by anything whatever to do with selection. I have no compunction whatever in declaring that there will be no further selection under a Labour Government, for all the reasons that I have spelt out this afternoon.

Dame Angela Rumbold: Will the hon. Gentleman help me and the rest of the House by confirming that it is the new Labour policy to strive for a fully comprehensive system of education?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): That is what the right hon. Lady said in 1974 when she stood for Kingston council.

Dame Angela Rumbold: And I won.

Mr. Mackinlay: The right hon. Lady did not do what she said—and she is blushing.

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend tells us that the right hon. Lady is blushing, but he also reminds us that, in

1974, she campaigned—successfully, she says—on a programme of comprehensive education for all. I take his word for that, and I applaud her previous policy.

Dame Angela Rumbold: The hon. Gentleman should understand that I campaigned substantially throughout my career as a local councillor and as chairman of the education committee in Kingston to preserve the selective system, that I did so successfully, and that all my three children went to the selective grammar school.

Mr. Blunkett: Were not they lucky to be in a home with books; lucky to have a parent driving them forward; lucky to have a primary school that crammed them to enable them to pass the examination; lucky to live in a different era from the present one, which the Government are proud about one minute and denounce the next?

Let us be clear about the fact that we live in a divided society, in which more than 600,000 young men and women under 25 have no job, no education and no training to go to; in which, even according to the Government's fiddled figures, more than 2 million people are unemployed; in which the long-term unemployed have no hope for tomorrow or for next year; in which more than 50 per cent. of those who have found jobs in the past year have become unemployed again within 12 months; in which—*[Interruption.]*

I hear the words "Oh, dear me." It is "Oh, dear me" for the people who are experiencing what I am talking about; for people experiencing genuine suffering after 18 years of Conservative rule; for those who face insecurity in our communities; and for those who know what the phrase "generational unemployment" means and why it has an impact on our schools.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Blunkett: I will not give way for the moment; I have given way sufficiently.

I want to tell Conservative Members a thing or two about divided communities where people do not have the hope of a job; where teenagers, especially boys of 13, 14 or 15, can see no reason to study, and have no hope of a job or further education.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): That is a disgraceful remark.

Mr. Blunkett: I am being accused of making a disgraceful remark, but that is the reality in schools and communities. Anyone who knew anything about what is going on and who realised the deep divide and economic despair that so many people face would understand exactly what I am saying. Talk to those who teach in the schools, such as those at the Ridings school, about the divisions, the hopelessness and the housing estates where 20, 30 or 40 per cent. of households of working age have nobody employed—people dependent on income support.

We are talking about welfare to work; the Government are talking about trapping people in welfare and reinforcing dependence. Three times as many children are now dependent on the welfare state as there were in 1979, but the hon. Gentleman says that it is a disgrace that I should draw attention to the hopelessness and despair of young people with no prospect of a job. It is he and the Government who are a disgrace, because they do not even understand the consequences of their actions. That is the sad and deplorable thing. They do not have a clue what they have done.

I make the Secretary of State an offer. Abandon the divisive—abandon selection and discrimination—and let us unite around those elements of the Bill that all hon. Members could support to lift standards, provide a disciplined environment and ensure that children have the chance of a decent education. If the Secretary of State really wants, as she said this morning on the "Today" programme, to promote those elements of the Bill on which there is general agreement, and the Government want to get those elements through in this legislative Session, let them abandon those elements that no one wants or favours and that are designed purely as party political dogma.

Dr. Keith Hampson (Leeds, North–West): The young people who are really trapped are those in Labour-controlled authorities such as Islington, Tower Hamlets and Southwark. The official evidence from those places has never been denied. The reading standards of more than half of 11-year-olds are at least two years behind what they should be. The only people who can get away from that are those with the wealth to get away. That is the selection that the hon. Gentleman is offering. People such as his colleagues are able, through their rich earning capacity, to get their children out of that system.

Mr. Blunkett: It is nothing to do with income. With one breath, the Government say that they have offered people choice, with the next they say that the choice is not there, and that they must extend it through further selection. They cannot have it both ways. Either the choice is there for parents and being exercised or it is not.

However, the House should not take my word for the divisive, corrosive nature of what the Government propose. Take instead the word of the Association of Grant Maintained and Aided Schools, not exactly a Labour-backed or Labour-supporting organisation. Its submission on the White Paper on selection states:

"This is an extremely divisive issue for the GM sector. Although many of our members are former Grammar Schools and some of those would like to return to their former role, the greater number are well established comprehensive schools which have been successful in raising academic standards and providing opportunities for the majority of their pupils. They would resent changes in the admission arrangements to neighbouring schools that would distort the current level playing field."

We cannot get anything much clearer than that, or can we?

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I shall give way in a moment.

The association continues:

"Raising standards"—

this is related directly to the crisis at the Ridings school—

"of a school with a low average ability serving an area of social deprivation has always been difficult. Creating what in parental perception is a grammar school nearby will make it virtually impossible."

That is the answer to Conservative Members. If we create division, undermine opportunity and deny teachers the support they need to do the job, we should not be

[Mr. Blunkett]

surprised if we end up with a fractured society, with a lack of cohesion and an inability to heal the wounds of the past two decades.

The Government have not just stumbled upon a Britain that is divided against itself. We are not talking of a Government who have had nothing to do with 18 years of right-wing radical change, of Thatcherism writ large. The Government are not an Administration who have had nothing to do with 10 million people experiencing unemployment since the Prime Minister took office. The Government carry direct responsibility for their own actions over the past 18 years, including the damage that they have brought to every community in every part of Britain.

Let us unite in putting those items on the agenda that matter to people in our communities. Let us heal wounds and ensure that schools can do their job on behalf of every pupil. Let us not confine our efforts to just a few schools that are fit to teach and learn in. Let us ensure that we can once again be proud to give every child a chance. Now is the time for a change. Enough is enough. It is time for a new agenda, with a new Government blowing a new wind of change through the schools and communities of Britain. It is time for a Labour Government.

4.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mrs. Gillian Shephard): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) began in unaccustomedly lively form. We all noticed, however, when the scriptwriter's text ran out. He conveniently ignored, in his new-found enthusiasm for standards and achievements, the fact that it is the Labour party which runs nine out of 10 local education authorities with the worst GCSE results. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North–West (Dr. Hampson) said, those are the LEAs where young people find themselves trapped.

The hon. Gentleman attempted to glide over the fact that it is his political colleagues in the town halls in Labour Nottinghamshire and Labour Calderdale who are demonstrating their inability to sort out problem schools and pupils. In his statement on Calderdale and the Ridings school, he ignored the fact that in Wiltshire, Bexley and Buckinghamshire, which all run selective systems, the results of the lowest-achieving schools are far higher than those of Calderdale. There is no comfort for the hon. Gentleman in his conclusions on selection in those areas.

The hon. Gentleman's statements about selection and choice to the effect that his party opposes them cannot sit alongside the actions of his right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), his hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) and others. We have had much preaching from the hon. Gentleman and it is about time that he put over his message to his right hon. and hon. Friends. He must surely understand that his party's position, which is one policy for his hon. Friends and another for the rest of the population, is a ludicrous hypocrisy.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Has not the Secretary of State prejudged Her Majesty's inspectorate's report on the problems at the Ridings school? The right hon. Lady has said that there will be no more money for Calderdale council. She blamed the local education authority. Those statements were made before the HMI went in, as it were. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that if Calderdale received the same financial help per pupil as Westminster city council, it could afford to recruit 860 additional teachers? Does not even she accept that that would make a considerable difference to the four remaining LEA secondary schools in Calderdale?

Mrs. Shephard: I would not dream of prejudging the outcome of the inspector's report, but it is good leadership and sound help from the local education authority, not extra resources, that is required.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) *rose—*

Mrs. Shephard: I shall just finish this point, because I am answering the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

The hon. Lady, who has had the opportunity to observe the situation at the school at close hand—after all, we are talking about her constituents and their children—might well have taken some action before now instead of standing by, and now, apparently, wringing her hands. It is her political friends in the town hall who have the responsibility for this. But, of course, we must await the outcome of the inspector's report.

I give way to the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes).

Mrs. Mahon: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The Secretary of State is factually incorrect when she blames my political friends in the town hall. Her political friends pushed through—

Madam Speaker: Order. I regret that that is not a point of order, but a point of argument. I very much hope that the hon. Lady will catch my eye early in the debate so that she can make her points known.

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State refers, as do many of her colleagues time and again, to two of my colleagues who send their children to local authority schools in London boroughs other than their own. Can she tell me—I should like a straight answer for once—which members of the Cabinet have enough faith in the local authority system to send their children to local authority schools? Once they do that, as I did, I shall pay some attention to what they have to say about the local authority system.

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman shows well the prejudices of the Labour party. His party is against choice, selection and diversity in education. The hon. Gentleman should look for the mote in the eyes of his hon. Friends.

Mr. Joseph Ashton (Bassetlaw): The Secretary of State is well aware of the situation at Manton junior school in Worksop in my constituency, where the teachers are on strike and there is total deadlock between the governors, who insist on a boy going to school, and the teachers, who have said that they will not teach while he is there. The right hon. Lady says that it is for the local authority to solve the problem, but it is her legislation that has handed total power over to the governors. They are

abusing their powers, because 75 per cent. of the parents have signed a petition asking them to stand down. They are deliberately going against the local council, the parents and the teachers.

There is now a deadlock. I have asked the right hon. Lady to intervene and meet a delegation, but she will not. I have written to her and I have raised every possible avenue with the Office for Standards in Education and everybody else, but the strike looks like going ahead. Yet the right hon. Lady is simply blaming the local council, which has no powers whatever. What does she intend to do about the situation?

Mrs. Shephard: The local education authority is in charge. I asked the hon. Gentleman whether, in the first instance, he would take his deputation to see the chairman of Nottinghamshire education committee. I hope that he has now visited the school. I understand that meetings are taking place today and tomorrow. But the simple fact is that there is a dispute—a breakdown of relationships—between the teachers, the head, the governors and the LEA, and that must be solved at local level. I had conversations with the hon. Gentleman earlier, but I am always happy to talk to him on those matters. However, I am firmly of the view that it is a matter for the LEA.

The hon. Member for Brightside referred, although rather briefly, to home-school agreements. I listened carefully, and I have read what he has to say about his party's proposals for compulsory home-school agreements. I welcome the fact that he will at least support the Government's approach, but—like Margaret Morrissey of the Parents-Teachers Association, Ms Tulloch of the Campaign for State Education and the spokesmen for all the teacher unions—I doubt whether compulsion would work. Parents who support children will not need compulsion, and compulsion would make no difference to those who do not.

Mr. Marlow: My right hon. Friend seeks to produce adequate discipline in schools, and we all encourage her in that because without discipline, there would be no education. Many of her colleagues were encouraged by her brave remarks this morning and I can assure her that an amendment will be tabled to restore corporal punishment and to make it available to school governors, should they so wish.

Mrs. Shephard: Perhaps I could deal with discipline a little later: for now, I wish to complete this passage.

On home-school agreements, the hon. Member for Brightside mentioned partnerships with parents—although he proposes making them compulsory, which is a curious form of partnership—and that sits ill with his party's record of consistent opposition to all the Government's policies that have put parental choice, information to parents and their involvement as governors at the centre of everything that we have done in education. The hon. Gentleman cannot expect to be taken seriously when he says that he wants parents to be partners—especially if he intends to force them into partnership—because he and his party have opposed that very concept for so long and in so many ways.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I agree with every word that the Secretary of State has just said, but does she accept that her policy is also confused? She will allow schools to choose whether to have a contract, but if they choose to do so, the contract will be compulsory. Does not that mean that Margaret Tulloch, and the other people the Secretary of State mentioned, are also critical of her proposals?

Mrs. Shephard: I might accept the hon. Gentleman's point if it were not for the fact that, as I have just said, the home-school agreements that we propose to make available to schools—as part of their admission arrangements—are part of a broad tranche of measures that seek to bind parents into the educational process, including, for example, baseline assessment.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does the Secretary of State agree that the soaring class sizes in Cambridgeshire, which were reported last night in the *Cambridge Evening News*, are due entirely to the Government's capping of expenditure in Cambridgeshire and are not conducive to raising standards? In one school, Huntingdon county junior school, which is in the Prime Minister's constituency, more than 50 per cent. of the children are taught in classes of more than 30. Does she agree that that will not raise standards in my county?

Mrs. Shephard: As I have said many times in the House and as the chief inspector has made clear many times, achievement in education depends on the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership. Teaching is, of course, more difficult if classes are extremely large, but the hon. Lady will know that teachers are helped by teaching assistants in many classes, especially in primary schools.

I wish to return to the Gracious Speech, which has as its principal themes the extension of opportunity and choice. Those principles have guided Conservative Governments since 1979 through four Parliaments and four election victories, and they will guide us through the legislative programme in the remainder of this Parliament and into the next one. The application of choice and opportunity in education means that we now have a system in which accountability, transparency, independence and the choice and diversity provided for consumers have combined to raise standards.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): The Secretary of State recently announced that a failed independent school in my constituency will have its status changed to become a grant-maintained selective grammar school. Can she explain how that move, which is opposed by parents, teachers, the local education authority and the diocesan school commission in Birmingham and which flies in the face of local opinion, will help the 107 primary school classes in my constituency that have 30 or more pupils? Staffordshire is right at the bottom of the funding league for education.

Mrs. Shephard: When we take such decisions, we take into account several factors, including inspectors' reports and whether the change will improve the range of choice and quality available to parents. The hon. Gentleman will know, as I do, that Staffordshire was extremely pleased with its current year's financial settlement. I had a letter from the county education officer telling me so, and it was reported, I believe, to the education committee.

[Mrs. Shephard]

We have made heads and governors accountable for standards in their schools. We have made the education system more transparent, so that parents know what is happening through tests, inspections and performance tables. To help schools, we have given them more independence so that those responsible have the freedom, including much more budgetary control, to deliver rising standards. It is no coincidence that the greatest successes have been achieved where those principles have been taken furthest: in grant-maintained schools. Of the top 32 schools identified by Ofsted, 14 were GM.

Sir Donald Thompson (Calder Valley): My constituency is in Calderdale, where one school is unfortunately in the headlines. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we should wait for the inspector's report.

Schools in my constituency are places where people want to go. A junior Minister visited what could be called a hard area and saw an exemplary school, because the schools in my area have exercised choice in all the ways that my right hon. Friend mentioned. We heard the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) say that he would close aided and grant-maintained schools. He will have to sort that out with the Churches and others, but I assure my right hon. Friend that schools in my constituency are extremely good.

Mrs. Shephard: I am delighted to hear that. The education Bill that will be introduced tomorrow aims to ensure that parents have even more choice than at present and that schools get even more support in raising standards and maintaining discipline. Rising standards and rising achievements in education are the key to personal fulfilment and economic success, and are the foundation stones of a civilised society.

Mr. Redwood: The Government have offered a grammar school in every town if parents and local people want it. How would one go about applying for such grammar schools, and when will they be available? There are three towns in my constituency with no grammar schools.

Mrs. Shephard: A number of ways of achieving that aim will be outlined in the Bill to be published tomorrow. If local education authority schools wish to become grammar schools, they will be able to take that decision. If they come up against a hostile LEA, they will be able to refer to the holder of my office for a decision. If grant-maintained schools wish to increase the selective element of their intake, they will be able to do so up to 50 per cent. without having to take further advice or apply to the Department. There are various approaches, and we shall enhance choice and diversity and provide what parents want.

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): If, as the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Sir D. Thompson) says, the secondary schools in his part of Calderdale are a credit to the council, will the Secretary of State pay tribute to them? Does she recognise that if schools are doing a good job in most of Calderdale, the problems at the Ridings are specific to that school, and she should wait for the inspector's report?

Mrs. Shephard: I thought that that was what I had said, twice.

I did not recognise the landscape painted by the hon. Member for Brightside. Again, he conveniently ignored the achievements. One in three of our young people now receives a university education, which is almost the highest proportion in Europe, whereas in 1979 only one in eight had that opportunity. Some 29 per cent. of our young people now get two A-levels—double the figure of 17 years ago—and more than 40 per cent. get five good GCSEs or better instead of a quarter, as in 1979. Some 40,000 young people are on modern apprenticeships, and 75 per cent. of 16 to 18-year-olds are in education or training. GNVQs are now firmly established, with 92 per cent. of GNVQ students this year being offered a provisional university place.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Blackpool, South): In the light of what my right hon. Friend has just said about the mistakes in the speech of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), did she notice his mispronunciation of something that he called "coup de gras"? Did he confuse that with the foie gras eaten by new Labour, or does he not know his coup de grace from his elbow?

Mrs. Shephard: My hon. Friend demonstrates his linguistic skills. I noticed the hon. Gentleman's error, but as he was in full flight, it seemed unfair to point it out.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The Secretary of State read out a long list of successes. Why has there been a collapse in provision for special needs children in Cheshire—a matter about which I receive letters daily? Whose fault is it? Is it her fault, or is the Conservative ruling authority—and its partnership with the Liberal Democrats—to blame for that council-wide problem?

Mrs. Shephard: Given the favourable financial settlement for Cheshire this year, it must be a question of the selection of priorities.

The achievements that I listed have come from the Government's education reforms, all of which have been opposed by Opposition Members, whose Luddite views were so perfectly encapsulated by the hon. Member for Brightside. Yet again, he made it clear that he is opposed to choice, opposed to selection and opposed to every measure that we have put in place to raise standards.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Shephard: I will make some progress now.

The hon. Member for Brightside wants to fudge performance tables by introducing "economic and social indices". Yet, as the chief inspector of schools has pointed out, the most successful secondary schools achieve GCSE results six times as good as the worst performers in similar circumstances. If they can do it, so can all. Opposition Members, of course, would say that if all cannot, none should have the opportunity.

Education has been bedevilled for far too long by those who make excuses for poor performance instead of encouraging the good, and the hon. Member for Brightside made it clear today that he belongs to that dishonourable band. The fact that children come from inner-city areas or poor backgrounds is not a reason for accepting poor standards. It should be an additional spur

for schools to make up for the disadvantage by providing a good education. That is the way out of cycles of deprivation, enabling all students to reach their potential.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): Is not it somewhat ridiculous for the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) to hinge his entire education policy on a diatribe against selection that is based on one experience in one town, when there are grammar schools all over the country in towns such as Colchester that co-exist successfully with comprehensive schools and sixth-form colleges? Does not that prove comprehensively that selection and achievement go side by side?

Mrs. Shephard: I am afraid that, yet again, the hon. Member for Brightside has demonstrated a paucity of policy and has sought to ignore the facts.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): I am grateful to the Secretary of State who, like everyone else, is concerned about breaking the cycle of deprivation. I hope that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is concerned about that also. However, would not his selection policy—while providing what the right hon. Lady calls opportunity for some—deny opportunity to others? Is she claiming that the policy advocated by the right hon. Gentleman and the selection policies to be included in the Bill will not deny opportunity to some, because in the past—as she must admit—they surely have?

Mrs. Shephard: I hope that the hon. Gentleman listened to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) and to my earlier points about the achievements of, for example, Wiltshire, Buckinghamshire and Bexley. There is no evidence to support the comfortable theory expounded from the Labour Front Bench that selection must result in reduced standards—that simply is not true.

We are concerned about standards. We have already done a great deal—all of it opposed by Opposition Members—but there is, nevertheless, more to be done. We are, therefore, introducing a national curriculum for initial teacher training, so that every new teacher learns the methods that really work for reading, writing and arithmetic, on which all other skills are founded. We are reforming in-service training for teachers and setting up literacy and numeracy centres. We have introduced training for head teachers, leading to a new professional qualification, because the quality of learning for children depends on the quality of teaching and leadership in schools.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): Will the right hon. Lady explain why it took 17 years before she started to tackle the issue of teacher training?

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Lady has not been in the House for long—nor have I—but even she can hardly have failed to notice that the education agenda of the Conservative Government has been full of education reform, all of which was opposed by Opposition Members. We have sought to tackle low standards, lack of choice and lack of parental involvement. We have, indeed, reformed teacher training and we are now continuing to do more.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Shephard: I want to make progress; I shall take more interventions shortly.

The enabling and empowering of individuals that is provided by education is vital, because, as I have already said, education is the foundation stone of a civilised society. Although individuals, families, Churches and voluntary organisations—indeed, everyone—has a part to play in that work, it is clear that, to use Mrs. Lawrence's words, it is in school that much can be done to ensure that our children adopt the values on which our civilisation depends.

That is why the teaching of spiritual and moral values is already part of the national curriculum and why that work, together with adherence to the daily act of worship and the school's interaction with the broader community, is already inspected by the Ofsted. It is also why Conservative Members value the work of the 7,000 Church schools within the system, whereas Opposition Members would reduce their power and change their nature—without, I understand, even consulting them.

Teachers need clear, practical advice to help them to fulfil their responsibility to provide pupils' spiritual and moral education.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) intervened in the Secretary of State's speech, yet she has not had the courtesy to stay for the answer that the Secretary of State is giving. It is appalling.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): That is a matter of opinion, not a point of order for me.

Mrs. Shephard: I forgive the hon. Lady—I suppose that she will not be missed.

That is why, last January, the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority set up the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community. Its remit was to recommend to the SCAA

"ways in which schools might be supported in making their contribution to pupils' spiritual and moral development",

and

"to what extent there is any common agreement on the values, attitudes and behaviour which schools should promote on society's behalf".

The forum involves 150 organisations and individuals—teachers, governors, parents, teacher trainers, the major religions, academics, the legal profession, the media, youth workers and employers. The SCAA will publish a document on Friday for wide-ranging consultation on a common core of values and attitudes, on how those might be dealt with in schools and on how best practice might be supported.

Schools already do much good work in that area. I must stress that they cannot on their own achieve changes in social behaviour, but they have a strong desire to take a firm stand on values and behaviour, and we can equip them with practical ways of tackling those matters.

[Mrs. Shephard]

The family, its role and how it might be bolstered, has been discussed by the forum, and at some length in the press. The forum stated:

"we value families as sources of love and support for all their members and as the basis of a society in which people care for others".

Five members of the forum wanted to go further, emphasising that

"children should be nurtured and developed within a stable moral and loving home environment with preferably both mother and father present in a happy marriage relationship".

Mr. Blunkett: As the Secretary of State is now quoting from a document that is to be published in three days, and an addendum to it, would it not be a courtesy to the House that it be now published?

Mrs. Shephard: Of course I shall give thought to that matter and will be in touch with the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dobson: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that if a Minister chooses to quote from an official publication in a debate, it has to be given to the House so that hon. Members can check it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I did not think that it sounded like a state paper. [HON. MEMBERS: "It was."] Order. We shall probably now find out whether it was or not.

Mrs. Shephard: It was not a state paper, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am quoting from press coverage of the document, but there is no problem. We can ask the SCAA to make the paper available immediately to Members of the House. There is no problem.

Rightly, the SCAA wants to look at responses before it decides on the wording of an agreed statement of shared family values. As the debate starts, I can do no better, as the Archbishop of Canterbury did recently in another place, than echo the Chief Rabbi's words from his book "Faith in the Future":

"It is as if, in the 1950s and 1960s, without intending to, we have set a timebomb ticking which would eventually explode the moral framework into fragments. The human cost has been colossal, most visibly in terms of marriage and the family. There has been a proliferation of one-parent families, deserted wives and neglected and abused children".

That is the legacy that we have inherited from moral relativism. That has weakened and partly replaced the traditional attitudes which people of all faiths and none used to regard as a bedrock of decent behaviour. I welcome the start of a debate on how we can begin to regain some of that lost ground.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): In making her welcome comment on the need for a return to traditional values, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that, as with religious teaching, wider ethical teaching needs to be firmly based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which is the foundation of our laws and customs?

Mrs. Shephard: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He will obviously make a valuable contribution once the debate starts.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): I am sure that, like me, my right hon. Friend has seen in today's *The Times* the reporting of the document that we are all about to see. She will also have been in contact with Frances Lawrence, my constituent, about her manifesto. Does she agree that it would be useful to children if they could recite the four points set out in *The Times* today which it is suggested that they might learn, but that of much more value would be the ten commandments, whatever the religious background of children, because the ten commandments give a proper ethical and religious basis to life?

Mrs. Shephard: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. He will no doubt be extremely interested in the debate and will contribute to it.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): As we are only a day away from Hallowe'en, may I invite the Secretary of State to put on her other witch's hat—that of Secretary of State for Employment? She talked about family values. Does she agree that one of the biggest destroyers of family life is that too many parents—fathers and mothers—cannot spend time with their children because of the relentless pressure of overtime and extra hours? Will she in this speech take a step to the centre and support the eminently commonsense idea of a 48-hour limit on average on the working week, to allow parents to spend time with their children?

Mrs. Shephard: No. We are still two days away from Hallowe'en.

I shall now deal with the Bill to be introduced tomorrow. Its main theme is the carrying forward of the principles of choice, standards and accountability. I have already outlined some of the measures that will be introduced to increase selection and choice. In addition, primary schools will be required to assess all new pupils, to help teachers plan each child's education and to establish a baseline against which future progress can be measured.

All schools will be required to set targets for improving their performance in the key subjects of the national curriculum. We shall extend the powers of Ofsted to include the inspection of local education authorities.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): My children either were educated or are at present being educated in Calderdale, so as the Secretary of State mentioned Ofsted's powers, may I comment on the Ofsted inspection? It would be a great pity to investigate one school and its problems without taking into account the havoc that has been wrought on education in Calderdale in the past few years by the twists and turns of the Government's policies. It would be much better to have an independent inquiry into what the past 17 years of those twists and turns have done to education in Calderdale.

Mrs. Shephard: Over which the hon. Gentleman's political friends currently preside.

I now come to the matter of discipline.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Shephard: This must be the last intervention.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the absence of choice and opportunity results in a

system of class segregation? That is sadly what happened in Glasgow after the abolition of selection and grammar schools. My children attend council schools in Southend-on-Sea. The four grammar schools there, which take 25 per cent. of the community, offer unique opportunities for able, working-class children to enable them to break through the system. That does not damage other pupils, who also have great opportunities. Does she appreciate that people in Southend will be disheartened and disillusioned by the speech of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), whose policies would serve only to deny opportunities to able, working-class children?

Mrs. Shephard: My hon. Friend makes the point perfectly. I hope that those on the Opposition Front Bench are listening.

Good discipline is a prerequisite for raising standards. The Bill will include the measures that teachers have asked for to strengthen their ability to tackle disruptive behaviour. The proposed Bill will require each LEA and each school to set out their arrangements for dealing with disruptive pupils. It will allow schools to detain pupils after school without parental consent. It will increase the flexibility available to impose fixed-term exclusions, and will ensure that independent exclusions appeals committees take account of the interests of other pupils and staff at the school, as well as those of the excluded pupils. It will give schools the right not to admit pupils who have been excluded from more than one other school for up to two years after the most recent exclusion.

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Shephard: Not at the moment; I am sorry.

Everyone has had fun talking about what may or may not have been said about corporal punishment in our schools. For the avoidance of doubt, I shall remind the House of what I said.

Mr. Stevenson: I saw the right hon. Lady on television.

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman could not have seen me on television, because I was on the radio. Or perhaps he could. God knows what mood he was in.

I shall remind the House of what I said, as opposed to what I have been reported as saying. The Government have not included in the Bill a provision for the restoration of corporal punishment, nor do we intend to do so, because there has been no demand for such a measure from any professional group. There is a wide range of views on the subject. My personal view is that corporal punishment can be a useful deterrent to bad behaviour in school. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister takes a different personal view. The Government's position, however, is that we shall not put the restoration of corporal punishment in the Bill. Although amendments may seek to do so from either side of the House, we shall not give them Government backing.

Mr. Blunkett: May I clarify that statement? The hon. Member for Northampton, North (Mr. Marlow) said that an amendment would be tabled. If it was, would the Secretary of State vote for it?

Mrs. Shephard: I said that we would not give amendments Government backing. That should be clear.

As I said, one of the purposes of education is to prepare young people for their adult working life. The correlation between education standards and employment is clear: graduates are only half as likely to be unemployed as non-graduates, and those with no educational qualifications at all are three times more likely to be unemployed than those who succeed academically.

Under-achievement for young people is not just a problem at school; it is a legacy that will haunt and deprive them throughout their adult life. Jobs are coming on stream and have risen by nearly 750,000 in the past four years. They are principally there, however, for people with the knowledge, skills and flexibility to take advantage of the opportunities that a modern economy has to offer. As more jobs become available, unemployment is falling for young people and adults. In Britain, free from the restrictions of the social chapter and a national minimum wage, young people's job prospects after leaving full-time education are among the best in Europe.

Young people and their parents should understand exactly what would be in store for them if the policies advocated by the hon. Member for Brightside were ever put into practice. He would deny them jobs through the social chapter and a national minimum wage, and youth unemployment would rise to the levels in France and Spain.

Opposition Members make every excuse for failing schools. They complain about resources, the burdens of the national curriculum and conditions in our inner cities. They do not seem to understand that their friends who control the LEAs where most of our poor performers are to be found are a major part of the problem. Of course, conditions in inner cities can be difficult. Of course, teaching the national curriculum to a high standard is a demanding task—so it should be, if it is to give young people the standards of education that they deserve. That is no reason for some teachers, heads and LEAs to accept low standards, because other teachers, heads and LEAs succeed while facing identical problems.

Inner-city schools, such as Small Heath school in Birmingham or the Central Girls Foundation school in Tower Hamlets, can succeed. Moreover, schools that were failing, such as the Northicote school in Wolverhampton, can be made to succeed. Those are inner-city success stories. Those schools do not give up on their pupils, do not have low expectations of their pupils and do not accept low standards. What they deliver, others can deliver, too.

For 17 years, we have conducted an increasingly successful campaign to extend choice and opportunity and raise standards in schools. That campaign has been consistently opposed by the Labour party. We owe it to future generations to continue that campaign. With the help of the new measures set out in the Gracious Speech, we intend to do so. We shall ensure, throughout this Parliament and into the next, that the life-chances of Britain's children are not despoiled by the Labour party.

4.43 pm

Mr. Joseph Ashton (Bassetlaw): May I draw the attention of the House to a matter that is relevant to what the Minister has just said about disruptive children? The front page of this morning's edition of *The Independent* carries the headline:

"A perfectly ordinary junior school for 200 pupils, closed by one naughty 10-year-old. Why?"

[Mr. Joseph Ashton]

The teachers of that school in my constituency have issued notices to take strike action tomorrow. The headmaster closed the school yesterday and there is deadlock. The problem has been on-going for the past two to three months and I drew it to the attention of the Secretary of State when it started.

That problem concerns not just my constituency—more than 11,000 children throughout the country are now excluded from school. This nationwide problem has attracted so much attention because of the difficult position in which teachers now find themselves. They are forced to draw up league tables, pass standard assessments and achieve all the results that the Secretary of State has been boasting about. Yet, when it comes to disruptive children, teachers have no help whatsoever.

The Secretary of State's suggestion might help in some small disputes but it would not solve the problems of Manton school in my constituency, where there is deadlock between the teachers and the board of governors. The problem centres around a disruptive lad called Matthew Wilson, aged 10. He has been given great publicity, with his picture on newspaper front pages and in *The Mail on Sunday* colour supplement. I hate to think what it is doing to the poor boy. At the end of July, Manton school said that it would no longer accept him because of his disruptive behaviour towards the staff and other pupils.

Manton is a small mining community in a low-income, deprived area where the pits have been closed and everybody knows each other. Most of the parents went to that school; they know the governors and every kid. It is a community proud of its history, but where nothing is really secret.

Matthew Wilson has had many problems. A couple of years ago his father died and his mother had a serious operation. He formed an attachment to his sister's boyfriend as a father figure and that poor man was killed in a motor bike accident. The boy needs help. There is no question about that. The teachers and parents at the school, however, said that they could no longer have him there because the other kids were not being taught. The board of governors, which now has all the powers, disagreed. The chairman of the board, Mrs. Eileen Bennett, said that the boy should go to the school. I do not know how the press got hold of the story but when the pupils went back in September there was total mayhem because the governors had decided that the boy would be taught one-to-one and the cost was to come out of school funds. So the parents went on strike. Fifty parents said, "If we have to pay for that lad out of the budget, our kids will suffer. So we won't send them to school."

It is the first time that I have ever known parents to go on strike and pull their kids out of school, but they did it for a good reason. The pits in the area have all closed and there is massive unemployment. Despite enterprise zone promises, no new jobs have been created. Those working-class people know that if their kids do not get some sort of qualification and education, they will have no future. They care just as deeply as middle-class parents about grammar schools and class sizes.

The board of governors, however, lost touch with the parents and insisted on the child returning to school. They wanted to show who was boss and were determined to take on the union. So they set up the one-to-one funding, kept the boy out of school and said that it would cost the school £14,000 of its budget. It has already cost £3,000. The local authority said that it could do nothing as it had no powers to disband the board of governors. Three quarters of the parents said, "The governors have handled this matter badly. We know who they are—they are neighbours of ours. They are playing politics." But the governors refused to stand down.

I sent a petition to the Secretary of State asking her to use her powers to request the governors to stand down and offer themselves for reselection. It suggested that they should keep well in with the parents so that the school could be united. She refused, saying that the governors were not acting unreasonably or unlawfully. I think that they were acting unreasonably, as they went against the local council, the parents, the head teacher and the teachers. They were out of line with everybody. If that is not acting unreasonably, I do not know what is. The Secretary of State, however, refused to use her powers to disband the board of governors and have elections.

Mr. Brazier: Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on the parallel position of a school in my constituency, where a boy was excluded for pushing drugs and a panel appointed by the Labour local education authority, including a Labour councillor, also went against the governors' wishes? The common factor in both cases seems to be a Labour local education authority overcoming the governors' wishes.

Mr. Ashton: I will not give way again to that sort of diversion.

I asked the Secretary of State to meet a parents' delegation during the recess, but she refused. She told me to see the local council. Its headquarters are 30 miles away, but council officials came to the area. Again, the parents refused to return their children to school because the governors were adamant. I persuaded the parents to return their children on three separate occasions, but they were so angry about the school having to fund the disruptive boy that they took their children out again. All the time, there was enormous media coverage. The effect of press and television coverage on disruptive children has been diabolical.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) will refer to another case in Calderdale. Matthew Wilson was shown on television receiving a Chinese massage in his underpants. The chairman of the governors said, "It will relieve his tension and do him good. It is a special form of psychotherapy." The boy has also been promised a trip to Disneyland. There was coverage of that case in *The Mail on Sunday* colour supplement. People were interviewed in the street. Children were saying to cameramen, "I've been on television before. Do you want to interview me?" What is all that doing to disruptive children?

Could not the Secretary of State include in her Bill a provision stating that, as with court cases involving a minor infringement such as vandalism, children under a certain age should not be identified? That strict law forbids children being used by the media. Kids are great imitators. Where there is violence or fighting in a school, it is often to prove who is the cock of the school—as we called it when we were lads. Half a dozen kids want to

prove who can fight the others, who is the bravest, who will show off more and who will be the first to make the teacher lose his or her temper. There is much of that sort of bravado.

There are ways of solving the problem of disruptive kids. If such a boy is one of the oldest in his school, he can be moved to the senior school down the road, where he will be one of the youngest boys. However, that requires extra funding—something that schools do not have. Because funding is left in the hands of the governors, every school says, "We're not having that bad kid." At one time, disruptive children were swapped around a bit but today, funding is so tight and insulated that there is no flexibility.

Mr. Spearing: What was the situation in my hon. Friend's local education authority before the Government insisted on local division of finance, school on school? Was there at least the possibility, as in many places, of the local education authority making funding available in respect of disruptive pupils, so that the success and education of other children was not prejudiced? Is that not the root of the problem?

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend knows the answer because he is much more experienced in education than me. There was that flexibility.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: There is nothing to prevent an LEA coming in with special funding, to provide one-on-one education separate from the school's budget. If Nottinghamshire used some of the money that it spends daily on publicity for the council, that authority would have ample funds.

Mr. Ashton: I will take the right hon. Lady's message back to Nottinghamshire county council. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for answering my point about one-on-one funding, but she has not replied to my point about teachers refusing to teach. Even if funding is available for one-on-one tuition at a different school, sooner or later the boy in question will have to return to his original school. Kids want to be at school. The boy is now saying that he will behave himself if he can go back to school, because he is fed up with being taught on his own—which is understandable.

The petition against the governors of Manton school still exists. I approached Ofsted. I am glad that it is moving into Calderdale, but it refuses to move into Manton. Ofsted said that once the dispute is settled, it will immediately hold an investigation—but not now. Again, there is a total deadlock. The governors will not back off, the teachers will not back off, the council does not have the authority to move in and take over, and neither Ofsted nor the Minister wants to know. Who the hell does want to know? I am been trying to pull the four or five strings together for two months, yet there remains a deadlock.

Mrs. Shephard: The LEA could do a number of things in addition to the action that I suggested. It could make its central teaching and advisory staff available to the school by short-term secondment. The LEA could arrange alternative tuition for all Manton's pupils, notwithstanding the strike. The authority could offer suitable alternative tuition to the parent of the pupil concerned because not all the alternatives have been explored. The LEA could bring itself to back publicly the governing body. I saw the chairman of the governors on television, who said:

"The LEA said they are behind us. It would be more helpful if they were in front."

Mr. Ashton: I welcome the Secretary of State's advice and will pass it on, but I will give another version of the comments made to her. The chairman of the governors, Mrs. Eileen Bennett, is a Conservative party nominee. She stands for the council as an independent in a rock-solid Labour area in which the National Union of Mineworkers held strong during the miners' strike. How Mrs. Bennett got to be chairman of the governors, I do not know. She is a great Conservative sympathiser. If the other governors had another chance to vote for their chairman, I do not think that they would vote for Mrs. Bennett—but I will be kind.

I am convinced that not only Mrs. Bennett but the right hon. Lady and the Tory party would like teacher strikes this winter. They think that any strike—whether on the railways, in the Post Office or in schools—will produce votes for the Tory party. There is a hidden agenda. This is not just a small issue for Manton school that is attracting big headlines. The problem is affecting 11,000 children and hundreds of schools, where teachers are fed up to the back teeth. Perhaps the teachers were fed up with having to achieve league tables, increased class sizes and being pressurised. Teachers are taking early retirement in ever-increasing numbers. Many teachers, who have already had enough, see disruptive children as the last straw. If a strike starts in Manton this week and it spreads, that would suit the Government and it might suit the union. However, the kids and the parents in the middle would be the ones to suffer.

The Secretary of State has not made any concrete proposals. She could stop the Manton problem by dissolving the board of governors and asking for new elections. I guarantee that if there were a new board of governors, the problem would end in a week. The right hon. Lady will not take that action because secretly she thinks that having teachers on strike throughout the country would be a vote winner for the Conservative party in a general election. That is what lies behind the Manton school problem.

4.58 pm

Dame Angela Rumbold (Mitcham and Morden): I do not believe that single cases make particularly good arguments, but I sympathise with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) in one respect. A disruptive child makes it difficult for the teachers and the parents to maintain their efforts to provide a good education for the other children. There is obviously a problem with that child. I hope very much that the local education authority, which is the proper authority, will manage to resolve it. It is time that people sat down around a table and worked out a resolution of that problem.

I welcome the Bill promised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. During its passage, we shall discuss discipline in schools, among other things.

Schools deliver the most effective education. They do the job of opening the minds of children best when those schools are orderly. We have asked a great deal of teachers in the past few years. They have had the

[Dame Angela Rumbold]

demanding job of rediscovering the things that they must teach and of ensuring that they meet the standards to enhance the children's basic education. Those requirements are right.

We make things very difficult if we, as a society, say that the only people in the country who can now instil moral rectitude in, and order among, children are teachers. Teachers have had to become social workers; they have had to become all things to all men. That is patently absurd. It is absurd to expect teachers, who frequently are confronted with not only abusive or violent pupils but abusive or violent parents, to answer for all the ills of our society simply because, in western Europe and the Americas, we have allowed ourselves to become obsessed with political correctness. We have become so obsessed that we refuse to allow the people who teach, members of a good and honourable profession, to react publicly and openly about how they feel with parents who are abusive and with children who are totally out of order.

It is important for us to support teachers who ask for some authority to be restored to them—who ask, not to be given the right to bring up children from scratch, but to be given back the authority to enable them to establish order in places of education. They are there to educate children.

The newspapers and other media, among others, indulge in another mistake a great deal. They imagine that, if children have an education, they will automatically go on to obtain a job. Teachers can only do their best to open the mind and intellect of children. They cannot guarantee those children a job; they can guarantee to enable those children to obtain the skills that will enable those children to find the training that will enable those children ultimately to obtain jobs. Teaching children to read and do maths and teaching them basic science and technology are the first steps to enabling children to get a job. Teachers cannot and should not be expected to teach children moral behaviour and how to conduct themselves in an orderly way. They can contribute to that, but they are not the first teachers.

Children's first teachers are their parents. If the mother and father are out of control, it is hardly surprising that the children are out of control. No doubt other hon. Members will have been told by teachers from their constituency of terrible experiences. A teacher in my constituency was put in hospital by a parent—I suppose it was a parent; it was certainly someone associated with the child—who decided that they did not like the fact that the teacher had reprimanded the child in class. We cannot, as a society, expect teachers to give their best in opening the minds of children if we expect them to fend off violent and irresponsible people who have no self-control.

I prefer not to indulge in a great moral debate. We need to tell teachers, "We shall give you the authority"—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plans to do just that—"and we shall give you the means whereby you can exercise control in your schools." In that way, we can at least restore the balance for the teaching profession, which, as my right hon. Friend said, has done a magnificent job. It has helped with all the different measures that have been introduced during the past 17 years. It has made possible significant achievements. Examination results have improved, and children go to university in far greater numbers than we ever contemplated.

At one point during my time in the Government, one in 10 children went to university. The figure is now one in three. That is a tribute to the extension of university places and to the people who teach in our schools. We, as a society, should support those people to the hilt to enable them to do the job that they have chosen to do, by giving them the backing of the Government measures that will be introduced and of the local education authorities, which have a major responsibility to ensure discipline in schools.

In mentioning the Bill that is to be introduced, I should declare an interest. I have an interest in grant-maintained schools because I am vice-president of Grant-Maintained Schools Ltd. I also have an interest in the assisted places scheme in so far as I am a part of the Girls' Public Day School Trust and I am chairman of the governors of an independent school in north London.

I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is considering extending the assisted places scheme to preparatory schools, because I strongly support the idea of allowing talented children, from families who do not have the means to send them to the schools of their choice, to go to those schools.

As a former pupil of a school in the Girls' Public Day School Trust, I believe that we offered to girls throughout the country, without exception, one of the very best educations that anyone can receive in this country. It is single-sex education, and 25 per cent. of the girls who attend Girls' Public Day School Trust schools are supported by assisted places. That means that those girls get an opportunity that would otherwise have been denied them.

I was furious and outraged when, in 1975, the Labour Government decided to get rid of the direct grant system, so preventing children from poorer areas and from financially disadvantaged families from going to schools that would give them an excellent opportunity in life. The majority of girls who go to the 26 schools run by the Girls' Public Day School Trust manage to go to university. Those girls hold top jobs in every walk of life. They do well and are a credit to their families.

Why on earth does the Labour party want to abolish the assisted places scheme? I ask, as others will: if the Labour party really believes in excellence and in giving opportunity to children who are otherwise, especially economically, deprived, why does it not promise to extend the assisted places scheme considerably? Why does not it offer many more children the opportunity to attend independent schools and receive a good education?

I do not understand the logic of wanting to deprive people of an opportunity to do well—of wanting to deprive parents, especially. Remember this: many of the young people who go to Girls' Public Day School Trust schools and many independent schools, come from single-parent families. They are children of parents who want their children to do well enough in life to climb out of the economic disadvantage in which they have found themselves. What is wrong with that? I genuinely ask that of Opposition Members, who seem to be locked into a system which failed decades ago and has continued to fail. The notion that every child is born with the same ability is patent rubbish.

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): Does the right hon. Lady not realise that we oppose the assisted places

system because it gives privilege to the few at the expense of the majority? If the right hon. Lady will tell her Ministers to spend the same amount on each child in the public sector as is spent on each child in the independent sector, I will support her 100 per cent. Does not she realise that a few people are being subsidised at the expense of the majority?

Dame Angela Rumbold: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I fail to understand his logic. The majority of those who send their children to independent schools pay their taxes and support the state system, but choose to spend more to give their children a different education. Forgive me if I am wrong, but I thought that being allowed to spend one's taxed money on whatever one chooses was the benefit of living in a free society. *[Interruption.]*

I should like to make a further point to the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg), who seems very excited. The abolition of the assisted places scheme will not provide a pot of gold for any prospective Government who might come in as an alternative to our extremely good Conservative Government. It would benefit perhaps one child in 16 at the most. It is misleading nonsense to say, "We shall abolish the assisted places scheme and then all your children, all you poor people, will get a much better education." That is untrue. It is high time that somebody said loudly what the benefits would be. Those benefits would be minimal and would not fund anything—certainly not the aspirations of the hon. Member for City of Durham, laudable though they might be.

I welcome the extension of grant-maintained status. I was probably one of the earliest people to believe that grant-maintained status would become the norm for schools and would be of great benefit to pupils, parents and teachers. It is a pity that we are still slightly hidebound by bureaucratic local authority procedures for the allocation of school places. I do not know how many hon. Members came across that problem during the summer.

It is important that we should be able to deliver choice and diversity. Sadly, we cannot always do so when parents choose a school, for good and sensible reasons, only to find that the local authority will not allocate them a place there and that the appeals system appears not to be as fair as they would like. I am not pleased to be making that point, but the Government need to consider it. Schools should have a greater say in choosing the children whom they take in. It is better for children to go to the schools that their parents want and for parents to have an opportunity to choose the schools that they prefer for their children. That is reasonable in a free society. I dislike the allocation of places by overseeing bureaucracy. It leads me to wonder seriously whether the role of the local education authority is still too overbearing.

The remarks of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw raised some interesting issues relating to the role of local education authorities. Many LEAs refuse to allow schools in their area to opt for grant-maintained status. It is reasonable to argue that it is not up to the local education authority because the governing body chooses, but we all know the pressures that can be brought to bear on a governing body and on voting parents. Little notes have gone out in my constituency to the parents of every child in a school saying, "If you vote for grant-maintained status, your school will lose £800 this year and £1,600 next year." It is nonsense, of course, and quite wrong, but let us not deny that it happens.

We should also remember that many LEAs claiming to be giving their schools the maximum amount under the local management scheme—85, 90 or 95 per cent., whatever it may be—are misleading parents, because they do nothing of the sort. They retain far more than that. My LEA retains 30 per cent., after taking into account the way in which money is paid back to it by schools for the services which the authority says that they must buy. A considerable sum which is not properly managed or used is going back to local education authority. I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Government to think about that and to see whether it might be considered for a Bill after we have won the general election and a successful Conservative Government are returned.

I welcome the Government's measures and wish them every success.

5.15 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I disagree fundamentally with many of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold). I spoke immediately after her last time the House had a major debate on education, when I was so incensed by one of her remarks that I suggested that it should be widely published, so that people would know where she stood.

I hope that the right hon. Lady's opening remarks today on morality in schools will also be widely published, because they were very sensible. I was delighted to hear her say that teachers cannot be expected to take on the full burden. They have a part to play in this important issue and we should give them more trust. Although she did not say so specifically, I suspect that she might agree that our schools are already highly moral places, providing good examples for young people on issues of right and wrong.

The right hon. Lady will be well aware that many schools find themselves under considerable pressure on the issue, not least because the significantly overcrowded national curriculum has made it very difficult for teachers to devote as much time and attention as they might to what in many schools is called personal and social education—a vehicle for dealing with some issues of morality. I very much welcome her early remarks, but I shall explain later why I disagree fundamentally with some of her other points.

It was said of Calvin Coolidge many years ago, "He don't say much, but when he do he don't say much." That is a particularly apposite remark on this year's Queen's Speech—it don't say very much at all. However, it speaks volumes about the Government. They have run out of steam and run out of ideas. Many of the proposals in the Queen's Speech are aimed more at trying to embarrass other parties than at trying to solve the many problems of our society.

We are meant to be debating local government and education today. It is a pity that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment did not mention local government. Perhaps that is not surprising, because we know that the Conservative Government are no fans of local government. That is no shock, because the Conservatives have no power base there. My party now has many more councillors than the Conservatives and

[Mr. Don Foster]

controls four times as many councils. However, that does not absolve the Government of the responsibility to respond more effectively and robustly to the problems of local government.

The Gracious Speech refers to one Bill on local government, which will bring forward precious few measures far too late. What a pity the Queen's Speech did not contain a serious local government Bill to give local authorities a general power of competence for the first time. The Prime Minister is keen to talk about the notion of subsidiarity—devolving power downwards—in relation to Europe. What a pity he does not take a similar view on the need to devolve power downwards from central to local government in this country.

Legislation to give a general power of competence to local government would enable authorities to take action that they believe that local people want at local level. It is a pity that such a Bill could not have had tacked on to it a Government commitment to remove capping and thus to remove the ludicrous situations which currently exist in local government as a result of capping. I would not expect it from the present Government, but it was a pity that they did not propose a change to the way in which local taxes are raised—a change from the council tax to a form of local income tax.

The Queen's Speech is also sadly deficient in terms of education. What a pity the Queen's Speech did not propose education legislation to scrap the ludicrous and cumbersome nursery voucher system. What a pity the Government did not say, "We have had trials of our nursery vouchers in four local education authorities and we will take account of the results and then act." If the Government had taken account of the results, there is no doubt that they would have decided to scrap the nursery voucher scheme and, perhaps, come to the House for the first time with a clear commitment to develop a high-quality early years education system linked to care provision for all three and four-year-olds in this country and a commitment to make available the necessary resources.

One aspect that particularly worries me is that the Government seem to have lost interest in the nursery vouchers scheme. They are so keen to go ahead that they have lost interest in their own proposals. I wonder whether the Under-Secretary might like to intervene and explain why we were told, during the passage of legislation to introduce nursery vouchers, that great importance would be attached to the inspection of the various settings in which nursery provision would be made. The Minister will be well aware that, instead of allowing Ofsted to carry out the arrangements, the Government brought in an outside contractor, Group 4, to handle them. I wonder whether the Minister is aware that over the past few days inspection contracts have been handed out by three people from Group 4 with little or no knowledge of the inspection process, and an Ofsted representative was not even invited to be present during the process. The House should be told why that happened.

Dr. Hampson: Surely the hon. Gentleman knows that the two experiments in Norfolk and Westminster have created substantial increases in the number of nursery places. He should know that Liberal and Conservative-held wards of the city of Leeds provide parents with the least chance of securing nursery provision. The Labour authority continually boasts about the level of provision in Leeds. But in my area that level is one in 10; in some of the inner-city Labour-held wards it is one in one—almost every child. The Liberal-held wards are also suffering under the present system, which the hon. Gentleman seems to back.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman takes no account of the funding mechanism in local government around the country and the differential difficulties encountered in many parts of the country. The hon. Gentleman was foolish to refer to the nursery voucher trials in Westminster. The view of Conservative-controlled Westminster council of nursery vouchers is well known. It recently made its comments to the Select Committee. Written evidence which it submitted to the Committee stated:

"the scheme is bureaucratic with much of the extra administration falling on our schools."

It also mentioned the increased difficulties faced by parents. Would not it have been better if the Queen's Speech had referred to a new Bill to scrap nursery vouchers and introduce a proper system of high-quality early years education? But that has not happened.

What a pity that the Queen's Speech contained no clear commitment from Government to increase the resources available to the education system. One year ago I warned in this Chamber that if the Chancellor of the Exchequer cut the level of income tax in the Budget, it would lead to cuts in our schools. Sadly, I have been proved right. In the intervening 12 months a large number of teacher posts—about 4,000—have gone. That loss has led to a rise in class sizes, with all the consequent effects.

There has also been a worsening in morale and an increase in the number of teachers and head teachers taking early retirement due to stress-related illnesses. Buildings have continued to crumble and schools have continued to suffer from shortages of books and equipment. It would have been wonderful to have had a Queen's Speech in which the Government made a clear commitment, this year at least, to make increased investment in our schools a top priority. Increased investment would allow the introduction of high-quality nursery education, boost the supply of books and equipment in our schools, provide more support for children with special educational needs, provide teachers with much-needed high-quality in-service training and provide a significant boost in spending to try to tackle the appalling backlog of repairs and maintenance to school buildings.

Right hon. and hon. Members who have listened to the list that I have just given will be aware that improvements in every one of those sectors would bring improvements in the classroom. They would help to reduce class sizes and to improve the quality of the buildings, making it easier for teachers to teach and for children to learn. Giving the teachers the tools that they need—books and

equipment—would raise pupils' motivation and ensure a reduction in the discipline problems that the Government are rightly keen to resolve.

Mr. James Pawsey (Rugby and Kenilworth): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, whose contributions in the House we always enjoy.

Mr. Pawsey: I agreed with what the hon. Gentleman said about capping—if by saying that I blight his position in his party, I am genuinely sorry. Is he aware that an answer to a parliamentary question that I received only today states that the amount spent in schools is about £15.25 billion? If the hon. Gentleman is saying that that is not enough, by how much should it be increased? Will he say a word about the degree of holdback that has occurred in local education authorities?

Mr. Foster: In his second point, the hon. Gentleman may be referring to the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, who talked about 30 per cent. As I understand it, the 30 per cent. level—even using the mechanism that the right hon. Lady mentioned—goes against the Government's intention. It would also run contrary to my view of the proper levels of delegation. I believe that the current 85 per cent. level is about right. It enables variation between different parts of the country and different sorts of local education authorities. I am delighted—I hope that the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey) is equally delighted—that the Government have dropped their inane intention to introduce a 95 per cent. level of delegation.

The hon. Gentleman has asked his first question so many times that I wonder why he bothers to ask it again. I have placed my answer clearly on the record: the figure is approximately £2 billion. As, this time, the hon. Gentleman forgot to ask me how the money would be raised—I know that he intended to do so—I will answer the question. If necessary, and if there is no other way of finding the money, we would be prepared to raise the level of income tax by 1p in the pound.

Mr. Pawsey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for answering questions that I did not ask. I welcome his comments about holdback and local authority budgets. Is that now Labour policy? I am sorry, is it Liberal policy? There is now so little distinction between the two Opposition parties. May I assume that the Liberals will join us in requiring local education authorities not to withhold so much of their budgets from schools?

Mr. Foster: I did not say that. I was very clear, and the hon. Gentleman does me a slight disservice in not having listened to me. I said that the 85 per cent. level—which is current Government policy—is approximately correct and that we should not go significantly beyond it. However, some local authorities will choose to do so of their own volition. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware from the many parliamentary questions that have been asked on that point, the level of delegation is much higher in some parts of the country, including in Liberal Democrat local authorities such as Somerset.

On discipline in schools, about which many hon. Members are concerned, I share and support some of the Secretary of State's comments. She was absolutely right to say that we must have higher expectations of pupils. For all sorts of reasons, teachers often do not have sufficiently high expectations of their students. We must also have higher expectations of our teachers. I think that it is appropriate to re-establish the concept of teaching as a profession. We must give our teachers, as professionals, the support that they need, with the General Teaching Council as their professional body. As occurs in other professions, we must ensure that teachers have adequate and appropriate levels of continuing professional development.

If we re-establish teachers as professionals, we shall expect a great deal of them in return. We shall expect them not to resort readily to strike action—as has occurred in the two cases that are currently in the news. I do not believe that such action is helpful in either of the cases that are being debated in the press.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): The real problem in schools lies in low pupil and parent expectations rather than low teacher expectations. Children who come from very deprived areas and whose parents and brothers and sisters are unemployed do not expect to obtain jobs at the end of their schooling, so their expectations while at school are very low.

Mr. Foster: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman only in his initial assertion that teachers do not have low expectations of pupils. I think that teacher expectations are too low in some cases. However, I entirely accept his point that pupils and their parents often have very low expectations of children's likely achievements.

I agree with the Secretary of State's remarks about raising self-esteem and having higher expectations, and it is correct that the new legislation will enable schools to introduce detention for pupils even if parents are unhappy about it, subject to giving appropriate notice. I support the Secretary of State in that aspect of the legislation. I believe also that she is right to introduce an additional layer of exclusion possibility within schools. When the Secretary of State removed the indefinite exclusion, I said that it was a mistake. I think that I have been proved correct and I welcome the fact that she is now reintroducing at least a partial additional level of exclusion possibility for schools.

I support the Secretary of State's remarks and the Bill's proposals regarding target setting and the need for schools to be very clear about their role in benchmark testing, which I support. However, I have difficulty with the Secretary of State—as will others when they study the proposals in detail—over the issue of home-school contracts. I disagree fundamentally with the Labour party's proposal to make home-school contracts compulsory in every school and to require parents to sign them before their children can enter the school.

It is vital that we improve the relationship between home and school. Far too many parents are not prepared to support either their children or the school that they attend. However, forcing people to sign a piece of paper will not solve that problem. It can be solved only if schools and parents work together to develop a better understanding of their rights and, more importantly, their responsibilities.

[Mr. Foster]

The Secretary of State made that point: partnership is about working together to develop something. We shall not succeed simply by signing a piece of paper. The reality is that those parents who wish to support their children and the school will sign happily. Those parents who do not wish to support their children or the school may choose not to sign—in which case, where will the child go—or they will sign, but the contract will have no meaning. Therefore, I do not believe that that approach will work.

I am equally worried about the Government's proposal. The legislation introduces a system whereby individual schools will be free to decide whether to use a home-school contract as an entry requirement. The problem that I have described with the Labour party proposal would exist for those schools that choose to take up that option. The Secretary of State generously pointed out that many organisations involved with schools expressed considerable concern about the proposal within 24 hours of its announcement. The Campaign for the Advancement of State Education and the National Confederation of Parent-Teacher Associations have made particularly strong remarks about that issue.

If the Secretary of State were in the Chamber, I know that she would listen very carefully to the comments of one person. Joan Sallis is highly respected in the area of education. She has been involved in the Campaign for the Advancement of State Education and with many other bodies. She is a frequent contributor to education debates and she makes it clear that she has no party political allegiances. Her views are heeded around the country and I believe that the Government should listen to them.

I asked Joan Sallis to share her views about this issue. In a letter that I received yesterday, she says that the Government's funding policies are forcing many excellent home-school liaison schemes around the country to fold. She continues:

"I was always taught that unenforceable law is bad law".

In her most telling point, she says:

"The link with admissions is ludicrous: children have a legal right to education and the only logic of basing admission on a signed contract, and retention on its fulfilment, is to have sink schools which don't demand parental support, a form of selection more savage than any yet proposed."

Twenty years ago, Joan Sallis was one of a group of people who formulated the Taylor report. The issue of home-school contracts was discussed at that time and is covered in that report. As it is such an important part of the Government's proposals, I ask the Minister to make available as quickly as possible the minutes of the relevant debates which took place in developing the Taylor report. I am told that hon. Members on both sides of the House would find them helpful in our deliberations on the Bill.

We support some of the proposals on discipline, but we have some concerns—especially about home-school contracts. I am delighted that we do not need to have a lengthy debate on corporal punishment; that argument was had and won 10 years ago. Anyone who thinks that we can reduce the violence in our society by using a violent sanction should seriously think again. The evidence 10 years ago showed that caning and other corporal punishments were not a successful means of reducing indiscipline in our schools. I am surprised that the Secretary of State even floated the idea, albeit only as a means of assuaging a few right-wing Tory Back Benchers—one of whom is about to intervene.

Mr. Robathan: I have never discussed the matter with the Secretary of State. What has happened over the past 10 years while bien pensant people such as the hon. Gentleman have been saying how marvellous it is that we have done away with caning and that there is less violence in society? I believe that our streets have become more violent.

Mrs. Mahon: Because of Tory policies.

Mr. Robathan: Not because of Conservative policies, but because young men, in particular, no longer leave school with respect for themselves and for others or with the self-discipline that ought to be taught in schools. Part of that may be due to the abolition of corporal punishment.

Mr. Foster: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman, who is performing the classic manoeuvre of desperately trying to find someone else to blame for what has happened and taking no responsibility for policies that he and his hon. Friends have supported for many years.

Mr. Robathan: Not I; I was not here.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman says that he was not here, but to my knowledge he has been here for four and a half years; he should accept responsibility for what he has voted for during that time.

Mr. Steinberg: I have listened with interest to the hon. Gentleman and I would not be as rude as the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

When I first became a head teacher, I used corporal punishment. My experience of using the cane on several occasions taught me that it did not work, because the same pupils kept coming back time and again; the naughty children who misbehaved were never deterred in the slightest by the cane, and the other children could be dealt with in other ways. Corporal punishment simply did not work.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman speaks from experience and he is absolutely right. Many years ago, I visited a school and looked at its punishment book; it listed one child who had been caned time after time.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: In a moment—the hon. Gentleman must wait until I have finished responding to the previous intervention.

The punishment book showed that one pupil had been caned on 12 separate occasions and that on each occasion his crime had been failing to attend detention. On the 13th occasion, the crime was listed as

"Failing to attend detention—again."

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg) is right to say that there is no evidence that corporal punishment works.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity to intervene. Perhaps he will catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

On selection and grant-maintained schools, let me first make it absolutely clear that my party is opposed to selection, because we do not believe that that is what the vast majority of the people want; they know that a selective system may ensure a reasonably high standard of education for a few, but that it does not ensure high-quality education for all. The provision of high-quality education and excellence for all should be fundamental to our education system.

I do not want to refer to the details concerning the Ridings school, but I am in no doubt that the selective procedures that have taken place in the area have played their part in the difficulties that the school is facing.

It is bizarre that the selection debate is in part about an attempt—I do not know whether it is the eighth, ninth or 10th such attempt—to refloat the failed Tory flagship policy of grant-maintained schools. Conservative Members may not know it, but in the past 12 months, despite all the bribes and all the relaunches of the policy, only 0.5 per cent. of all eligible schools held a ballot for grant-maintained status; it is a failed policy and the Government are flogging a dead horse. The sooner they give it up and start to concentrate on ensuring that increased resources are put into securing high-quality education for all, the better. Sadly, the Queen's Speech contained no such proposal and is therefore wholly deficient in relation to education as well as in relation to local government.

5.45 pm

Mr. George Walden (Buckingham): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on keeping her head in the morality maze, when many others have been losing theirs, and on her general efforts to improve standards in education. That is enough praise, as she is not here to receive it, and as I want to get on to some criticism.

I oppose the whole concept of assisted places. The Conservative party has a warm conscience about the assisted places scheme, and when anyone has an excessively warm conscience about anything, that normally means that there is something wrong with it. There are two things wrong with the assisted places scheme: the principle and the practice.

As I understand it, the principle is supposed to be about bridging the enormous divide between state and private schools; it does not bridge the divide, but widens it, for reasons that I shall explain. Money is transferred from the state sector into the private education sector, so a so-called independent school ceases, by definition, to be independent, and becomes reliant, at least in part, on state handouts. It is an important point of principle that an independent school should, by definition, be independent, if it wishes to remain private and to restrict access to those with sufficient money.

By subsidising such schools, as they are doing, the Government ensure their continuation in their present, highly harmful form. That is another major objection of principle to the policy. A further fundamental point of principle—I could talk about principles indefinitely, as there is so much wrong with the scheme—is that the entire concept of assisted places is de haut en bas.

Hon. Members should note the word "assisted", with that little redolence of the National Assistance Board and the outdated concept of welfare of 30 or 40 years ago. We are throwing crumbs down in a Victorian manner; the scheme could well have been administered by a Victorian charity commissioner. That is why the scheme is socially as well as educationally backward; we are working from the top down and throwing crumbs to poor, deserving children.

Unfortunately, in practice many of the crumbs are intercepted by the agile hands of the middle classes. It is no use for Ministers to tell me that 80 per cent. of the recipients of assisted places schemes have below average incomes; that is a totally meaningless figure, because, as everyone knows and as I know from talking to people in the independent system, many of those people may technically have low incomes but, by God, they are not lacking capital.

Constituents have asked me, as they must have asked other Conservative Members, how they can get an assisted place. Sometimes, especially when I know their backgrounds and their houses, I say that it is really not for them, and that that was not the idea behind the scheme. However, they persist, and they get the cash. They get it because, as people in independent schools tell me frankly but privately, the scheme has largely benefited clean-break divorcees. That is what it is about, and let us not pretend otherwise. Of course some places go to deserving children, but an awful lot do not. There are major objections to the scheme, in principle and in practice.

What is the Labour response? It is to abolish the scheme. I want to abolish it, too, but Labour's response has as much intellectual and practical validity as our policy. By abolishing the scheme and replacing it with nothing, Labour will blow up the one inadequate and fragile bridge that we have built between the two very distinct sectors of education—the independent and the state sectors. That is a purely negative policy.

The idea that we can sprinkle the £100 million, which is soon to be £200 million, in penny packets around the state sector is not entirely factious, because there is a problem of class size in the state sector. However, it again underlines Britain's problem, which is not suffered in most European countries, of the permanent interface between the public and private sectors.

Dr. Hampson: One figure that Labour spokesmen always overlook is the fact that it would cost £350 million to reduce classes even by only two.

Mr. Walden: I accept my hon. Friend's figure, but my point is that our position is intellectually and practically indefensible, as is that of the Opposition. That is typical of the failure of the House as a whole to confront the distinguishing feature of our education system—our system of apartheid, about which no one wants to talk because it is embarrassing for both Government and Opposition. That is why we end up with our ridiculous system.

I suspect that there is an element of political provocation behind our policy in extending the scheme. We are trying to put the Opposition on the defensive.

[Mr. Walden]

In purely political terms, we will probably succeed. That will not help the country; it may help us a little in the general election, but I am not even sure of that. The Opposition have to reply, "We do not want to help the few; we want to help the many." The old, trite, primitive, typically British, anti-elitist argument, which has done so much damage to our education—and, in passing, to our culture—comes out yet again. I shall reprise later, and I shall try to make the same points again.

The Opposition's policy is negative. It will cut the one bridge. The private schools will be even more of a zone of money and privilege than now. Is that what the Opposition want? My criticisms may seem too easy; we need a solution. I have just published a book—it is very cheap at £9.99—in which I try to spell out my solutions. They are not easy; I understand that. Much of our time in the House—and I shall not be here for much longer—is wasted in our education debates. That is not because we cannot improve the system. I give credit to the Government for improving it, and to those Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen who have begun to admit there may be something philosophically wrong with state education.

However, there will be a clear limit on how far we can improve the system. We may make it more adequate, but it can never be more than second rate when we are the only country in the western world where the two sides of Parliament send their children to different schools. It is the only country in Europe in which the top 7 per cent. of society do not give a damn about what goes on in the rest. They do the sensible thing and send their children—and I always have to add that I did so, too—to private schools. Why? Education in private schools is not simply better but overwhelmingly better: 68 per cent. of A grades in physics at GCSE level are gained by the 7 per cent. of children in private schools. That is a catastrophic figure. We all know the arguments inside out. That is part of what is wrong with the debate.

Private schools, of course, have more resources and they are by definition selective sociologically, but those are not the only explanations. There is a third important point. The educational philosophies and expectations of the private sector are, by and large, superior. That is why people who have any money send their children to the private sector. While almost all the professional classes continue to do that, they will not be interested in what goes on in the rest of the schools.

When we discuss disciplinary problems—by God, one sympathises with the economic backgrounds of the people involved and the challenges they face—we should remember that in Britain, uniquely, the most powerful, articulate and educationally discerning people are not, and will never be, involved with those problems. They will weep a little tear and say that there should be more resources for education, but they will not get deeply involved, because they have no personal interest.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion and Pembroke, North): The hon. Gentleman keeps talking about "this country", but the Bill deals with two countries, England and Wales. The situation that he describes in England does not apply to Wales. We do not have such a divide. His analysis is irrelevant to Wales, as is the Bill.

Mr. Walden: I am prepared to take the hon. Gentleman's assurance on that. I still think it is possible to talk about the majority of the people of this country, who happen to live in England, great, as a half-Scotsman, as is my respect for the people at the top and at the side—the Scots and the Welsh.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): What about us?

Mr. Walden: And the people on the other side of the water. If the hon. Member for Ceredigion and Pembroke, North (Mr. Dafis) does not mind, I shall stick to the big picture, because most people in the British Isles happen to be English.

Mr. Spearing: The answer to the last point may lie in the different attitude to and culture of education in the different countries. From his hard work on the matter, in which he says that there is no bridge between the sectors, can the hon. Gentleman say whether the full cost per pupil in a school with assisted places is significantly greater than that in the true community sector? Does he agree that, if people want those schools, they should ensure that the facilities, opportunities and standard of education available at them are available to all? Is not that the big criticism of the philosophy of the assisted places scheme?

Mr. Walden: I know what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but, despite some signs to the contrary, I am a realist. There is no prospect that any Government will raise spending in the state sector to the level of that in the private sector. Let us be frank. My book is called "We Should Know Better", for those hon. Members with £9.99 after our recent increases. My proposals start from the situation as it is. I do not start from some planet Mars where we can bring up state spending to private school levels. No one will do that.

Instead of Conservative Members sometimes having—I am sorry to use the word—a hypocritical attitude to what I call the great divide, which, in a negative sense, conditions so much of the under-achievement in Britain, and instead of the Opposition's evasive or punitive attitude to private schools, we should start from where we are. We should be realistic and ask how the hell we can open up the privileged sector. It must be done voluntarily; let us have none of the old nonsense about abolishing private schools or having envious attitudes to them. We need a positive and gradual policy. I could go on for some time—for 230 pages—but that would be very boring for me, not to speak of other hon. Members.

Curiously, I consider the matter very politically. I was surprised when the *Daily Mail* serialised my book, because I thought that it might be a bit radical for it. It is not a left-wing newspaper. No doubt some of my hon. Friends think that I am a screaming lefty from the way that I talk. I was trying to work out why it had serialised the book, when I realised that it is read by the middle, middle, middle classes. That is why the Leader of the Opposition reads it carefully. The middle, middle, middle classes are not resentful about private schools, and nor am I. They just want to get into them.

It was interesting to receive a telephone call from the Leader of the Opposition's chief of staff. I was told, "Tony Blair has read your book; could you come and talk to us about it?" I had two choices. First, I could say, "I don't talk to snivelling socialists like yourself." Secondly, I could say, "Yes, obviously." I said, "Yes, obviously," and obviously I talked to the Leader of the Opposition. I said that I would make the matter public because I did not want any trivial, primitive nonsense about underhand contacts, defection and all the rest of it. I made the matter public, and, as no one was interested, perhaps no one noticed. It is conceivable, however, that someone noticed, because a few weeks later I was assured personally by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he, too, would read my book.

I was genuinely surprised by the amount of, not cross-party—I do not like that term, because it assumes a permanent divide—but different ranges of, reaction to what I had to say. I was the more surprised because people seemed to think that what I was saying was new. It seems self-evident—it stares at us rather like a big nose or carbuncle on someone's face—that I am talking about the fundamental education problem. If we do not face it and think—

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden): There are other problems.

Mr. Walden: If my hon. Friend thinks for a second and considers how any society, remembering that education is not a mechanism but a culture, can solve its problems in dealing with education in the absence of any interest being taken by its most powerful members, he will understand that, although we can and do improve things, there will be a ceiling on how far we can go. We face a limiting factor that is not present in other continental countries. I shall not talk about America, which is sui generis.

I am not basing myself on consideration of class. I am trying to push that behind us. Our problem is class first, education second. Let us put education first. Let us admit that private schools are overwhelmingly educationally superior. That is a fact. Before I hear predictable interventions, I suggest to Opposition Members that they read Mr. Will Hutton's frank acknowledgement in his book that the superiority of the private sector is part of the problem.

Mr. Maxton: In a sense, the hon. Gentleman is right. At one level, the independent sector has superior facilities. One of the major problems, however, is that the independent sector's approach to education is so traditional that it colours the way in which, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the administrative class thinks. One of the problems with many of our state schools is that they try to ape what happens in the independent sector instead of trying to find a better way forward for education provision.

Mr. Walden: It is the hon. Gentleman's attitude that is traditional. I beg him to read one page in my book where I try to correct the old-fashioned, left-wing attitude that he has taken up. The traditional teaching to which he refers is not taking place in private schools nowadays. For example, 35 per cent. of private school graduates who move to university study science and technology. I understand that 25 per cent. study the arts. Only 2 per cent. study Latin.

Let us put behind us an old-fashioned social attitude to private schools and think about what they are achieving academically, which is becoming better and better as girls' private schools come on. That, curiously, exacerbates the divide in achievement between the private and state sectors.

Mr. Trimble: The hon. Gentleman has referred to the superiority of private schools in England. It is the assumption that that is connected in some way with the greater resources that the private sector enjoys compared with provision for the state sector. Will he take into account the fact that the achievement of private schools in England is matched, and in many instances more than matched, by state schools and voluntary schools in Northern Ireland, which have exactly the same level of resource, by and large, as schools in England, Wales and Scotland?

As the hon. Gentleman said earlier, the difference between the private sector and the state sector may have more to do with cultural factors. In Ulster and Scotland, where we have much the same cultural attitude to education, we have a different approach to education and a different approach in the classroom from that adopted elsewhere.

Mr. Walden: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. Indeed, I have no alternative but to accept it. I do not know enough about Northern Ireland to challenge him. I did not go deeply into the matter in my research, because I was told on reliable hearsay that the situation was different in Northern Ireland and therefore not typical of the United Kingdom as a whole.

Mr. Maxton: What about Scotland?

Mr. Walden: I note what the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) says. It seems rather typical of our communally evasive approach to the problem that, as soon as it is raised, 90 per cent. of those around us start what we used to describe as pushing on the periphery. They say, "What about Scotland, what about this and what about that?" They will do anything but face the central problem that, at least in this part of the United Kingdom where I speak, which I believe contains about 50 million people, we have what I consider, and what I know those on the Opposition Front Bench consider, a damaging system of education division, which no other country in Europe has, and which will hold us back.

I bore myself, and I will not be boring hon. Members for long, because I will not be in this place for very much longer, but I have one other criticism of selection. Given our primitive education culture, we have yet another primitive debate about selection. I am hesitant about the Government's selection policy.

Once again, it is common sense to recognise that there is an element of political provocation in the timing and nature of the Government's proposals. Selection is a dangerous area in which to play that game. To say, "Let us have grammar schools in every town," is, both intellectually and practically, a vulgar proposal. How can one possibly say that without being aware of the different circumstances of every town?

What is the point of reliving the dead debate about selective education versus secondary modern education? It is a social and class-motivated debate. Let us put all

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that behind us. Instead, let us have a serious debate about selection. Let us consider what has happened in more advanced countries than our own, where there is selection not so much by ability as by aptitude. The process takes place over a longer period. Let us not have the primitive debate that has taken place yet again today. I read Opposition Members' speeches rather carefully, and even they are beginning to edge towards the need for diversification, which the Government have the credit for introducing.

We all know that there is a problem. We all know also that the comprehensive approach is by definition self-contradictory. It represents the logic of Groucho Marks. The children of the upper middle classes will never go to comprehensive schools. Therefore, our system of schools can never be comprehensive.

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): I always listen to my hon. Friend with interest on these matters. I share his hope that we shall move towards selection by aptitude, which is something that is fit for the 21st century. We should not go back to the tired old dogmas of the 1960s and before. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that, under the present comprehensive system, a comprehensive school that serves a suburb is infinitely better in terms of its raw material than a comprehensive school that serves an inner city or large council estate, as happens in parts of Taunton in my constituency?

Mr. Walden: That may be so. I know a little about our country, and I know that comprehensive schools are very good schools for the children of other people. I am sorry to say that that is my overwhelming experience in my party. That is my overwhelming experience in discussing these matters with those I meet in society. In other words, the degree of education hypocrisy is profound, and that is reflected in the Chamber.

There is a marked reluctance in this place—I have recognised it again today, and I did not expect anything else—to confront the problem. I have no expectation that either of the major parties will do so. I thought, however, that, before leaving this place, I would throw my penny's worth into the fountain to see what happened.

6.9 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Nothing in the Queen's Speech depressed me more than the proposal to allow more schools to select. Before the education Bill becomes law, I urge the Government and anyone interested in state education, including the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) who showed such an interest in having grammar schools in every constituency, to visit Halifax and talk to members of the local education authority, the governors of LEA schools, the children who attend the Ridings and their parents and ask them about selective education and choice.

Riding is a strange word. It is an old Yorkshire word which means thriding—to divide into three. That is what we have in Halifax—a three-tier system. When it comes to selection and choice, I urge the Government and everyone interested to talk to councillors in all parties in Halifax and ask them why secondary education in Halifax is in such a mess.

The hon. Member for Calder Valley (Sir D. Thompson), who is no longer in his seat, said how good the comprehensive system was in his constituency. Yes, it is good. It has well and long-established comprehensive schools which sometimes, in the past, provided an escape route for people in Halifax. Unfortunately, they are now mostly full. That system has existed there for years and that is exactly what we want in Halifax—nothing more, nothing less.

Halifax has always had a selective system. Because of the disastrous Education Reform Act 1988, probably the worst modern education Act ever, one of our local authority secondary schools—the Ridings—faces a crisis. The world's media have trekked to our doorstep and, if headlines are anything to go by, most had an instant scapegoat.

The Secretary of State, I am sad to say, was no exception, when she acted in a most irresponsible manner at a press conference last week. Without consulting the LEA, or any of the teachers, parents or governors, she decided to play party politics with the feelings of the children who attend the Ridings and their parents. She prejudged the inspector's report. She decided who the culprit was and drew her own conclusions before sending in the inspectors. She did not speak to the LEA until half an hour before the press conference and I had to follow her to the press conference before she would see me.

In contrast, I pay tribute to the director of education, all councillors of all political persuasions, the parents and the teachers at the Ridings who, compared with the Secretary of State, have conducted themselves with much dignity, in the face of extraordinary publicity.

Because the Secretary of State was so badly briefed about the Ridings, she appeared to be unaware that the amalgamation which has been the cause of so much of the trouble there was implemented by a Conservative-controlled administration. Some Labour councillors objected, pointing out that, without adequate resources and money to rebuild part of the school, the merger could be explosive, and they have been proved right.

I want to concentrate on what should be done now, not apportion blame. The councillors involved in that decision were faced with falling rolls, so they knew that the two schools had to be merged. Nor should the teachers or the council officers be blamed. If blame is to be laid at anyone's door, it should be directed at the Government, who, through their policies, have done more to bring about the situation at the Ridings than anyone else.

I do not know how many education Bills the Government have introduced during the past 17 years. I have been told that it is 18; it is certainly many. But they have all had one aim: to introduce and encourage selection. They have thrown admission policies to the forces of the market. All that on the pretext of parental choice—what rubbish. What choice is there for many of the pupils who attend the Ridings? There is none.

When a school is burdened with 135 children with special needs, when nearly 50 per cent. of the pupils qualify for free school meals, when a school takes 20 pupils who have been expelled from other schools and when it is surrounded by grammar schools which are highly selective and by opted-out schools, it is cruel to make comparisons, as happens in the league tables. Such comparisons show nothing about the children and what

they can achieve. After everything that has happened to education in Halifax, does the Secretary of State seriously believe that parents who sent their children to the Ridings had a choice? Of course they did not. Choice is a sham, as the right hon. Lady knows well.

The crisis at the Ridings should be put into context. I do not dispute that there are disruptive children at that school. Like every other Opposition Member, I deplore disruption and violence of any sort in the classroom. We all have a duty to try to do something about it. Since the late 1970s, Halifax has put forward more schemes than I care to remember to bring about a comprehensive system to do something about the inadequacies of the education system offered to most children in our town.

As I have said, Halifax has two highly selective grammar schools operating the 11-plus that now take pupils from outside the area. I understand that they are now rejecting some of their own sixth formers with A and B GCSE grades because they can get more A-grade pupils from outside. That is causing some problems. That is the brave new world of competition in education which Government policies have introduced.

Halifax also has two secondary Church schools which have opted out and the LEA is left with four secondary schools which are bursting at the seams. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) knows one of those schools well. He has visited Sowerby Bridge school in my constituency which has 13 mobile classrooms, one of them 30 years old.

One reason I so much resent the criticism which has been made is that the Labour group has been in charge for only 18 months, but it is still trying to do something about the problems. Most recently, a school is being built at Withinfield in Southowram. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), told us to repair that school, where children were packed in like sardines; but the LEA has committed itself to building a new school there, because anyone with an ounce of common sense knows that that is the only answer.

In Northowram, the most Tory ward in Halifax—I live there, so I know—money has been spent on a nursery and a new library for the primary school there. No political bias has been shown there. The local education authority is very responsible. If LEA schools received the same financial assistance as the opted-out schools and the grammar schools, there might not have been so many problems at the Ridings.

The Secretary of State, at her press conference, denied that schools in Calderdale were underfunded. She said that that was ridiculous. Not all are underfunded. Some are very favoured. I want to put on record some of the facts about funding. Since 1991, because of the unfair funding of grant-maintained schools—double funding by the Government in an attempt to bribe schools to opt out—Calderdale has had to pay £1,093,000 more to the grant-maintained schools than the equivalent LEA schools received in cash and services. Because of the capping regime, the only way in which such additional payments could be funded was by cutting local authority services. In addition, the introduction of the common funding formula has meant that, in the past two years, grant-maintained schools have received a disproportionately high share of any increase allowed by the Government.

Even worse are the proposals for 1997-98 in the common funding formula. For all the Secretary of State's preferred options, the proposals would mean an average reduction in the allocation of resources for special needs of 15 per cent. Those allocations are for the LEA to provide services for special needs children in all schools, including grant-maintained schools. In Calderdale, if the proposals go ahead, they would mean a reduction of more than £750,000.

The reduction in the LEA special needs allocation would lead to a further increase in the funding of grant-maintained schools. That is not fair, by any measure. Schools such as the Ridings would suffer. As well as that increase, the grant-maintained schools in Calderdale have been given a capital grant of £2.9 million, but the Secretary of State has told us that the problem is not one of resources. If she thinks that is so, please will she throw the same amount of money at the LEA schools? We will tell her whether it has made any difference after a few years. She certainly has not minded throwing money at the grant-maintained schools and the grammar schools.

I wish to consider briefly the effects of the three-tier system on other aspects of education policy in Halifax, especially the policy of integrating children with special needs. As I said earlier, the Ridings has 135 children who have special needs, ranging from stage 1 to extreme needs. Some 59 are on the register with behavioural problems. Those figures expose the Secretary of State's cruel charges against the children and their examination results. We must not forget that the children went from a secondary modern to an amalgamated school, and the selective system distorts the results. Credit could have been given for the improvement, albeit small, which happened in such a short time.

We should compare the Ridings, with 600 pupils, 135 of whom have special needs, to the nearest grammar school, which last year had one child with special needs on the register. The other grammar school had three. People can draw their own conclusions, if they are fair-minded. It is not true to say, as some people have, that the Ridings did not exclude pupils permanently. Of course it did. Last year, it excluded two pupils permanently, as did the nearest grammar school.

The Ridings had to shoulder another burden: it had to absorb all the pupils excluded from other schools. It has taken an extra 20 pupils who have been excluded from other schools, so 20 out of the 61 so-called unteachable children have already been excluded from other schools. To its credit, Calderdale council does not let excluded children wander the streets. It already spends £500,000 of its limited budget to send 24 disruptive youngsters to special schools outside Calderdale.

The Secretary of State accused Calderdale council of not doing anything to help the Ridings, but it has taken steps and I shall list a few. It has seconded an advisory teacher to work with the middle managers on aspects of curriculum development and production of curriculum materials. It has assisted the school in the introduction of a computerised system to develop basic reading and comprehension skills. It has made limited resources available to support initiatives taken by the school. The council has also assisted the school to make available a residential experience to all year seven pupils. It has also helped to set up a task force to deal with the behavioural problems at the school. The council has now appointed a new head and deputy head and has started building a

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sports hall. Any suggestion that the governors and the LEA failed to act when it was apparent that the school faced considerable difficulties is without foundation.

A few months ago, I visited the Ridings school at the request of the governors. They wanted to talk to me about some of the problems and the new buildings that they wanted. They told me about the serious disciplinary and practical problems that they had faced since amalgamation. Since then, I have spoken to governors and teachers, who have all complained about growing problems. The Secretary of State asked what I was going to do about the Ridings. I invite her to come to my office to look at the file on the Ridings if she thinks that I have not tried to play my part to help that school. I live next door to one of the governors, so it is difficult to get away from the subject.

When I met a small group of governors and the head teacher, they spelled out some of the problems they faced. They said that it was not possible to deliver national curriculum physical education at the school. They have only one, inadequate, indoor facility—a gymnasium with changing rooms that accommodate only 30 pupils. Science is taught in various labs scattered around school, which is inefficient and presents hazards when equipment has to be moved. The technology curriculum is restricted and provision for the emergent sixth form is non-existent, because the school was originally designed for 11 to 16-year-olds. The hall is used for assemblies, examinations, tests and PE and massive daily chair removals are necessary. Some parts of the building and campus are falling into disrepair. They have real problems in that school and it is not fair to say that the governors and teachers did not know about them and had not tried to face them.

Over the weekend, I was inundated with telephone calls from concerned parents, teachers and others. Like the union involved, I welcome the Government's intervention, but only if it is genuine. We must all hope that the Secretary of State's inspectors show more professionalism and objectivity than when she prejudged the outcome of the inspection in a knee-jerk reaction at her press conference last week. Like many others, I have every sympathy with the teachers and governors, because they have had a horrendous job.

I am sure that the inspectors will make some criticisms, but the narrowness of the remit given to them means that they will not see the overall picture. Only five inspectors have gone in for only two days and they will not consider the selection system, which I believe to be the major problem in Halifax. Such a system means that we end up with schools such as the Ridings, which has become a whipping boy. The teachers were told to cope and we have seen the resulting cheap headlines, but the blame should be directed at the Government.

I hope that, for the sake of the children, governors, teachers and parents, we get a swift, honest and practical report. If the inspectors' opinion is that there is no hope for the school, let them say so and close it. If the school can be saved with sound practical measures which will be backed up by resources from central Government, the report will be supported by everybody in Halifax, not least the children and parents from the school. If the inspectors decide to close the school, they must tell us where the 600 pupils will go. They cannot go to the three remaining, under-resourced LEA schools, because they are bursting at the seams. The grammar schools will not take the pupils, because they operate a selective system and the Church schools are full.

If people wish to see the future results of more selection, I suggest that they go to Halifax. For every state grammar school set up, they will get at least two Ridings, because such schools do not come separately—they come as a set. If one sector is deliberately underfunded and the other sector has money thrown at it, they will face the same problems that we face, which are a direct result of Tory Government policy on education.

6.28 pm

Mr. James Pawsey (Rugby and Kenilworth): Unlike the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), I welcome the Gracious Speech, especially the references to widening choice and diversity, improving discipline and raising standards in schools.

Recently, we witnessed the Leader of the Opposition offering the Prime Minister support on certain items of legislation. I wonder whether we shall hear a serious offer in the winding-up speeches tonight. I doubt it, because so far in the debate we have heard only some cheap, knockabout, claptrap stuff from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett). The red thread that runs through the Labour party's education policy has always been one of opposition—never positive, always negative. Opposition Members have opposed every reform advanced by the Government. It does not matter how practical, important or necessary the measure; the Labour party opposed it, usually for cheap political advantage.

The House will remember that Labour opposed Ofsted, grant-maintained schools, the national curriculum and testing, league tables, nursery vouchers and greater parental involvement. Opposition Members are locked into a 1960 time warp where only one type of school—the neighbourhood comprehensive—is acceptable and where all excellence should be levelled down. They would abolish grammar schools, grant-maintained schools and the assisted places scheme. I wonder how long the independents would survive, were new Labour to abolish the old charitable status of independent schools.

By contrast, we have consistently argued for greater diversity and choice, believing that not all children are alike and that they have different abilities, needs and talents, which can be recognised and developed in different environments. That is why we support the concept of selection. I welcome the Prime Minister's words at Bournemouth. He said:

> "If parents want more grant maintained schools, they shall have them. More specialist schools, we shall provide them. More selection, they'll have it."

The new education Bill will give schools greater freedom to select pupils by ability.

In marked contrast to the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), in my constituency we have a boys' grammar school and a girls'—Lawrence Sheriff and Rugby High School for Girls. I therefore speak with some knowledge of the excellence of those schools and of the high schools that surround them. It is significant that we in Rugby have excellent primary schools. The standards at those high schools and primary schools are good because of the 11-plus examination and the need for

primary schools to meet the challenge that it presents. Pupils who attend the high schools also benefit from the added rigour in the primary schools. The effect of selection, therefore, is felt throughout the school chain and not simply in the grammar schools.

I believe that education best takes place in a disciplined environment, and that greater efforts should be made to ensure that it exists. Accordingly, I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's statement that all schools will be required to publish a policy on discipline and that schools will once more be empowered to give pupils detention without first obtaining parents' consent. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am delighted to receive the support of my hon. Friends. I also support the proposal that schools be represented at exclusion appeal hearings and that the interests of the entire school should be taken into account at those hearings.

I welcome the legislation that will enable schools to introduce home-school contracts in their admission procedures. Those contracts should be strongly written and require the active co-operation of parents. Education does not take place in a vacuum—or only within a school. It is a process that occurs in the home and the school, so a partnership between parents and teachers will be to the decided advantage of the children. Parents should clearly understand the importance of the commitment that they give when they sign a school contract.

It is a mistake to assume that all learning takes place in a classroom. Recently, I visited a primary school and was told that some children entering reception had little grasp of language and little understanding of relationships. So many children these days do not enjoy any real conversation with adults. They are parked in front of the television, and that is it. Parents must understand that their children need to learn speech and be reasonably articulate before going to school.

One of the matters that causes me concern is the increasing number of exclusions from the nation's schools. Exclusions result in the children who most need education and discipline being put outside the school gates where the devil will soon find work for idle hands. Some of those who are excluded will, no doubt, be involved in and commit misdemeanours.

Many of those who are or will be excluded would have benefited from being caned, as they would have been in my day. I therefore argue that if a school wishes to insert in its contract with parents a clause that would allow the school head to use the cane in place of exclusion, such a clause should be inserted and the contract signed by the parent. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am obliged to my hon. Friends for their support. Most parents, I believe, would prefer their child to be caned on the hand, rather than excluded from school and lessons.

Mr. Robathan: Of course they would.

Mr. Pawsey: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his comment; he is right.

Those who refer to the European Court of Human Rights—to the case of Warwick *v.* the UK—should recall that there was not a court ruling, but a decision made by the Committee of Ministers on 2 March 1989. I have a copy of that decision. I am anxious that teachers should have all the sanctions that they need to ensure proper discipline in the nation's schools. Corporal punishment is one of those sanctions. The mere fact that it was available would, in most cases, be sufficient. The cane in the corner of the head teacher's study is a powerful deterrent.

It should also be recalled that, uniquely, here in the United Kingdom the teacher acts in loco parentis—that is, the teacher stands in place of the parent in the school. The teacher should be empowered to use the same amount of discipline as a loving and caring parent.

I come now to the role of local education authorities in providing education for the nation's children. I hope that the public understand that the Department for Education and Employment does not run the nation's schools. The overwhelming majority of schools, as the Opposition continually remind us when we debate GMS, are controlled by Labour LEAs. They can exert a fundamental influence over the character and running of schools. We in Parliament vote the funds and lay down the general principles, such as the national curriculum, but the teaching methods and the term-by-term running of the school lie firmly in the hands of Labour and Liberal-controlled LEAs.

The LEA has advisers, teacher advice centres and a bureaucratic machine well equipped to bring heads and governors into line. It sends out a steady stream of letters and circulars, all designed to influence the way in which the teachers teach and the schools deliver education. As Chris Woodhead said:

"What counts is not class size but teaching method."

That method is decided principally by the LEAs, the majority of which are Labour controlled.

One of the reasons why I am a committed supporter of grant-maintained schools is that grant-maintained status breaks the chain that binds schools to LEAs. The GM school can decide many of its own policies and priorities. That is one reason why grant-maintained schools are so popular with parents and achieve so much success. They succeed because they enjoy greater freedom, with less interference from LEAs.

There is, however, another reason why I am increasingly suspicious of the role of the LEA—this point was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold). I recently read a paper produced by the Centre for Policy Studies on school funding. I was interested to note that, of the national schools budget, £12 billion goes to schools and about £4 billion to LEAs—in the main, Labour local education authorities. On average, LEAs deduct more than 26 per cent. of total school spending money in England.

The writer of the pamphlet suggests that education is not deprived of resources: the problem is one of mismanagement of resources by LEAs. The total proportion of funds deducted by LEAs—this point was raised earlier by the hon. Member for Bath, who I am sorry not to see in his place—ranges from 26 per cent. in Havering to 39 per cent. in Barking and Dagenham. It is argued that LEAs keep £3 for every £7 that they share among their schools. An average of £594 a year is withheld by LEAs for every pupil in the country, whereas schools receive an average of £1,808 for each pupil.

Extraordinarily enough, the problem arises because there are three separate budgets: the general schools budget, the potential schools budget and the aggregated schools budget. Those three budgets mean that the whole system of funding the nation's schools is fudged.

[Mr. Pawsey]

Those who believe that the maximum amount withheld is "only" 15 per cent. are mistaken. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am delighted to have the support of the Government Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin). I therefore believe that the new education Bill should include a section devoted to the reform of school funding. It should ensure less holdback for LEAs and more money for schools, because that is what this House intends. Parliament is anxious that schools' money should be spent in schools, in the classrooms and on the nation's children.

Mr. Robathan: What on earth do LEAs spend this 15 or 39 per cent. on? That is what confuses me. What do they do with all the excess money?

Mr. Pawsey: The pamphlet to which I referred, entitled "School Funding: Present Chaos and Future Clarity", sets out in great detail exactly how LEAs waste the money. I repeat: I want the funds to get to the classrooms. I do not want the money spent on the bureaucracy that surrounds town and shire halls, as it so often is.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): If the hon. Gentleman is so committed to the money going to the classrooms, I am surprised that the Conservative Government have been creating even more local education authorities in England, Scotland and Wales.

Mr. Pawsey: That argument would carry more weight were it not for the fact that the hon. Gentleman ignores the GM schools, which cut the cord that used to secure them to the LEAs. Possibly unlike the hon. Gentleman, I want more GM schools to emerge. After all, that is what the parents want, because it gives them more control and makes the schools more receptive to their wishes and more responsive to local needs. Perhaps if there were more GM schools there would be fewer schools of the type described by the hon. Member for Halifax.

More money should reach teachers and the classrooms where the real work of education takes place. I want more of the available cash to be spent on teaching children and less of it to be spent on bureaucracy. If we adopted that policy, it would be welcomed by teachers and parents alike.

6.44 pm

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): Listening to the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey), as I usually do, I was struck by what a typically arrogant Tory speech he made, as he usually does. He implied that the electors are wrong because they have voted for Labour authorities. He seems to think that they should automatically vote in Tories. Does he not realise that we have so many Labour local authorities precisely because people were sick to death of the mess that the Tories had made of local government? Does he not realise that it is because of the mess that the Tories have made in Calderdale and Halifax that things are as bad as they are?

This year's Queen's Speech clearly shows that the Government are bankrupt of sensible policies. The proposed legislation of last week was either innocuous or extreme, none more so than that arising from the Government's dogmatic education policies. Those policies favour the minority against the wishes and benefit of the majority. Measures to establish new grammar schools, to extend selection, and to extend the assisted places scheme to the primary sector will all create an even worse two-tier system in education than the Government have already produced.

A Gallup poll conducted earlier this year found that only 19 per cent. of the public thought that selection should be encouraged, while 77 per cent. thought it a bad idea. *The Independent on Sunday* of 30 June 1996 stated:

> "The Tories have therefore invented all manner of devices to smuggle in selection by the back door—city technology colleges, specialist schools, opted-out schools. Ministerial assurances made again and again that none of these novelties were designed to bring about a new generation of grammar schools were lies."

It is now clear that this most reactionary education policy is being drawn up so as eventually to bring back total selection throughout the education system—grammar schools and secondary modern schools. Yet Tory education policies have been rejected by the vast majority in this country. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister trundles along in his own sweet way with his crackpot ideas, even though he must be aware that local voters have swept Tory education committees out of every town hall in Great Britain except for four London boroughs and a single county, leaving Tory education authorities responsible for only 2 per cent. of our schools. Fourteen LEAs are Tory-free zones—the Tories do not have a single seat on their education committees. That just shows how much confidence people have in the Tories and their education policies. The clearest sign ever came from Milton Keynes, where the Tories campaigned in the local elections on the platform of a return to a selective grammar school and were heavily defeated.

For years, the Government have promoted the myth of parental choice, but the more the system becomes selective, the more parents will find their children being turned away from schools that are full, both specialised and selective. The policies promoted by the Government have led, not to parents choosing schools, but to schools choosing their pupils. As more surplus places are removed, choice will become more limited because schools will be full. Parents may express a preference, but they do not have the right to choose a school.

The fact is that when, each year, the time comes for parents to choose a school for their children, a large number of them cannot get their children into the school they want. At that time of the year, my postbag is always full and my surgeries are full of parents desperate for me to take up their cases and enable their children to attend the school nearest where they live. Selection will make that worse.

I suspect that the Tories themselves recognise the pitfalls of selection because they envisage a legislative safety net whereby the 50 per cent. selection powers of grant-maintained schools, the 30 per cent. selection powers of specialist schools and the 20 per cent. selection powers of LEA schools will not apply if children are otherwise unable to find school places. The Tories are worried that their supporters will be unable to find places in local schools because of the selection arrangements. That is happening already in my area, where there is no selection at present.

If more selection is foisted upon us by legislation, it will mean multiple application procedures for parents, which will benefit only those with the skills and information to protect their children's interests. As usual, the less vociferous and the less well-off in our society will suffer. As more children are bussed around their local area, more public resources will be diverted from the classrooms into school-home transport, and sensible planning will have to give way to more fragmentation. In my area, Durham county council estimates that if only 10 per cent. of its schools were selective, its extra first-year costs would be £0.4 million, rising to nearly £8 million if a total selective system were introduced.

The comprehensive system has succeeded—it is not a failure, as the Tories would have us believe. Had secondary moderns—the type of schools to which the Government want to return us—continued, the huge increase in the number of students entering higher education in the past 30 years would not have happened.

Hon. Members can be certain that a system that allows only a small number of children to be selected for grammar schools while the rest go to secondary modern schools will not go down well with the vast majority of electors—particularly Tory electors. Rather than being an election winner, it will be an election loser for the Tories. Even Westminster council—that bastion of Toryism—warned that by giving schools greater freedom to select pupils, one could be seen to be diminishing parents' rights to select schools. As a result, there could be fewer—rather than more—satisfied parents.

It is a sad fact that right-wing dogma has created such a crazy system, but even crazier is the fact that, despite all the vilification heaped on comprehensive schools, there is no proof that they have failed because the Government have never evaluated their successes. Recently, independent research has found success despite the existence of selective schools.

Mr. Pawsey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Steinberg: No, I certainly will not. The hon. Gentleman spoke rubbish for 20 minutes, and I will not give him an opportunity to give us some more.

The successes in the comprehensive system were made clear in the 1996 research by Ben and Chitty.

Up till now in my speech, I have concentrated on the evils that I believe exist in the selection system, and on what parents, local authorities and the Government might want. One thing that I have not commented on—frankly, no hon. Member has referred to this in the debate—is what children want.

Mr. Pawsey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you refresh my memory? In 1976, did not the then Labour Prime Minister call for a great debate on education as he believed that the education system was failing his grandchildren?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Whether I recall it or not is beside the point—that was not a point of order.

Mr. Steinberg: That was an appalling abuse of parliamentary procedure by the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth. That is the typical of the way in which the arrogant Tories present themselves in this place. I will now return to what I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted.

We must ask what children want and how they feel about the selection procedures. I have personal experience of what it is like to sit the 11-plus examination and fail. It was a traumatic experience at the time, and the sense of failure never leaves as one gets older. I do not want hon. Members to go "Ah!" nor do I want any sympathy from the House, but my father died when I was seven. My mother was convinced, and rightly so, that the only way in which anyone could progress in the world was to have a good education, and her ambition was for me to pass the 11-plus and go to a grammar school.

I can clearly remember the despair on the morning when the results of the 11-plus were announced in the hall, where everyone was lined up as the headmaster read out who had passed. My name was not on the list. I have never known a feeling like it, and to this day I can remember the horror. I ran away from school to my grandmother's because I was so ashamed of failing, and I was unable to face my mother, who had placed such store on my passing that dreadful examination.

As it happens, I was fortunate in that I went to a secondary modern school that held GCE exams—there were not many of them at that time—where I did reasonably well. I got my GCEs and transferred to a grammar school—which, incidentally, was the only place where one could do A-levels at that time. I got my A-levels, and I went to college.

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): A happy ending.

Mr. Steinberg: Yes, a happy ending, but the vast majority of youngsters did not have such a happy ending. That is the point—the vast majority who failed the 11-plus did not go to a secondary modern school to try for GCEs. They were unable to take GCEs at the school they attended and, consequently, their education was second class. That is the system that the Government want us to return to. It is absolutely appalling. It seems to be fashionable these days for people to say that they failed the 11-plus but went on to have a successful career. That may well be the case, but failure was traumatic at the time and it made a lasting impact. We must not return to those days.

The proposals in the Queen's Speech regarding grant-maintained status show that the Government are still flogging what I would call a dead horse policy. Immediately before the general election in 1992, the then Secretary of State for Education—the present Chancellor of the Exchequer—predicted that an avalanche of schools would opt out as soon as a Tory victory was assured. To this day, he continues to get his figures wrong.

Grant-Maintained Schools Ltd. claimed that 2,000 schools would quickly opt out. In 1992, after the election, the then Secretary of State said that

"by 1996, most of the 3,900 maintained secondary schools, as well as a significant proportion of the 19,000 maintained primary schools could be grant maintained".

The present Secretary of State claims that grant-maintained schools are increasingly popular with parents. They were, but they are not so popular now that the money has dried up. The boasts and propaganda of Tory Ministers were bogus, as we all know. Figures released recently show that

[Mr. Steinberg]

there are only 1,100 grant-maintained schools in operation, while the number of LEA schools remains at more than 24,000. The right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) said today that the LEAs responsible for those 24,000 schools had influenced them not to opt out. Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous in your life? How could 24,000 schools be influenced by Labour LEAs? What a load of rubbish.

Even though all the evidence shows that the British people do not want grant-maintained schools, this arrogant Government press on with their implementation. We have seen the absolutely despicable behaviour of the Secretary of State, who played appalling politics when a school in the constituency of the Leader of the Opposition voted not to opt out. On the say of the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Devlin), the Secretary of State requested an inquiry, although she had been told by the head teacher that he was happy with the situation. That is an example of how low the Tories will stoop—they will question the legitimacy of decisions because they do not like them. The Secretary of State had to admit eventually that she was wrong and that there had been no misdemeanour in that area.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): The Secretary of State called the investigation not at my behest, but at the behest of the headmaster, who had written to her to complain. A copy of the letter was passed to the media at the time, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. He should not misrepresent what went on.

Mr. Steinberg: With great respect, I do not accept that. A letter from the headmaster, which was printed by the press, said that he had no objection to what had gone on and was quite happy with the situation. He added that the hon. Member for Stockton, South had originated the complaint. *[Interruption.]* We have different points of view—I know which of us the House will believe.

The Government are now going to allow grant-maintained schools to create nursery classes, sixth-form classes and boarding facilities and to expand their capacity by up to 50 per cent. without needing central approval. They are going to allow the Funding Agency for Schools to set up new grant-maintained schools in all areas where it thinks that they are needed and to charge the cost to local education authorities. How, in the name of heaven, does the FAS know what a local area needs? Only the local education authority and the people living in the area can know that—not a remote Tory puppet such as the FAS.

Allowing grant-maintained schools to expand by 50 per cent. without approval undermines the planning role both of the FAS and of local education authorities, which have a strategic role to play in each area. The Bill goes a long way toward introducing a free market into that sector of schooling—something that, in the past, successive Secretaries of State have refused to allow. In addition, allowing the FAS to set up new grant-maintained schools in all areas undoes another part of the Education Act 1993, which stipulates that 10 per cent. of pupils in any area must be in GM places before the FAS can propose a new school. The new proposal further compromises sensible planning.

In response to claims that GM schools are achieving better results than local authority schools, it is worth quoting Local Schools Information, which says that

"local education authority comprehensive schools cater for 50 per cent. more pupils entitled to free school meals than grant maintained schools and that when the performance of the local education authority and the grant maintained comprehensive schools within the same LEA is compared by reference to free entitlement, there is no significant difference in performance."

It is clear that the Government intend, in their usual underhanded and cynical way, to create more grant-maintained places at the expense of local education authority schools. Schools and parents will not opt out, so the Government will force them to use grant-maintained schools by reducing LEA places and increasing GM places. Of course, places at those GM schools will be available through selection—another example of how the Tories will extend selection by the back door.

Instead of announcing in the Queen's Speech that they intend to reduce class sizes in primary schools, the Government announced that they intend to extend the assisted places scheme beyond schools that cater for secondary pupils. Primary school children will be brought into the scope of the assisted places scheme. The Government will now spend an extra £140 million during the next financial year subsidising private school places.

The Government ignore the advice of the National Association of Head Teachers, which says that class sizes are clearly significant for behaviour and results. Ofsted concedes in its report on independent schools—I repeat, independent schools—that smaller class sizes are important; but because Tory Ministers and the Prime Minister say that class sizes do not matter, Ofsted plays down the importance of class sizes in the state sector.

Mrs. Mahon: They have been nobbled.

Mr. Steinberg: Exactly, they have been nobbled.

The importance of smaller class sizes in the early years of education is widely recognised by experts, but the Tories ignore that and put more and more money into the private sector.

The measures announced by the Government in the Queen's Speech have nothing to do with choice. The Tory propaganda of giving parents choice has always been a con and a sham—the real aim of Tory education policies over the past few years has been to take money from the state sector to subsidise the private sector. The policies on selection, grant-maintained schools, the assisted places scheme and the nursery vouchers scheme all transfer wealth and resources from ordinary people to better-off people to subsidise private education.

The proposals on discipline in the Queen's Speech are weak. They do not address the real problem, which concerns local education authority support for schools. The dash to integrate or close special units because of lack of resources is one of the main reasons why we have so many discipline problems in our schools today. In addition, the Government's rigid requirements on deregulation have broken up valuable behaviour support services. I do not oppose giving schools the power to detain pupils after school without the consent of their parents, or to exclude pupils for 45 days in any year instead of the current 15 days per term. Having said that, I nevertheless believe that head teachers' professional judgment in respect of expulsions is not given enough support.

I am not at all sure about home-school contracts. I am afraid that the parents who would most need to be bound by the contracts are the very parents who could not care less about their children's education or what their children get up to in school. The only time that such parents show an interest is when they can get themselves on television because their children have been excluded for bad behaviour. Contracts will not help their children at all. Perhaps I am being unduly pessimistic—I hope so.

Mr. Don Foster: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he does not approve of the policy expounded by his hon. Friends on the Labour Front Bench this morning?

Mr. Steinberg: I am saying that I am very sceptical about it—

Mr. Devlin: If you had left him, he would have dug himself in.

Mr. Steinberg: I would not have dug myself in. The fact is that I have my own views on education, but for between 95 and 99 per cent. of the time I agree with my hon. Friends on the Front Bench. However, I am not sure whether home-school contracts will work. I shall be interested to see schools try to use them and I shall be delighted if they work, but I am sceptical.

The truth is that the Tories have allowed education and discipline to decline while giving priority to private education. Last year, the Tories pretended that they gave the education budget an extra 4.5 per cent., but the actual increase was only 3.2 per cent., funded by cuts in other council services. Even the rising rolls were not fully funded, and last year's teachers' pay award was not funded at all. Tory Government cuts in education have led to large class sizes, crumbling buildings and not enough teachers, books or equipment. Those are the problems we face in education—selection and subsidising the private sector only make matters worse.

In conclusion, I shall quote from the report produced by the National Confederation of Parent-Teacher Associations from its third state of schools survey, which states:

"The results of our survey give us genuine cause for concern. We set out to discover whether parents' fears, such as rising class sizes and the lack of books and equipment, were justified. We now know that they are. The survey confirms that not only are class sizes rising, staff morale is low, teachers are asked to teach subjects in which they lack confidence and there is a need for more books and equipment."

A continuation of all this right-wing rubbish will not solve the country's education problems. Instead, it will continue to divide education into a two-tier system, in which those who can afford it will have a high-class education and the vast majority who cannot will receive a second-class education. That is what the Government have been developing for the past almost 20 years.

7.8 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden): The House will be relieved to learn that I have not written a book, and so shall not be spending a great deal of time boosting it.

Today's debate is devoted not only to education, but to local government, about which we have heard little so far. I notice that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration is to wind up the debate. I shall not spend much time talking about matters other than education, but I want to start by welcoming the promise in the Queen's Speech of a local government and rating Bill that will allow for the possibility of 50 per cent. rate relief for village shops.

It is extremely important to those of us who live in rural communities to maintain the village shop, which is a vital element of village life and an important social centre. It may be that village shops will become more important commercial centres as, over the next few years and as a result of new technology, more people are able to spend a proportion of their working life at home instead of having to travel to work. I warmly welcome the measure.

Also, we may have to start thinking how we can help towns as well. The growth of towns helped to diminish the commercial viability of villages, but the viability of towns is in turn being diminished by the development of new out-of-town and edge-of-town shopping centres. We need to consider measures whereby towns can be helped, or can help themselves, to ensure that they retain their viability and that there is a balance between that type of shopping and the other type, which involves travelling some distance.

I should have been happy to see in the Queen's Speech some promise about improving compensation—a development of the Land Compensation Act 1973. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration will be aware of the impact of the development of Stansted airport on my constituency. The process by which people are compensated for the loss of value in their properties deemed to have resulted from the airport's development is slow and that is causing great distress in many cases—it is certainly causing great annoyance. I hope, therefore, that it will not entirely escape the Government's mind that some improvement in compensation needs to be made.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), towards the end of his speech, called for a new agenda in education, but there was little on his agenda today. He did not even seem to speak to the terms of the amendment on which we shall no doubt vote later. He did not talk about the specifics of that amendment and certainly did not suggest how the education improvements that the Labour party wants are to be funded. All we know is that there is a commitment to take away the assisted places scheme, as though that would deal with all the remaining problems in education. A certain number of children would presumably have to come back into the maintained sector if they were not being assisted in education elsewhere. I do not understand how the Labour party can condemn what is going on without giving a realistic account of how it would find the funds to bring about the improvements that it wants.

By contrast, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, seemed to have an agenda that was stuffed full and I puzzled as to how 1p on the standard rate of income tax would pay for it all. If one assumes that that would raise £1.5 billion, which would have to be split among more than 100 education authorities, the result would be £1.5 million each. That would not go far when spread across all the ideas that the hon. Gentleman put forward.

[Sir Alan Haselhurst]

We are all aware of the great discipline problem in our schools. Two Opposition Members spoke with feeling about the circumstances confronting them. Although there is a problem with discipline in schools and there always has been, it is as well to remember that all the rest of our schools—barring those enjoying half term—are working, and working reasonably normally. We ought to be careful that the debate on education is not skewed by the circumstances that are occupying the headlines.

Ms Hilary Armstrong (North–West Durham): Tell that to the Front Bench.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: The hon. Lady, who has been an expert in the sedentary comment throughout her time in the House and ought to know better, should say that to her two hon. Friends, who felt sufficiently concerned about the problems in their constituencies that they had to speak at some length.

I wonder whether the problem being faced and dealt with, with fewer headlines, in many schools, is one of growing numbers of difficult children or whether it is becoming more difficult for some schools to cope. Clearly, in so far as there are some ill-disciplined children, they are spread throughout many schools and are not the preserve of one or two. The vast majority of schools are managing to cope without arriving at the extreme situations that we have heard described today. An uncomfortable number of children may be being excluded, but by and large one has the feeling that the teaching profession and the administrative bodies—be they governing bodies or local education authorities—have the expertise and are able to deal with the difficulties.

I accept that we need to include the power to exclude in the Bill, but I wonder about the use to which it will be put as a result of the legislation. Perhaps there will be more special pupil referral units, but are they to be an end in themselves or a route back into mainstream schools? I am not entirely clear how it is envisaged that those will work, given the feeling that seems to be becoming entrenched that a child, once excluded, will be difficult to get back into the system.

On the whole, I support the idea of a home-school contract, but I much prefer the Government's idea of having such contracts in certain cases rather than the universality suggested by the Opposition. I would like to think that, for most people, an implicit contract already exists. They want their child to be educated at a certain school by virtue of their decision to send the child there and it seems unnecessary for them to have to sign a piece of paper as well. Alas, something extra may be required from parents in cases where difficulties have arisen, and perhaps it is reasonable for them to have to do so.

I hope that the power to detain a child in school after school hours without the permission of the parent will be applied with care and sensitivity. Again, I am speaking for a rural area and I am all too well aware of the transport difficulties. I would feel some concern if a child legitimately and properly suffered the punishment of detention but then faced the problem of how to get home in the dark. One does not need too vivid an imagination to worry about the dangers that such a child could face, so we have to think that aspect through carefully, although effective forms of punishment have to be available to teachers.

On choice and diversity—a subject that has taken up a fair part of the debate—it is true to say that as far as Labour policy is concerned choice equals division. There is a fundamental difference of approach between the two sides of the House. I honestly think that the Conservative party speaks more with the instinct of the parent in this matter. Parents are trying to exercise some element of choice and commitment. That is a grain with which we should work, rather than trying to obstruct it. Judging by what has been said today, the Labour party seems to want to take away any vestige of choice. It is no good complaining that choice is not absolute and should therefore be denied to everyone. Under that arrangement, one would send one's child to the school that one was told to send them to and would have no creative input in the decision, which would be a considerable step backwards. We are saying that there should be an opportunity for schools to develop. Opposition Members should remember that many grant-maintained schools are essentially comprehensive schools and that they now want to build on their successes.

At the same time, I hope that the Government will recognise that geography is a factor when it comes to trying to create diversity and extend choice. What is possible in a town, with three of four schools whose characters might be developed in different ways, is not so easy in rural areas—it is difficult to see how that sort of diversity can be achieved there. We have to be careful to take in the geographical factor and to remember that, in those circumstances, money will be needed to expand existing schools if not to build additional schools to accommodate the expression of popular choice.

Perhaps, the private finance initiative can be harnessed more effectively to that end than it has been thus far. My part of the county of Essex has no single-sex girls school. The only opportunity for education in such a school is across the border in Hertfordshire. There are precious few places in relation to the number of people seeking them. There would be better balance in the available education opportunities in my part of Essex if we had a single-sex girls school. At present it is almost impossible to see how that could come about. If ways could be opened for that and other types of development, that would be welcome.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg) invited us to sympathise with the problems of the child who fails an academic selection test. I understand what he says, but I hope that he understands the feelings of rejection, puzzlement and desperation on the part of children who are excluded for no apparent reason from a particular school other than that 143 applicants for 45 places does not work. How does one explain to children of 11 that their friend two or three doors away can go to that school while they cannot, when there is no logical basis for the distinction and it is made purely on the basis of numbers? I invite the hon. Gentleman to see that there is more than one side to that coin. Many people accept that selection on the basis of ability and aptitude carries more understanding among parents and children than perhaps the hon. Gentleman was prepared to allow.

The role of sport in our schools is close to the heart of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Without wanting to disturb the national curriculum too far, we are trying to boost the opportunities for sport in schools. For all sorts

of reasons, there will be some difficulties in achieving that quickly. I shall not list all the reasons, but they are fairly obvious.

We have talked about contracts. Can we not talk about them in another context? There could be a contract between many of our voluntary sports clubs and schools to provide coaching opportunities to young people. Moneys can be directed towards clubs through the national lottery or various other foundations to enable clubs to use their capacity to help coach youngsters. I believe—it may be an old fashioned view—that if youngsters have more opportunity to play sport, that is helpful for self-discipline and social contentment.

I believe that diversity in education is helping choice. It does not make it perfectly available to everyone on demand, but it is helping. It is also boosting standards. The policies offered by the Government and the ideas that they put forward in the Queen's Speech are more exciting and hopeful than the drab conformity which seems to be the only alternative offered by the Labour party in a recall of the 1960s.

7.22 pm

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): I shall make just one quick point about school sport. I speak as a Scottish Member of Parliament, so I am not always all that aware of what is happening down in England and Wales. What destroyed school sport in Scotland, particularly team sport, was a long strike by teachers because they were not properly paid and felt that they were not being properly looked after by the Government. During the strike, school sports disappeared and it has taken a long time to get them back.

We must not emphasise only the major team sports. Surely the aim should be to give youngsters a broad spread of sports from which they can decide which one to take on into later life, whether golf, tennis, judo or whatever. I have a son who plays rugby. I want to see him playing rugby at school. He plays club rugby very much in relation with his school.

Sir Peter Fry (Wellingborough): Would the hon. Gentleman be interested to know that no less a rugby luminary than Mr. Cliff Morgan, who is not particularly well known for his dedication to the Conservative party, said clearly that the decline of Welsh rugby began when the grammar schools were abolished?

Mr. Maxton: In Scotland, that would not be true. The problem with Scottish schools rugby is that it is dominated by boys from a small number of schools in the independent sector rather by those than from state schools. Even when a state school team wins in a trial in Glasgow, 12 out of 15 boys come from the five independent schools rather than from the other schools. Out of 45 boys selected from three school districts in Scotland—Central region, Lothian region and Glasgow—only five came from the state sector. We cannot encourage rugby in the state sector if that is what happens.

As a Scottish Member of Parliament, I do not often hear the Secretary of State for Education and Employment speak, but every so often I hear colleagues and Conservative Members tell me how good she is. Her speech today was one of the most appalling speeches that I have ever heard from the Front Bench. I wondered initially why she was taking so many interventions. By the end of her speech, I had worked it out. If there had been not one intervention in her speech, she would have sat down within 10 minutes. She had nothing to say. She kept taking interventions, making points in response to them and hoping and praying that someone else would intervene so that she could keep her speech going for the 43 minutes or whatever it was for which she spoke.

The Secretary of State kept saying that selection and choice went together. I do not see how selection and choice go together. Let us imagine that I am a parent of a 10-year-old child about to go into the secondary system in England. In Scotland, the child would do so at 11. Let us say that I want to send my child to a particular grant-aided school. The school says that, to get in, the child must pass an examination. My child fails that examination.

It is not me, the child or my partner who has made the choice, but the school. I do not see the difference between that and the system under which the local authority decides what school a child goes to. Where is the parental choice which supposedly has been at the core of the Government's argument about education? The introduction of selection is the denial of all choice in education.

The hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst) said that choice was often denied under the LEA system because parents could not get their children into specific schools. I accept that parents choose from two schools which are the same the one they think is better, but under a selective system they choose between two schools that are radically different. One school is supposedly best because it has the brightest pupils, and the other takes the dimmer pupils. That is the major difference between the two systems.

One reason why the 11-plus was abolished was that on educational grounds it often failed to select the right pupils, as it so obviously did in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg). He should obviously have been selected. One has only to look at his career since to know—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) may laugh, but my hon. Friend went on to do A-levels, go to university, go into teacher training, become a teacher and then become a head teacher. That is not the normal route for someone who fails the 11-plus.

If the hon. Member for Blaby had been here when my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith) spoke in a recent Scottish debate on education, he would have heard him describe the trauma that occurred in his family, not when he failed—anyone who knows my hon. Friend knows that he is an exceptionally bright academic—but when his brother failed the 11-plus. There was great trauma in the household and the parents were in despair that the child was to go to a secondary modern, or junior secondary as it was called in Scotland.

Unlike my hon. Friend, his brother went to junior secondary and did not sit his O-grades or take A-levels. He left school at 15 and worked in the shipyards in Greenock. When he was 17 or 18, he realised what a waste that was, so he educated himself, and he is now professor of aerodynamics at an English university. The system failed to select: some children in grammar schools

[Mr. Maxton]

should not have been there, and some children in junior secondaries, or secondary moderns in England, should have been in grammar schools.

Mr. Rod Richards (Clwyd, North–West): Cannot the hon. Gentleman see the difference between parents having their first preference rejected by selection, and possibly their second or third preferences accepted, and not having any preferences at all because the education authority dictates which school their child should attend?

Mr. Maxton: Under legislation that the Government have introduced, local authorities cannot dictate the choice of school. I have some sympathy with parents who move into an area in, say, October or November—perhaps because their jobs have taken them there—and cannot get their children into the local secondary school because it is full as a result of parents exercising parental choice. They have a right to feel aggrieved. The school their children should attend may be next door to where they live, but they have to travel two or three miles to another school.

It is argued that comprehensive education has failed in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham said, comprehensive education has not failed the vast majority of pupils. It has given more children more opportunities to succeed in education and in whatever they do thereafter than the old selective system did. As my hon. Friend said, the expansion in higher education under the Conservative Government and the last Labour Government would not have occurred without comprehensive schools. Higher education would mainly have been limited to pupils from grammar schools, which would not only have damaged children but have caused excessive damage to our society.

Throughout this century, one of the major problems has been the failure properly to educate enough of our population. Children in this country lose badly compared with children in the United States, France or Germany. Far from comprehensive schools failing our society, the Government have failed comprehensive schools. They have consistently under-resourced schools, and have constantly changed the curricula and the structures by introducing new ideas. The Government have always made it clear that they do not believe in the comprehensive system. As a result, the morale of teachers is very low.

My family has 130 years of teaching experience, mainly in Scotland. Most of my family on my mother's and my father's side were teachers. I was a teacher, my wife was a teacher, her father was a teacher and her brother is a teacher. Despite that tradition of teaching, none of the next generation of children—my brother's children, my sister's children and my in-laws' family—is opting for teaching. Why? Because they believe that the teaching profession is not properly regarded by society, and is badly paid compared with other professions taken up by people with ability. Teachers feel that they have no real option, because many Conservative Members do not agree with the comprehensive system and do not send their children to comprehensive schools.

There has been much talk about discipline and morality. I do not accept that there is a breakdown in the moral structure of our society. The same arguments were made in the 1960s when the Beatles grew their hair long and youngsters copied them, and when there was an upsurge in the taking of soft drugs. When mods and rockers rioted in the streets of Brighton, we were told that our society was collapsing around our ears. That was blamed on our schools.

We cannot expect schools to solve the social problems that arise from other sources. Discipline can be a problem in schools, but it is the indiscipline outside school that causes the problems, not what is happening in schools. I made the point to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) that children who live in deprived areas do not see the point of going to school. Their fathers and mothers are unemployed, they live in poor housing where they have no chance of doing their homework, and their brothers and sisters and most of their friends are unemployed. They are wrong, and we should ensure that they see schools as better places than they do now.

Some children succeed in that system, largely because of their parents. I hope that the two women on the Opposition Front Bench do not think that I am being sexist, but I must say that it is usually the mother who provides the drive and motivation to improve her child's position. Bright children may succeed, but it is difficult for ordinary pupils in such deprived areas to become motivated.

Motivation is vital in education. Children need to feel that there is some point to what they are doing, and that there is an end product. The end product, after four or five years of listening to teachers teaching them subjects that they do not find interesting and that they do not think are relevant, is a visit to the social security office, to be told that they cannot have any dole money. They may be unable to find a job, and if they do find one it is very low-paid. It is easy to understand why many of those kids stay away from school, or cause problems if they go to school.

Let us not put the blame entirely on indiscipline in schools. Of course unruly children cause problems in some schools. That is true even of the independent sector: in the 1830s, Marlborough college was burnt down by rioting students. We should not believe that we can solve problems in schools simply by tightening discipline.

There is also much talk about a moral code. I always feel queasy when politicians talk about moral codes. The idea of a daily religious service in schools is abhorrent to many people. Fewer than 20 per cent. of people in this country attend church on anything like a regular basis, yet their religion is shoved down the throats of the other 80 per cent. I am not religious: my children have never been christened. I openly and proudly announce that I am an atheist. But I did not take my children out of religious education in school. Cowardly? Perhaps, but I never wanted to make my children feel that they were different or stood out, because to make children feel that they are radically different from their contemporaries is the worst thing that one can do to them.

Why should I have had to make that choice? Why should I have been put in that position? I do not believe in religion, and my children certainly do not believe any of it now—so why should they have been made to have religious education?

The second aspect of the moral code is that we must bear in mind the fact that intelligent young people's moral standards are different from ours. We cannot impose on

the new generation, even on those who know best, a moral code that stems from the 1940s and 1950s. Modern contraceptive methods have meant that the sexual morality of our young is different from the one in which we were brought up. More casual sexual relations are now possible, without the side effects—children. Young people now are also more tolerant of sexual relationships that are not the norm. For instance, they are much more tolerant of homosexuality.

Many young people do not see why it is right—or, if not exactly right, certainly not condemned out of hand—to drink 10 pints of beer with one's pals or have a few whiskies after a game of sport, and it is all great fun, whereas, if someone takes one ecstasy tablet, or smokes one reefer of cannabis, that is both morally and legally wrong. Our youngsters do not altogether understand when people say that it is wrong to take drugs, but that, although one should not really do it, going out and drinking 10 pints of beer is okay.

Finally, as I said earlier when I was talking about motivation, the real answer to the problems in our schools is to make them places where children want to be. That is why the "back to basics" stuff about the three Rs is nonsense. I have stood in front of 25 or 30 kids in a classroom, and it means that one has to base the teaching on the average, so the bright get bored, if one is not careful and does not give them enough work, and the less able never manage to keep up.

We should give real choice and equality in education. That is how we can ensure that each child can develop his or her talents to the fullest extent, at the speed and level best suited to that child's abilities.

That may sound like the sort of lecture that I used to give in a college of education in the 1970s, when modern ideas were all the thing, but I still think that it holds true. The problem in the past was that, because of the structure of schools, because of the training of teachers and the way in which they taught, because of the 45-minute or one-hour periods, and because of the way in which learning techniques were put across, the aim was not easy to achieve.

Often the attempt did not work. I accept that the aim was difficult to achieve, and that there were failures with those modern methods of learning. I say "methods of learning" rather than "methods of teaching", because it has always been my view that education is about learning rather than about teaching. We tend to forget that.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: That says it all: the hon. Gentleman is against teaching.

Mr. Maxton: I am in favour of children learning. That seems to me a better concept than someone standing in front of a class teaching.

I accept that there were problems in the past, but now we are on the verge of being able to achieve what we wanted. Why? The most astonishing feature of the debate so far—this is a criticism of my hon. Friends on the Labour Front Bench as well as of some of my other hon. Friends—is that, although an information technology revolution is taking place all around us, in the world of entertainment, in commerce and business and in our own homes, so far not one Member has mentioned the word "computer".

Information technology will genuinely enable each child to develop. I recently saw a news item about the changes taking place in education in Minnesota—an item that in some ways could be seen as leaning towards the Government, because it was said that in Minnesota every parent had the right to choose. Fine, but what I noticed was not the fact that people had all those choices, but the fact that every shot taken in a classroom showed a child sitting in front a computer, perhaps with the teacher helping and advising, or teaching a little bit—

Mr. Jenkin: That is not education.

Mr. Maxton: A computer linked with the Internet, and with CD-ROMs, enables people to learn in interesting new ways that have never existed before. Of course that is education. Of course it is learning. That is what it is all about. We must break down the attitude that computers have nothing to do with education and never will have.

At the Conservative party conference, the Deputy Prime Minister said that, once the millennium has passed, the Government would use the Millennium Commission money to provide computers for schools. That means that it will be five years before we do anything serious about putting computers into schools. By then we shall be unbelievably far behind the rest of the world. We cannot wait that long. We must tackle the need for computers in schools.

I am not talking about computer education—a room set aside with a few computers in it, where kids can come once a week to put their hands on them and play around. I am talking about a computer on every desk for every child throughout his or her school career, from which those children can learn. That must be the aim. I realise that I have spoken for rather longer than I intended, but I must express my hope that that will be the aim of education policy for the next Labour Government. It must be, because only then will we be able to give children education at the speed at which they want to learn, and enable them to develop their skills in the way they want.

Only in that way will we be able to develop the technological economy that the country requires, with people who are at ease with computers and use them without difficulty. Unless we have those policies, and unless we aim to have a computer on every child's desk by the millennium, so that every child can learn properly, we will have failed our children for generations to come.

7.47 pm

Sir James Hill (Southampton, Test): I praise the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for the magnificent work that she has done—against tremendous opposition from the Labour party, as we have heard.

We have not mentioned this subject much so far, but of the schools in my constituency that have been examined by Her Majesty's inspectors of schools, one had to look to its curriculum and to the quality of its teachers and another, La Sainte Union, although a well-known and highly creditable university for teaching teachers, was found by the inspectors to have a curriculum insufficient to provide the qualifications that it bestowed.

Consequently, the vice-chancellor himself had to telephone me to say that he was awfully sorry to have to tell me about the criticism, and that things were being put in order as quickly as possible. That is what inspection is

[Sir James Hill]

all about. The Secretary of State does not intend to put a heavy foot on any school or university, but there has to be quality in teaching. Some teachers may be two or three generations removed from what is happening. All the work being done by the Department for Education and Employment is designed to improve the standards not only of schools in themselves but of the teachers and of the discipline within the schools.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) took 25 minutes to tell us that he was still making the same speech that he made 25 years ago. It must have been a good speech at the beginning, but it is getting a little threadworn now. The hon. Gentleman talked about discipline in schools. We have had a terrifying time in Southampton, with children dying from glue sniffing. He mentioned ecstasy; a child in Southampton died from taking that. Some of the problems in the school playground may be caused by under-18 drinking, as plenty of that goes on. Luckily, it is covered in the Crime (Sentences) Bill, which we shall soon debate in Committee.

I am aware that I may not be as strong on education as some hon. Members who have spoken before me, simply because I went through the terrifying period when Shirley Williams demolished all schools apart from comprehensives. Southampton had some worthwhile grammar schools such as Taunton school, Itchen college and King Edward's, which had a tremendous ability to produce results and provide proper education. After the great Shirley Williams saga, only one school was left, and it has now gone completely private. It divorced itself from the LEA and was funded by a number of people. It is now the best school in Southampton. That was achieved through its own ability, as it took not a penny piece from the taxpayer to change from a grammar to a private school. The school takes many scholarship pupils and, in the past few years, has built a huge gymnasium and plenty of ancillary buildings and created wonderful rugby fields. The Government should highlight such schools to refute the nonsense that good education must be comprehensive.

Education in Southampton has been thrown up in the air and is now beginning to come down. I hope that the old political warhorses will not come out again, determined to keep all education down to the level of comprehensives. We must think afresh on education, as the Secretary of State is trying to do. She will not get much co-operation at this stage, but the ideas are there.

I do not like accusing the Labour party of anything—I am one of the gentler souls in the House—but I hear that Labour Members oppose objective testing and inspection and favour, dare I say, trendy and progressive education theories rather than basic facts. Education must be considered according to the city that one represents. The quality of education depends not just on a city's schools but on its universities.

Southampton has a splendid university. It has had to go outside for research contracts and, although it is doing nicely, it would still like a little more money. It is taking over the site of the old Taunton grammar school and incorporating it into the university, so it is moving forward. The only problem has been that Southampton college of higher education started to invest some of its budget abroad. It set up three little universities consisting of just four or five rooms, one of which was in Athens, and lost a great deal of money. That was adventurous but hardly in keeping with what colleges should do with their budgets. Naturally, the head of staff had to go, but I am sure that all that is over now and that the institution is returning to budgetary stability.

Three higher education establishments and some 18,000 students in one city can cause problems, such as increased traffic, and many older residents in Southampton object to seeing so many students in the town. The students have a certain number of their own public houses and the licensed victuallers complain that they get cheaper drink.

Those are elements of the growing provision of education in Southampton, which will result in a high standard of education for practically every child in the area. We have lost the Walsash school of navigation to Southampton, because most of the students there are from other nations' navies or merchant navies and we can no longer build on that.

There is a focal point for everything, however, and if we get into a yah-boo type of debate on education, we shall ruin not only some of the bad things, as the Opposition would say, but all the progressive new work that is now coming through. A large percentage of youngsters in my area will now go to university. They have chances that we did not have 40 or 50 years ago. Consequently, we should co-operate on some subjects, regardless of our political parties' views. I bear no ill will to Labour Front Benchers who want better education for their children, even if they must take them miles and miles to get it. They are showing the way to most of their Back Benchers. It is time that we took the silliness out of education and ensured that every child has the best possible education.

I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will not mind my saying a few words about local government in Southampton. These debates are always a golden opportunity to mention what is happening. I have been worried for a long time about asbestos in high-rise blocks of flats. I presented three petitions to Parliament, but the answer that I received from the Department of the Environment was of little use. The Department was supposed to review the condition of asbestos in high-rise blocks. The danger exists in all cities, not only in high-rise blocks but in four-storey blocks and even normal houses. Asbestos was once considered a jolly good material. When we used it, we were building for heroes, although people had to be heroes to live in some of those flats, because they were badly designed and let in the damp. They were built with inferior materials and, ultimately, the tenants became disgruntled. That aspect must be examined by local authorities.

When three flats in Southampton were identified as having asbestos panels, the Labour council said that there was no need for the tenants to move out while the panelling was removed. The council had forgotten the health and safety rules on asbestos. The authority was fined £29,000 by Eastleigh magistrates court for not providing sufficient protective clothing and equipment to the workmen and tenants. The situation is still up for grabs and nobody knows what the local authority will do. There ought to be a national campaign to identify clusters of blue asbestos or any other type.

One family with young children wrote to me saying that asbestos boards were sawn up in their flat. The parents were terrified that asbestos fibres had got into the

lungs of their children. I have brought a particularly sad case to the attention of the local authority. The mother coped with all the problems of bringing up her children in that evil atmosphere; when she wanted to redecorate the flat, she and her husband were offered £150. That is an insult. One can hardly redecorate a toilet for that sum these days. Councillors must be more realistic.

I was so angry about the local authority's attempts to ignore the asbestos problem that I invited the councillors to give up their homes to the tenants affected and move into the high-rise blocks, if they thought that there was no risk. That proposal was greeted with great laughter, as always happens when one asks someone to make a great sacrifice. I felt justified because those councillors and anyone else involved in the local authority must realise the penalties for disregarding these dangerous times. Asbestos is a legacy from the times of wanting to build homes quickly and cheaply, while pulling down hundreds and thousands of terraced houses.

Councillors must be made aware that tenants are well informed these days. They have only to turn on their radio or television to get all the vibes possible. Councils should have the leading voice, saying, "You have suffered a certain amount of privation. We cannot prove that you have contracted anything dangerous, but there must be some form of compensation." This is the modern world. In the United States of America, such tenants would get a lawyer to secure the highest possible compensation from the responsible authority. We in the UK do things differently. The Department of the Environment and local councils ought to recognise the public's fears and produce compensation; in that way, they would quell everything and avoid extreme agitation.

I can only hope that some of the measures in the criminal justice Bill will help to deal with some of the massive problems on large council estates. I had a bit of a chuckle when I read that young tearaways who commit crimes in their neighbourhoods are to be electronically tagged; the courts would have the power to impose curfews and to tag young offenders, so that they stay at home and off the streets. I could visualise a mum and dad who might not be so enthusiastic about finding themselves on a Saturday evening in the company of a couple of tagged lads, restless after drinking their second or third can of lager. Those parents might find that they had trouble in their own home.

There must be further examination of how to curb the bitterness in some young people that arises because they do not have the job that they desire or cannot manage on the money that they are getting from social services—*[Interruption.]* Who is trying to help me?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman. Although the themes of the debate are broad, his remarks should relate to education and local government. I am not sure how his last comments do so. Perhaps he will enlighten me.

Sir James Hill: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to explain that all those matters revolve one on another.

Thuggery on council estates will not stray past a playground. Youngsters stay at school until the age of 16. Boys and girls seem to be much more developed these days. Unless there are sufficient facilities in an urban conurbation, youngsters turn to a certain amount of what I call thuggery. That could be one reason for a boy of 10 being able to terrify a whole school. That seems incredible to me, but that is the way in which things have developed over many years. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was brave even to hint at some sort of corporal punishment. I believe that the public are almost unanimous in thinking that some restrictions, discipline and punishment must return—and that things must not continue to stray as they have.

8.6 pm

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): The Gracious Speech makes this commitment:

> "In Northern Ireland, my Government's priority will be to maintain progress towards peace, prosperity and reconciliation, based on a comprehensive political settlement commanding widespread support."

That statement should be welcomed across Northern Ireland, but we fear that it is just more talk, and that no action is likely to follow that takes into account the wishes of the people who choose to live in Northern Ireland and who intend to continue living there.

In 1993, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley) was the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland. He had this to say in the consultative document that reviewed education administration, which was published at the time:

> "There are few, if any, other areas of day to day life in Northern Ireland where churchmen and laymen, both from the main traditions, meet so regularly and work together so constructively. It is important that we preserve and build upon this co-operation and seek to extend and strengthen these links and not weaken them."

I could identify with that fine tribute from my own experience, having served on an education board as a member, vice-chairman and chairman, and chairman of the finance committee. In fact, I have met no one in Northern Ireland who does not long for peace, prosperity and reconciliation. Nor have I met anyone who disagrees with the need for a comprehensive review of all aspects of education administration, including a review of the role of the education and library boards, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

The present Minister with responsibility for education in Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), in his statement of 25 June 1996 on a review of education administration in Northern Ireland, signalled the strongest attempt yet by the Government to replace the existing area board structure in Northern Ireland. Previous attempts to impose change have been successfully repulsed by strong argument, backed by political and community opposition.

The announcement by the Minister of State and the publishing of draft legislation on board restructuring have given the clearest sign yet that our previous analyses of the situation have proved correct—that the Department of Education has always wanted a three-board structure, that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is a sacred cow and must be left out of any review and that the Department of Education will not be part of any review.

So far, the review exercise has been the opposite of what the right hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes desired when he was Northern Ireland Education Minister.

[Mr. Roy Beggs]

The Department of Education has continually ignored the wishes of the Northern Ireland population. The usual arguments about changed roles and over-administration in boards are repeated and, although those arguments have been shown to be a distortion of the truth, repeated again.

The Northern Ireland Forum Education Committee has considered the position and, in its interim report, highlighted the fact that there are no educational, social or economic reasons for the type of review of education administration that is proposed. The Northern Ireland education permanent secretary accepted, during his visit to the Northern Ireland Forum, that much more than 90 per cent. of those who responded during the consultation exercise wished any revised system to be built round the five-board structure.

All the political parties in Northern Ireland had expressed the view that the current five-board structure should remain until a legislative assembly was established. All the political parties representing Northern Ireland in the House of Commons deplore the decision by the Minister of State to destroy the existing five-board structure. All the trade unions, including Unison representatives, whom I met this morning, support the retention of a five-board structure.

I am sorry to have to say that there has been an arrogant disregard for the expressed wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. All borough and district councils in the North Eastern education and library board area, including councils in my constituency, still support the continuance of the North Eastern education and library board in its present configuration. That reflects the views of district and borough councils in other education and library board areas in Northern Ireland.

The Department has continually provided misinformation, if not false information, throughout the review exercise, in a bid to confuse. In 1992, a claim was made that Northern Ireland was over-administered. Research showed that the five Northern Ireland education and library boards were in the top half of all local education authorities in the United Kingdom by size. Since reorganisation, 80 more local education authorities have been created in England, 15 more in Wales and 20 more in Scotland, yet there is a determined attempt to reduce the five that have served Northern Ireland so well to three.

It is important that there should be parity and consistency of treatment within the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is often compared with Yorkshire. In Yorkshire, the number of local education authorities has increased to 13 since reorganisation. Hundreds of councillors and an increased number of education officers are now involved in education administration. Yet it is proposed to reduce our five area boards in Northern Ireland to three.

In 1995, it was announced that savings of £2 million would be achieved in a four-board structure. That announcement was based partly on inaccurate figures. In 1995, we were told that regionalisation of services would save £1 million. Working parties comprising Department of Education officials and area board officers set to work. They showed, after their analysis, that regionalisation would cost £1.2 million more.

In 1996, it is claimed that regionalising purchasing, architectural services and student awards will achieve considerable savings. The evidence produced is to the contrary. In fact, savings of only £38,000 in purchasing could be made. However, it would cost £380,000 extra to regionalise architectural services. It would cost £622,000 to regionalise student loans under a lead board in Northern Ireland.

In 1996, we have been told that the current review proposals will enhance political representation from 40 per cent. to 48 per cent. It has taken a very long time to move towards making matters more democratic in Northern Ireland. We do not need a complete restructuring of the boards to increase the number of elected representatives who serve on them.

However, the facts are as follows. With the new proposals, a new south eastern board would have eight fewer district councillors than the current Belfast and South Eastern education and library board, and each councillor on that new board, if it ever came into being, would be expected to represent twice as many constituents as councillors currently do.

Since 1989, the Department of Education has been responsible for significant additional expenditure on education administration in the system by establishing the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. Since 1990, those organisations have cost an additional £20 million to administer.

Further education incorporation in Northern Ireland has also resulted in significant additional expenditure. The Department of Education has now allocated £500,000 so that those new colleges can advertise for finance officers, at more than £30,000 per year, to do the work that our education and library boards have done efficiently at minimum cost.

Mr. Don Foster: Did not the hon. Gentleman find it incredibly ironic that when the proposals were being developed about a year ago, local papers in Northern Ireland were saying that Northern Ireland would learn from the experiences in the rest of the United Kingdom? The experiences of further education colleges on this side of the water have been disastrous, with one in eight now moving towards bankruptcy.

Mr. Beggs: I thank the hon. Gentleman. We in Northern Ireland do not consider that we have anything to learn from the blunders made over here. We should much prefer to be left to manage our own affairs, because we can make them work.

The boards in Northern Ireland have been prohibited from addressing their accommodation needs, yet the Department of Education appears to be embarking on a major capital expansion at its headquarters in Bangor, County Down. The Minister's proposals are based on seriously flawed information and advice, which some of us suspect to have been tailored by civil servants to help achieve their agenda. If the Minister refuses to listen to the hard, accurate fact that no savings can be obtained, only chaos in education can be created where there has been stability. His three-board option would be divisive and sectarian and could destroy the consensus and harmonious working relationships that have stood the test of troubled times.

The Northern Ireland Forum Education Committee has been snubbed. It received 44 submissions, heard 24 hours of oral submissions and produced a report within three weeks, but the Minister dumped the report in the bin and stubbornly published his own proposals immediately.

In his speech following the publication of the draft order, the Minister said that he would consider alternative structures. Alternative structures much better than those that have been offered will be produced. If broad consensus is achieved in Northern Ireland, will the Minister accept the alternative proposals? Will he agree to set aside the draft order and give serious consideration to the alternatives? Will he accept that any review of education administration in Northern Ireland must be total? Will he accept that the majority of people in Northern Ireland want any revised education administration system to be built around the five existing boards? Positive responses to those questions will give confidence in Northern Ireland that the Minister is open to persuasion by those whose children are likely to be most affected by any change that he may impose.

Has the Minister considered the benefits that may flow from the amalgamation of the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department of Economic Development? After all, education and employment go hand in hand here. Why not in Northern Ireland? I genuinely want to believe that the Minister with responsibility for education in Northern Ireland wants to do what is best for education in Northern Ireland. However, he must work with, not against, the people of Northern Ireland. He should set aside the draft legislation on education administration. He should co-operate with those of us who seek to promote peace, reconciliation and prosperity and who want to create an economy with a well-trained, educated work force and an education system that continues to meet the needs of society in Northern Ireland for the present and for the future.

A satisfactory resolution of the future pattern of education administration in Northern Ireland should be given the highest priority. The Minister and Northern Ireland Office civil servants should pay heed to the advice offered to them.

That issue overshadows all the pressure and stress on principals and school governors—pressure to balance budgets; pressure to cope with inadequate funding; and pressure to deal with growing concern as class sizes increase, because the only way to make a significant saving in a school is to make a teacher redundant. Additional funding is needed in the Northern Ireland education budget. We have too many caravan parks of mobile classrooms. There is an urgent need for them to be replaced with permanent accommodation. There should be enough money in the budget to enable schools to provide the books and equipment to which all children should have access. Above all, there must be an urgent reappraisal of the formula for funding each pupil.

In addition to the matters referred to in the Labour party's amendment, Her Majesty's Government have undoubtedly done immense damage to the stability and security of the education service in Northern Ireland through the stubborn decision of the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland to destroy five successful area boards that have served Northern Ireland so well. It is therefore impossible for the Ulster Unionist party to support Her Majesty's Government's education policy.

8.26 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I understand that tonight's debate is on education and local government. I do not know how far hon. Members understand local government in Northern Ireland. If they heard the experiences of local councillors, I am sure that they would be shocked by their lack of powers and by the forcing of things on the people of Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Office.

We have a crisis in education in our province such as we have never seen before. Our school system was all shaken up by a former Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Peterborough (Dr. Mawhinney), who rammed down our throats in this House a book in the form of an Order in Council. We could not have read it in the three hours that we had to debate it.

Now another Order in Council is to be rammed through the House that will result in every school in Northern Ireland being upset again. The principals, the teachers, the parents and the scholars have been upset. The whole education system has been rehashed, but not to the benefit of the pupils, their parents, their teachers or those responsible for education. It is timely that we should have the opportunity tonight to highlight what the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland is up to.

It is strange that the Minister does not think that his Department should be looked at. He will not allow the eye of scrutiny to look into his Department. He is not prepared to have a thorough and proper reform of the education system. That reform should start in the Northern Ireland Department of Education, which must be scrutinised by those who can call it to account. Every Department in Westminster can come under scrutiny, but the Departments in Northern Ireland cannot because we do not have the machinery to undertake that task.

The Minister, presiding over his Department, looked at the education system and decided that he would do something about it. His first proposal was for four boards and then he decided to reduce it to three. He did not think out his proposals properly—if he had, he would never have made the first proposal. He removed that proposal from the table and said that he wanted to listen to the people of Northern Ireland. They have now spoken. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) knows that nine councils in his area joined with the teachers union, with other organisations that have an interest in schooling, with parents and local authorities to reach a unanimous decision. That consensus extended throughout the Province.

The Minister received a petition from the Western board signed by tens of thousands of people. What did he do with that petition? He put it in his wastepaper basket, although he had called upon us to make representations so that the views of the people could be heard.

I have been involved in Northern Ireland politics and have sat in this House for 26 years, and I have never seen such unity before. The Social Democratic and Labour party, whose members do not sit on the forum, joined the forum deputation to the Minister to express anxiety at what was occurring. Roman Catholics, Protestants and atheists like the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton), who said that he did not want any standards—I felt like going to him and saying, "Thou shalt not steal: give me your money. I shall be quite happy to take it"—were united in their views.

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

Opposition Front Benchers, who travel to Northern Ireland from time to time, knew that there was unity. The Labour spokesman for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Redcar (Ms Mowlam), knew that there was unity on that issue: we opposed the destruction of the boards. However, the Minister went ahead with his plans.

Rev. William McCrea (Mid–Ulster): Will my hon. Friend confirm that Her Majesty's Government are seeking, through political discussions, a way forward in the political affairs of Northern Ireland? This issue has united opinion in the Province across the political spectrum. It is the first opportunity for the Government to show that they will listen to a united expression of opinion, yet they have closed their ears. Is it not time for the Government to listen to an opinion that is expressed by all political parties in the Province?

Rev. Ian Paisley: It is amazing, given the divide in Northern Ireland politics. The SDLP does not attend the forum, but its members who serve on the boards were prepared to go before the forum to give their opinion, to bear testimony to that opinion and to take the united opinion to the Minister. As the hon. Member for East Antrim has said, the Minister did not wait to read the report: he destroyed it completely and made a quick judgment.

The Minister is not so quick to handle other matters. We have guns in Northern Ireland; there are arsenals of arms and weaponry in Northern Ireland. What is happening to them? The Minister has put it on the long finger; he does not break into a sweat over that issue. He does not hurry to introduce a policy that will bring in those guns. Let no one think that there is peace in Northern Ireland. Today, another leading figure was slain as a result of internecine terrorist activity among the so-called loyalist paramilitaries. While that goes on, the Minister is running fleet of foot to destroy our education system. He does not have time to run after those who are destroying our country.

The teaching community in Northern Ireland has endured the burden and the heat of the day. It is not easy to be a teacher in Northern Ireland. Schools and parents have been subject to attack. This is an unfeeling Minister. I took deputation after deputation to him, but he would not listen. He could not answer our arguments—he did not want to. When I put points to him, he replied, "Well, you'll still have your opinion when you leave and I'll have mine". I said, "We do not want that. We have come to argue with you to persuade you to change your mind," but he would not be persuaded, as he was intent upon his course of action.

What will happen if the people say no? What will happen if those who man the boards, the teaching community of Northern Ireland and the parents and children say no? The Unionists, Nationalists, Republicans, Ribbonmen, Hibernians, Orangemen, Arch-Purplemen, Blackmen and apprentice boys of Londonderry are absolutely united across the board. The Government should heed the words of all the politicians of Northern Ireland and pull back from this calamity. They must reconsider the matter.

The Government are good at pulling back—perhaps when they should not have done so. This time, the Government could pull back to their credit, because I do not see how the people of Northern Ireland will take it on the chin. The House should know the unity that has been forged on this matter. The personnel of the boards would be scattered across the Province, sending people as far as North Antrim and Omagh, in order to bring the organisation together. It is the height of madness. I trust that someone in government will tell the right hon. Gentleman to think again.

Rev. William McCrea: Today the Prime Minister intervened to ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to pull back on caning in schools. He could surely intervene in Northern Ireland and ask the Minister to pull back on the destruction of the boards.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I think that the Prime Minister should cane the Minister—a good sharp rap on his wrists would do him good. The situation is grievous and I cannot adequately convey to the House people's anxiety. Some of our schools are a disgrace—one would think that they were caravan parks as they consist simply of outbuildings. The time has come for the Government to rethink the matter.

I hope that Opposition Members will take on board the fact that Northern Ireland Members are not happy about having an Order in Council thrust quickly through. The matter needs careful deliberation and examination. We do not want another "Mawhinney saga", as it was called in Northern Ireland, with a huge book of legislation being rushed through the House.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said that what we are being asked to accept did not work on this side of the water—so how will it work in Northern Ireland? I make a plea to the House tonight to put pressure on the Minister to think again before he proceeds down the road of educational disaster in Northern Ireland.

8.39 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion and Pembroke, North): I have listened with great interest to the debate about the situation in Northern Ireland and it is clear that there is a problem of democratic accountability there. There is also a problem of democratic accountability in Wales, particularly in relation to the Bill that we shall discuss tomorrow and the White Paper that was published some months ago.

It was claimed in the Gracious Speech that the legislation would widen choice and diversity and raise standards in schools. In Wales, it will do no such thing; it will certainly not raise standards, although it may add a bit of diversity at the margins, and it will reduce choice for pupils and for families. I can confidently assert that all the themes of the White Paper, "Self-Government for Schools"—the encouragement of grant-maintained status, the extension of selection, the development of grammar schools, the weakening of the role of local education authorities and the encouragement of the private sector—are unacceptable to the vast majority of people in Wales, including the 25 to 30 per cent. who regularly vote Conservative.

It would be interesting to know how many, if any, favourable responses there were to the Welsh Office consultation. I have seen the responses from my own constituency and I dare say that the Government would not be surprised to hear that the local county council is

unsympathetic to the White Paper and condemns its proposals. The Government would probably say that that was because the local authority had a vested interest in the status quo, but the Ceredigion Federation of Governing Bodies, which represents schools and parents, is equally condemnatory and even more direct in its language.

The rejection in Wales of the whole enterprise of grant-maintained status since 1988 has been overwhelming. We have 17 grant-maintained schools in Wales out of a total of 2,088 schools—0.8 per cent—after eight years of blandishments and incentives and constrained local authority funding. The few parental ballots that have been conducted recently resulted in overwhelming rejection; yet the single chapter on Wales in the White Paper pursues the laughable illusion that at some stage there might be a case for establishing a schools funding council for Wales, just to administer the 17 grant-maintained schools.

The White Paper mentions extending selection. If that were implemented in Ceredigion, for example, it would reduce choice and oblige rejected pupils to travel every day the 10 or even 16 miles to the nearest comprehensive that would take them; the transport costs would have serious implications for the local authority, which is already strapped for cash. According to the map in the White Paper, there is not a single grammar school in the public sector in Wales.

The White Paper suggests that there should be a compulsory delegation of 95 per cent. of the local education budget to schools. I understand that the Government are now thinking again about that, but it is worth emphasising that in Wales the delegation is 95 per cent., compared with 90 per cent. in England. That reflects not Welsh preferences but Welsh Office preferences, which is an altogether different matter.

In a survey conducted by Ceredigion county council of 77 primary schools in the area, only 5 per cent. said that they would welcome an increase in delegated funding. Indeed, the evidence is that the great majority would like to see the process at least partially reversed. The Ceredigion Federation of Governing Bodies says that head teachers who have to work full time in small schools—schools with as few as three teachers—cannot give additional time to more and more administration without the fundamental task of ministering to the academic, social, physical and emotional needs of their pupils suffering. So much for raising educational standards by giving schools more so-called freedom—a freedom that they do not want.

My strong hunch is that attitudes would be similar throughout rural Wales—most of Wales is rural and we have a pattern of widely dispersed small rural schools—and in the greater part of urban Wales. There is a strong case for allowing greater flexibility and, in some circumstances, less delegation, in consultation between schools and local education authorities.

On the encouragement of the private sector in schools, I believe that the doubling of funds for the assisted places scheme would be regarded as a misuse of scarce funds—that has already been discussed effectively in this debate—and that private sponsorship would be regarded as entirely inappropriate, if not repugnant.

In a host of ways, educational and social traditions in Wales are radically different from those in England. In Wales, we have an infinitely less class-conscious, class-oriented society. There is a strong and pervasive sense that it is morally unacceptable for educational success for the privileged few to be bought at the expense of the many. Social solidarity remains a bedrock value in Wales, despite all the traumatic changes that have taken place in various aspects of life over the past 20, 30 or even 50 years.

The position of private schools in England and in Wales illustrates well the difference between the two countries. According to the White Paper, in the whole of Wales only six independent schools are in the assisted places scheme and about 2 per cent. of Welsh children attend private schools; in England the figure is 10 per cent.

As the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Walden) said earlier, the English elite is educated in an entirely different sector from the mass of the population. He regards that class divide as a fundamental problem that needs to be solved—a social fracture, one might say, that needs to be healed—and advocates the introduction of selection in state schools as a means of enticing private schools into the public sector. I do not agree with his approach, but I do not question the sincerity of his motives or the intractability of the problem with which he is grappling. The important point for me is that in Wales it is not a problem; by and large, the Welsh elite send their children to comprehensive schools. What they want is for standards to rise in those public sector schools, for their children and for everyone else's. The great majority of the people in Wales will regard the proposals in the White Paper with a mixture of irritation and exasperation, if not something even stronger—and they include the 25 per cent. of Welsh people who vote Tory from time to time.

The proposals come from an English perspective and they are designed for English priorities, but I do not think that they are good for England. It is seriously inefficient to try to run two parallel public sector school systems—the local education authority system and the grant-maintained system—in the hope that one will gobble up the other. We know that that is the theory, because that is what the former Secretary of State used to tell us: we were told that gradually we would move to all schools being grant-maintained. We are now told that the most enterprising and efficient schools will become grant-maintained and that the rest will remain in the LEA sector. That is a grossly inefficient approach to running a public sector education system.

There is a real danger that through further extending selection we shall see created a seriously divided and dysfunctional society. It is wrong that Wales, where no democratic support exists for the Government's proposals, must be dragged along the same route. Why should we? Scotland is not obliged to conform to the model. The proposed Bill will not apply to Scotland. Why should Wales be obliged to conform? Our education and social traditions are every bit as distinctive as those of Scotland, if not more so in many ways.

It is not only a matter of being exempted from irrelevant and damaging legislation. I accept that the education system in Wales is not without its deficiencies, and some of them are serious. At the same time, much of education in Wales is excellent. Examination results over large areas of Wales show that clearly. They are excellent, that is, in British terms. That is not the same as saying that they are excellent in terms of international comparisons.

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

There is under-performance in significant parts of Wales. We have been guilty of complacency and, in our own way in the past, of emphasising the success of the upwardly and outwardly mobile at the expense of the less academic. We have had our own unhealthy elitism within our public sector schools, including comprehensive schools. We do not want merely to be exempted; we want to be more positive than that. That being so, how are we to raise education standards? How are we to prepare Wales for the challenge of a rapidly changing world?

As the proposed Bill passes through the House, there will be an opportunity to outline my party's proposals. I shall take every opportunity to do so, relevant as they are to specific conditions in Wales. Partnership and collaboration are the key principles, not competition. There should be partnership between school and school. There must be partnership between school and local authority. They should agree, for example, on a sensible and practical degree of delegated responsibility.

There should be partnership between teacher and teacher in sharing experience and good practice, not guarding them like trade secrets, which is what teachers find themselves obliged to do these days. That is what they tell me. There should be collaboration and co-operation between schools and colleges of further education instead of the damaging competition and duplication that takes place in the 16-plus sector.

At the heart of the system that my party would advocate would be a national system for quality assurance, integrating assessment, examination, inspection and support. In other words we would combine in one organisation the functions of the Curriculum Council for Wales, the examining body for Wales, the inspectorate and the current advisory services of local authorities. Wales happens to be both large enough and small enough to make crucial provision possible at an all-Wales level.

We must examine carefully the separation between inspection and support. Industry would not countenance such separation, with the punitive five-yearly inspections that schools have to undergo. The effect on teacher morale of the inspections is serious. That is true even in Wales, where we have a more sensitive and less aggressive regime than that in England. I understand that there are few other countries where inspection and support are separated in such a way.

The system that I have outlined would be adequately resourced. There would not be the crazy competitiveness that the Government so fanatically pursue, leading to the sort of targets listed in the sixth paragraph of the White Paper, which might be described as the Welsh afterthought.

How could we create such a system in Wales, a system that would work and deliver the desired results for us? The House knows my party's thinking. We think that there should be democratic structures in Wales that have the necessary powers.

I conclude by asking the Labour party a question. I note that no shadow spokesman for Wales is on the Opposition Front Bench. I understand, of course, that we are all short of time. It says something about our system of government, however, that when discussing a White Paper and legislative proposals that will bear on Wales and could have far-reaching effects on it, there is only one spokesman on the Opposition Front Bench to represent Wales. How would a Labour Government create the education system for Wales that I have described? How would they enable the creation of an education system of which Wales could be proud? We know that the Labour party hopes to form the next Government. Could its proposed non-legislative assembly introduce such a system? I think not.

If that is so, will Labour allow separate legislation for Wales in this place, which Scotland now enjoys, after the general election? Will Labour base any such legislation on proposals emanating from Wales that bear on Welsh priorities? What mechanisms would a Labour Government have to enable that to happen? We need answers to these questions as a matter of urgency, given the coming debate on democratic devolution in Wales that will take place over the next year or more.

I leave the House with a final question. What happens if, following a five-year Labour Government, the Tories return to power committed, as they might well be, to complete the process of which their White Paper is a part? We all understand that the process is about making selection the norm. It is also about strongly developing the private sector in education. What will happen if a Tory Government return to power in the early 21st century committed to completing the process? What will Wales do then, equipped with no more than Labour's non-legislative assembly? That is the question.

Dr. Hampson: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not an old convention of the House as a debating chamber that Members who are called should, as a matter of respect to their colleagues, be here for the opening speeches? Some of us have been here now for five hours while others have not.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): It is a courtesy for all hon. Members to listen to the opening and closing speeches. The time spent in the Chamber is also relevant to whether an hon. Member is called.

8.58 pm

Sir Peter Fry (Wellingborough): I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North–West (Dr. Hampson) is not referring to me. I was present during the first two or three hours of the debate and I have been sitting here for more than two hours since. I hope that there are others who have spoken to whom his strictures apply.

I do not want to wander into the byways followed by some Opposition Members, but there is one point that I must make. I listened to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) on television today and again this afternoon and he seemed to claim that the Government were responsible for the enormous increase in one-parent families. That is one of the most disgraceful charges that I have heard. All sections of society have been responsible for the increase in the number of one-parent families, including the parliamentary Labour party, so I do not know how any politician has the gall to make such a comment.

I welcome the measures in the Gracious Speech, particularly those in relation to education and local government as far as they go. With regard to education, many of us are particularly pleased that discipline is to be

strengthened, with after-school detentions and temporary suspensions. However, as has been said, we must address the problem of the education of those who are suspended or excluded from school. But the Government are rightly recognising that teachers now provide the kind of support that is being proposed.

The current moral crusade is laudable and must be supported, but we must accept that a substantial minority in our society cause many problems. For example, I was told of a five-year-old boy in my county whose language at school was disgraceful, using words which the head teacher did not even know existed. Eventually, in desperation she called him into her study and threatened that if he continued to talk in such a way she would have to scrub his mouth out—knowing full well that she would be prosecuted if she attempted that. The five-year-old thought for a moment and then said, "Well, Miss, I won't use them words at school, but please can I carry on using them at home?"

That goes to the nub of the problem facing many of our teachers in schools today. Too many parents do not support teachers in the way that they should, particularly when teachers discipline their children. Yet too many of those same parents expect schools and teachers to perform tasks that are really the responsibility of the family.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is to be congratulated, not just on the greater flexibility in education that she is offering to grant-maintained schools, but on her proposals for increased discipline. I agree with what she said about corporal punishment. I am only sorry that more of her Cabinet colleagues do not share the same view. We have recently had support for a degree of corporal punishment from a most unlikely source—the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less, so perhaps he cannot always be wrong.

My constituency has, in its main town, four secondary schools, three of which are grant-maintained and successful, but all sniped at by the leadership of the local county council. The chairman of the education committee believes that grant-maintained schools should be abolished and brought back under LEA control. It is proposed that the only secondary school in the town controlled by the LEA, the John Lee school, should be closed because it cannot attract sufficient pupils. That is the result of the local authority's administration of one secondary school in Wellingborough.

The anticipated demand for secondary school places next year will be 720 but, as a result of the wonderful decision to close one school, only 607 places will be available. So much for socialist management and its attitude to local schools. Instead of apologising for the mess that it has made, the LEA's only response is to blame the grant-maintained schools for their success and, by implication, the parents who have chosen to send their children there. Therefore, the possibility that the one school controlled by the local education authority will be closed should be re-examined.

It would be wrong if I suggested that Northamptonshire had no education problems. I carried out a survey of the schools in the county and discovered that, without the more generous help that we had last year, some 36 out of the 48 schools in the Wellingborough constituency would have used up all their reserves. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was able to obtain an extra £12 million for us, but the reserves are now low and need to be replenished for the essential expenditure that has been deferred, because in the medium and long term that expenditure has to be made.

My plea today is for extra help for my county. We have to make that plea because our county's standard spending assessment seems to have been reduced more than that of many other counties. For example, in the current year, our SSA is £46 per primary pupil less than the county average, for secondary pupils it is £61 less and for post-16 students it is £76 less. That is unfortunate, but when we compare ourselves with the adjoining county of Bedfordshire we find that the gap is £131 for primary schools, £178 for secondary schools and £158 for post-16 education. Why has that disparity arisen? It is largely because the adjoining county benefits from the current area cost adjustment scheme. It is manifestly unfair that adjoining counties should have such large discrepancies in the money given to them.

I was delighted, therefore, when Ministers in the Department of the Environment agreed to set up an investigation into the area cost adjustment, and the results have recently been published. If Professor Elliot's proposals were implemented, they would aid counties such as Northamptonshire, which seems to have been underfunded recently. His proposals are based on a more credible model of employee behaviour and employer response; they reflect the fact that staffing costs differ throughout the country, even between counties in the south-east; and they are based on more comprehensive and reliable data than the present system.

Having commissioned the Elliot report, why do the Government appear to be hesitating? It is because the local authority organisations, all controlled by the Labour party, object to any change and would rather perpetuate an unfair system than move towards the fair society that they are so fond of spouting about.

I suggest to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration that the time has come to accept the advice of the Elliot committee and to implement its proposals. They could be implemented immediately, with some transitional relief for those counties which might lose out. At the least, we should move toward the Elliot proposals over some years. One of those alternatives is desperately needed, not just by my county but by others, such as Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, which have suffered similarly. It is time for the Government to show that they will be as courageous in implementing change in the area cost adjustment as they are in education.

Although I am critical of the spending priorities of Northamptonshire county council, I accept that it has problems, not just with education but with social services. Of course it could manage its affairs differently, but I believe that any political administration in Northampton would need a better deal. That is why I am sorry that there has been no mention of a change in the area cost adjustment apportionment. I hope that we shall have a helpful and constructive statement from Ministers some time in the next few weeks.

The Government have been wise in their proposals in the Queen's Speech, especially those to help rural shops and to improve school discipline, but for my constituents—and also for yours, I suspect, Mr. Deputy Speaker—the Government would be wise to take the

[Sir Peter Fry]

advice of the report that they commissioned and to make the changes in the area cost adjustment that we so desperately need.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I take it that I am not the only Member who has not been called in today's debate. Last night the 10-minute rule applied. May I take it that Members who were on the list but were not called because they were not in the Chamber will receive a rebuke from the Chair for their discourtesy to the House yesterday? Perhaps that is why the 10-minute rule was not applied today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will do well not to try to second-guess what the Chair is doing.

9.10 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I am glad that the Secretary of State for the Environment has graced us with his presence, albeit late in the day. The words "moral crusade" have been mentioned once or twice during the debate, and no moral crusade would be complete without a man who was once responsible for a publication called "Pulpit Monthly".

Northern Ireland Members are not present, but I undertake to draw to the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Ms Mowlam) their comments about Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State has started yapping, now that he has arrived. To keep him quiet, may I tell him that the Bill affecting rural areas, which I understand may be debated next week, is generally welcomed by the Opposition?

Whatever the merits or shortcomings of the speeches made in tonight's debate, there is no denying that they reflect immense public concern about the state of our country—what might be called the feel-bad factor. Speeches over the past few days have revealed some of the things about which people feel bad: crime and the fear of crime; unemployment and the fear of losing a job; not being able to afford a mortgage or the rent; not having anywhere decent to live; having to suffer from air pollution; wondering whether it will be possible to get treatment in the local hospital; trying to work for a living but not being paid a living wage; not being able to live on their pension; fretting about the future of their children and grandchildren.

Those and other practical matters are major sources of concern to people all over the country. Looming over them all is the feeling that Britain is not as decent a place as it once was, and that it is getting worse. On that, most speakers in the debates have been agreed. The differences arise as to why our country has got into such a state and what we must do to make it decent again.

According to some of the pundits, the problems are all the fault of schools, children, teachers, and, most recently, parents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) made clear, the Labour party wants everyone's children to get a good start in life. We recognise the importance of good teachers, and want to encourage them. We recognise the even more crucial importance of parents and the positive or negative contribution they can make to the education of their own and other people's children.

Clearly, what goes on in schools influences society in general, but it is equally true that what goes on in society influences what happens in schools. What people do outside the schools can make it easier or harder for children to learn, for teachers to teach and for parents to bring up their children. Let there be no mistake: at present all three groups have a hard job. It is hard for children, teachers and parents—much harder than writing an editorial, mouthing off on "Newsnight" or even making a speech in the House of Commons.

Let us consider just one of the problems faced by children, parents and teachers, a problem over which they have little control and for which, generally, they are not responsible: drugs. Drugs are being peddled to children not only in every town and city, but now in many villages. It is not the fault of children, teachers or parents that Governments the world over have failed to put enough effort into stopping international trafficking in drugs. It is not the fault of parents or teachers that financial institutions switch the drug barons' money around the world in a virtually untraceable electronic maze.

It is not the fault of parents that, instead of combating the drugs menace, some countries' secret services—in particular, the United States Central Intelligence Agency—have trafficked in drugs themselves. The flood of drugs into our country is not the fault of teachers or parents, but they and the police must cope with the consequences. Drugs are just one of the problems that children and parents face.

Nearly everybody tries to get their children to grow up knowing the difference between right and wrong, good and bad.

Mr. Pawsey: Why do they grow up to vote Labour, then?

Mr. Dobson: Nearly everyone wants his child to be well behaved, not to be greedy, not to steal—

Mr. Pawsey: Why do they—

Mr. Dobson: —not to interrupt—not to lie, not to be violent, to show concern for others, to control their temper and not to be rude. In other words, most parents want their children to adopt the values and standards that we like to think are our own. To achieve this, we must put more effort into bringing up and educating our children.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Sir P. Fry) took up so much time that I cannot give way.

We cannot dump the responsibility for bringing up children on to schools, teachers and parents. They influence children, but they and the children are in turn influenced by what is happening in society as a whole.

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: Many Conservative Members will agree that it is hard for parents and teachers to promote decent values in their children when, every day, television, radio, newspapers, comics and videos are doing just the opposite. Television is the most powerful instrument of communication in the history of humankind, but is it

being used to educate and to promote high standards? Far from it. As everyone in the House knows, some of the programmes made for children are among the worst dross ever produced.

The apologists for television try to tell us that their output does not affect the behaviour of children, but they are trying to raise advertising revenue by emphasising that advertising Levi jeans on television increased their sale fifteenfold and advertising Pepperami sausage pushed up sales by 55 per cent. within a month. An advertisement for Tango drinks that involved clouting children around the ear led to copycat incidents the next day in a thousand schools around the country. Of course television affects the behaviour of children, and it is time people in television grew up and accepted their responsibility, because they are quick enough to criticise everybody else.

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: The question of examples goes further and deeper than that. One good example is worth a thousand sermons. Children notice what happens in the grown-up world, and they see what is rewarded and what goes unpunished. Dad tells little Johnny not to tell lies, but he is undermined when Johnny hears that Ministers of the Crown have lied to the House of Commons and got away with it. Mum punishes little Gillian for sneaking a pound from her purse, but she switches on the television to see that a City fraudster has avoided punishment for taking millions of pounds by a plea bargain to save the taxpayer the cost of bringing him to trial for his thieving.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Hon. Members: Go on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman who has the Floor will not give way, and the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) should not be tempted by those Opposition Members who are inviting him to intervene.

Mr. Dobson: Let us look at sport. Sport can be healthy and entertaining, and can promote sporting behaviour—hence the expression, "Be a sport," which is regarded as a good thing. Sport can promote teamwork and loyalty, but, far too often, the heroes of young people are obsessed with money and their teams regularly change their strips to make money from merchandising rather than from sport. Entire sports in this country have been sold out to the highest bidder, and the Atlanta Olympic games were sacrificed on the tacky altar of their sponsors. Such bad examples are commonplace, and are just a part of the overall problem.

For the past 17 years, we have had a Government who have preached—and, to be fair, practised—the creed of greed. They have said, "Everybody should look after number one"; that "We should be selfish"; that "Being competitive is natural" and that "Caring for other people is for wimps."

All that has had an effect on children. It has made it harder for teachers and parents to instil decent values into children. They have had to row against the fashionable tide. Some people denounce political correctness—often rightly—but they never denounced it in the 1980s, when the prevailing political correctness was the Tory creed, "Be greedy."

Let us not accept any Tory attempts to blame their predecessors in government—not one child at school today was at school under a Labour Government. The present generation of children is sometimes described as Thatcher's children, but that is not fair. As a result of the efforts of their parents and teachers, the vast majority of children are pretty good, pretty well behaved and pretty hard-working, and they are doing their best in a difficult and complex world. Yet the Tories continue to blame parents, teachers and schools.

The Government have introduced a market-based model for schools in each locality. The theory is that schools should compete against one another and the most successful will prosper and expand—but where there are winners, there are bound to be losers, and, under the Tory market forces model, the least successful schools will contract and go to the wall. Then the Tories and the Tory newspapers will make a great song and dance about the shortcomings of everybody but themselves and their policies.

Some schools get in trouble for no good reason and need to be sorted out or closed, but others simply cannot compete. Those include the schools that, as some of my hon. Friends pointed out, have to take the troublemakers successful schools get shot of so as to keep up their success rate, or the children successful schools interviewed and turned down.

It is no use criticising schools in badly off areas for not doing as well as schools in more prosperous areas. Schools in poorer areas certainly should do better, and, for our country's sake, must do better. Many have not been sufficiently ambitious in the past. Their location and intake are not an excuse for not trying, but they are often an explanation for not doing well.

The Department for Education and Employment publishes figures showing the proportion of children achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A to C as a measure of success. The Department also publishes figures showing the proportion of children taking free school meals as a measure of deprivation. When those figures are brought together, they reveal the vast gap between well-off areas and deprived areas.

The national average for free school meal take-up is 18 per cent., but it is only 10 per cent. in the 10 education authorities with the best examination results. In the 10 education authorities with the worst examination results, the average take-up of free school meals is a staggering 51 per cent.—nearly three times the national average, and five times the figure for the most successful areas. On that evidence alone, it is impossible to argue that deprivation does not make it much harder for a child to succeed.

That reveals another aspect of Government policy that militates against parents' efforts to ensure that their children do well at schools—the growing gap between rich and poor. As was spelt out in the recent Rowntree report, the gap between rich and poor is wider now than at any time in the 20th century. This Government have rewarded the rich and taken money from the poor.

Another conclusion of the Rowntree report was that there was a widening income gap between rich areas and poor areas, so, unless something is done, we can expect the need for free school meals to continue to rise in poor areas and fall in rich areas. Equally, without special measures to compensate, we can expect the gap in educational performance between rich areas and poor areas to grow rather than diminish.

[Mr. Dobson]

Labour is determined to diminish that gap, using the measures outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Brightside. Poverty is an educational handicap, however, so those educational measures will have to be augmented by a parallel effort to attack the multiple sources of deprivation that affect poor areas. Deprived areas do not suffer from one or two individual problems—they suffer from a combination of problems. The Queen's Speech does not even mention most of them, let alone propose solutions. Deprived areas have high levels of unemployment, and often very high levels of youth unemployment. Many of the people who have work are badly paid. As a result of both of those factors, many families have a poor diet.

Air pollution is more commonplace in deprived areas. Crime is high in deprived areas. All these things make people ill, and make children ill prepared to learn. In badly off, rundown areas infant mortality rates are higher and babies' birth rates are lower; people are less healthy, and they die sooner. When we talk airily about the quality of life, we sometimes lose sight of the basic fact that the biggest difference in quality of life is the stark contrast between being alive and being dead; that, if people live in a poor area, they will die sooner.

The quality of health care, which is not in any way the responsibility of Labour local authorities, is often lower in deprived areas, so that, when people fall ill and need treatment, they are least likely to receive the quality treatment that they need. We are determined to mount a campaign to improve the nation's health. We cannot afford to go on as we are. Enough is enough.

We cannot afford to allow illness to cause the loss of 175 million working days a year. We cannot afford to have people who are not fit for work or children who are not fit for school, because that means that those men, women and children, who should be assets to our country, become liabilities instead. We must change those liabilities into assets. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) and I are determined to improve the nation's health by tackling the things that make people ill. We shall do so through health authorities, health trusts, local councils and the Health and Safety Executive.

Far too many people in our country are ill. The pain and anxiety they suffer is bad for them and their families, but the damage does not stop there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have to remind the hon. Gentleman that the debate is exclusively on education and local government.

Mr. Dobson: Everything I am talking about is related to the functions of local government, as I shall go on to demonstrate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The damage does not stop with the people who suffer ill health. Their ill health is bad for the rest of us, as well. It is bad for us as taxpayers because we have to pay for their medical treatment, and the costs do not end there. If people are ill, they cannot work, so we have to pay for the benefits that they need, including housing benefit, which is a responsibility of local authorities. We have to find the money to make up for the tax that they do not pay, including council tax. We have to go without the goods and services that they would produce if they were at work. Their employers in the Confederation of British Industry are deeply concerned, so they tell me, even if the Secretary of State is not, about the 175 million working days lost each year.

As a society, we should try to help the victims of unavoidable illness. As a society, we should offer advice, help and inducements to choose a healthy life style. Most important, as a society, we must act together to combat the innumerable causes of ill health and injury which spring from the conditions in which far too many people are forced to live and work.

Poverty is a health hazard. Unemployment makes people ill. Poor-quality food makes people weak. Air pollution chokes people. Bad working conditions are literally sickening. Low pay undermines people's health. Stress and anxiety make people ill, mentally and physically.

That is why we are determined to do something about it. We are determined to launch a concerted programme on the causes of illness. We want everyone to be involved. Our programme will not be a burden on business or on the taxpayer. It is illness that is a burden on business and the taxpayer. We are determined to reduce that burden. We believe that environmental and economic benefits will flow from our strategy.

First—local authorities are involved in this, Mr. Deputy Speaker—on food standards, which were not mentioned in the Queen's Speech, our proposals to set up an independent food standards agency will promote public health, improve children's health and help the food industry by bolstering consumer confidence.

Secondly, transport was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech.

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): Will the hon. Gentleman help me? The Labour party originally said that the debate would be on education and the environment. The hon. Gentleman then decided that he had nothing to say about the environment, so he withdrew that topic and decided to talk about local government. He is now talking about food safety. Can he talk about either the environment or local government? After two and a half years, it would be nice to hear him make a speech on the environment. Most of us believe that he knows nothing about it.

Mr. Dobson: That is a bit rich coming from the right hon. Gentleman, who is apparently so ignorant of the courtesies of the House that he did not bother to tell us that he did not intend to reply to the debate. He turned up literally one minute before I started to speak. On the subject of food safety, it is worth reminding ourselves that people's principal recollection of the Secretary of State is his attempt to feed a hamburger to his daughter, which was too hot, so she refused to eat it. People tend to forget the sequel to that: he ate it himself, and what is more, the effects are beginning to show.

The third item should appeal to the Secretary of State, if he can listen patiently. Home energy efficiency, which is to do with the environment, was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. At present, the homes of many of the worst-off families and pensioners are poorly insulated. Although their fuel bills cost a fortune, they waste so much energy that they cannot keep warm. Labour's plans

for a home energy efficiency programme, which have been drawn up by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock), will cut household fuel bills, help the environment by saving fuel, add warmth, improve health and create jobs.

Fourthly, housing was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. Apparently the Government think that the position on housing is okay, that nothing more needs to be done, and that their housing policies are succeeding. If the Government are satisfied with what is happening, they are far too easily satisfied. The figures show that 48,000 families had their homes repossessed last year, and that, at the beginning of this summer, half a million families were in negative equity and almost 200,000 families were in serious mortgage arrears. The Government do not propose to do anything to help.

The shortage of housing—which, according to chartered surveyors, has driven up the price of houses—is being made worse because housing starts are down. Private housing starts are down, housing association starts are down, and council housing starts are virtually non-existent—just 651 in the whole of last year. Not one council house or flat was started in the north-west or in London last year.

To anyone who can make the connection, it should be no surprise that thousands of people are sleeping rough. The Government have organised surveys of the number of rough sleepers in York, Cambridge, Norwich, Bath, Exeter, Gloucester, Basingstoke and Reading: it is no longer just big cities that have a homelessness problem. In the past year, 120,000 families were officially classified as homeless. Hundreds of thousands more are living in overcrowded or substandard conditions. According to the Government's own figures, more than 1.5 million homes are unfit for human habitation, yet they propose to do nothing about it. They do not even mention housing in the Queen's Speech.

This drift is damaging the country. Not having somewhere decent to live makes people ill, makes it hard for breadwinners to hold down a job, and makes it difficult for children to do well at school. Anyone with a grain of sense knows that doing homework is well nigh impossible when a child has no decent home to go to. This drift not only harms people who have nowhere decent to live, but puts building firms out of business and building workers out of jobs. It loses orders for building supply companies, and deprives professionals of job opportunities.

It is time that the Government made a start on building homes for people in need. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) said in his speech at the Labour party conference and repeated when he opened the debate on the Queen's Speech, we are committed to encouraging councils to invest the takings from the sale of council houses in new and rehabilitated homes. That will provide not just new homes and jobs for people in the building industry but orders and jobs for firms that make door hinges in Dudley, electrical fittings in Basildon, carpets in Brighouse and Halifax, lavatory pans in Stoke-on-Trent and glass in St. Helens—jobs all over the country.

Those are just three specific examples of what we intend to do to improve the country's health and make it a better, safer, cleaner, healthier and more prosperous place to live. That is why we shall win the coming general election.

9.35 pm

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration (Mr. David Curry): My father was headmaster of a primary school within sight of Armley gaol in Leeds; my mother took teacher training as a mature student and also taught in one of the most difficult areas of Leeds; my aunt was head teacher in a rural school; and my uncle was a school inspector specialising in truancy and delinquency. I am responsible for the Government's regeneration programmes, and I will not take lessons from the Opposition on how to help those most in need in this society.

One always listens to the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), entertaining the hope that he will stray inadvertently into common sense. We are invariably disappointed. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, this was supposed to be a debate on the environment. At least Labour knew that we had a new policy on that. It was then to be a debate on local government, and now we know that Labour has no policy on that. Out of 30 minutes, the hon. Gentleman gave us just 30 seconds—it may not have been quite so long—on the Government's proposal for rural areas, which shows the measure of the Labour party's concern for the fate of those who live in the countryside.

We heard the most extraordinary diatribe against the media and television from a Front-Bench spokesman of a party whose leader galloped off to a coral reef in Australia to commune with the Murdoch empire to try to get it on his side. That is a curious formulation of the Labour party's views on the media, given its desperate anxiety and its circumnavigation of Fleet street and docklands to try to persuade editors that it can be touched after all.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was supposed to give a winding-up speech. He was wound up outside the Chamber like a tin soldier. He charged in and flailed frantically around without landing a single punch. I do not know who wrote his speech. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is bidding for the leadership in anticipation of the next election defeat for his party, but it was an extraordinary performance. The only comment he made on local government was the old canard, "Let us release capital receipts from local government." This is the do-it-all-with-mirrors school of thought on finance. The Labour party has suddenly found the piggy-bank of £5 billion.

The hon. Gentleman must realise that, if he is to release £5 billion of capital receipts, the effect will be identical to increasing credit approvals. Indeed, it will be worse, because they are not in the right place. If that is what the Labour party wants to do, it would be far more sensible to increase credit approvals. That, however, would increase public expenditure, because the Labour party says that it would not redefine the public sector borrowing requirement. Would the Labour party liberate all future capital receipts as well? *[Interruption.]* All Governments say that they will contain public expenditure. The Labour party's Treasury team hastens to impress us at every opportunity by saying that, whatever its housing spokesman may say, we should not believe a word of it because it will keep the purse strings, but it is not prepared to change the public sector borrowing requirement.

My hon. Friends the Members for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst) and for Wellingborough (Sir P. Fry) mentioned our proposals to help village shops and rural

[Mr. David Curry]

communities. That need is crucial. We talk constantly about regeneration in terms of inner cities, and their problems are real and important enough. However, regeneration is also an issue in rural communities. Our country takes a particular pride in such communities. Our countryside is unique and we want to preserve it, but it must be a countryside in which people live and from which they can earn their livelihood—not one preserved purely as a museum.

The key to many villages is the village shop, on which many elderly people depend. Our proposals to give mandatory rate relief will assist a large number of people who are themselves disadvantaged and in some cases marooned. We will also allow local authorities to give discretionary relief to a wider range of shops, so that they can give a great deal more assistance to their communities. That is a subject of great amusement to the Opposition parties, but many people in Britain prize our rural communities and wish to assist them.

There has been a lot of talk about subsidiarity and devolution. Our proposals for parish councils put them into action. *[Laughter.]* I am delighted with the merriment that that statement attracts from Labour Members. I shall point out to my constituents, who live in a large rural area in which a village of 300 souls might be thought quite large, the sheer entertainment value that Labour contemplates when it considers the problems of rural areas.

We will allow parish councils to raise funds to help community transport and promote crime prevention. Councils will be required to consult parish councils more. We will open the way to the creation of new councils, including some in rural areas, where people want that to happen. Our measures are of great importance to rural areas and we will carry them through.

Mr. Maxton *rose—*

Mr. Curry: I shall not give way. I am emulating the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, who took only one intervention from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I shall wait for a more substantial intervention.

Our package of measures recognises the problems of preserving a living countryside which people want to admire and visit, and in which they want to work. Those measures are devolution in practice. They follow our creation of national park authorities, which give a specific role to local people who live within the parks and know their problems.

There has been much talk of social cohesion and exclusion. Last week, I attended a Council of Ministers meeting in Dublin to examine those issues. It was interesting to note how many of our European partners, in pursuing their national policies, agreed that one had to approach social cohesion and exclusion from the viewpoint of the problems of the community—and that the time when national prescriptions could tell people what they wanted had passed. That is why it is so important that the integrated programmes that this Government have developed should work effectively—bringing the community effective choices and responsibilities in the cities.

One cannot solve a city's problems by focusing on education, training or housing alone. One must get a grip on the integrated difficulties. That means difficult choices, because one must choose a small community. The regeneration budget is crucial, because it embraces local partnerships, local initiatives and local delivery. Education and training are overwhelmingly two of the great priorities of all the partnerships that are addressing social issues. They are the most common elements in the programmes. That was so in the two earlier rounds and will be so in the third round, which will be decided shortly.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg) knows that that is true. He tried to be frightfully fierce today—a sort of Hemingway of the Back Benches, but it did not really suit him. He came to see me a little while ago to ask whether I could assist with the transfer of a housing estate in his constituency, because that was the way to achieve regeneration there. We were able to help. The transfer was agreed by a massive majority of the tenants. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his concerns for his constituency. We were able to work together to deliver something of benefit and effective regeneration. He is much better when he concentrates on those problems than when he tries to read diatribes from the back of the Chamber.

There will also be opportunities for local government in capital challenge; we shall announce those shortly. That is a chance for local government to create an integrated programme and for different parts of a council to talk to one another, which does not always happen. Once again, we are getting high-quality, well-integrated bids, and we find that education is a strong runner. Local government is being given new opportunities to choose its own priorities, and rightly it often chooses education as one of those priorities. It is local government making the choice, reflecting local people's views.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): What advice would my right hon. Friend give the Liberal-Labour coalition that runs Kent, which has had the most generous settlement ever given to Kent county council, and which consistently complains that it has not enough money to run services to the necessary standard?

Mr. Curry: I would advise it to study some of the most efficient authorities—those much more efficient than itself, which put less premium on simply employing more people—and find out what can be done if people set about the task of being an effective enabling authority. That is happening throughout the country, and it is a new road for local government.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) mentioned education funding and other issues. He gave us the Liberal litany of financial permissiveness: the ending of controls on local government expenditure, the abolition of competitive tendering, the local income tax and the education surtax. He did not mention—but, as he chided my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey) for not mentioning something that he believed he should have mentioned, I shall do the same—the site valuation principle for the business rate, which means that if a large tower were built in the City of London, and Fred's diner was next door, occupants of the two would pay the same business rates.

The hon. Gentleman should consider where the opportunities lie for local government to assist education. They lie in local government addressing itself sensibly

to the opportunities of a private finance initiative. I have announced changes to that initiative that tackle the two issues about which local government was most worried. First, where councils sign a contract, they will no longer have to make credit provision up front for those sums. That was a major problem for local government. Secondly, those revenue payments that are made will no longer be caught by capping rules, and the Government will provide them through the standard spending assessment mechanism. Those were the two issues raised most consistently; we have addressed them.

Mr. Don Foster: I thank the Minister for the changes that he made, which were desperately needed; unfortunately, as he will acknowledge, there is no monitoring in the Department for Education and Employment of the use of the private finance initiative, and the Government's own financial adviser cannot begin to say how much money will come in through the initiative for education, so we do not know what it will do.

Mr. Curry: We have made an allocation for next year and the following year on the volume of capital schemes that will be financed under the private finance initiative. Allocations have been made of £50 million for next year and £200 million for the following year. We believe that those allocations will be adequate to meet demand. We, local authorities and the Department for Education and Employment are working extremely closely on that. There is an organisation, run by local authorities, called the 4Ps, which is promoting that through local government.

I shall be grateful if the hon. Member for Bath will proselytise and argue the case for the private finance initiative. All Governments are trying to find ways in which private finance can assist the public good, because we all live in the global economy.

Mr. Stevenson: I want to help the Minister to drag out his speech until 10 o'clock; he seems to be running out of notes. Would he care to comment on the fact that, since the Government imposed business rates in my constituency, business rates have increased by nearly 40 per cent.?

Mr. Curry: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the business rates reflect the assumed rental characteristics of an area and are subject to evaluation every five years. Where there have been changes, people in some parts of the United Kingdom have had their business rate cut and others have had their business rate increased. The system has to keep pace with the changing circumstances in the economy.

As the hon. Gentleman represents a part of the world that has benefited substantially from the Government's regeneration programmes, he would do well to realise the possibilities for local government in the combination of regeneration—

Mr. Blunkett: Will the Minister tell the House when the commitment made by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about placing the SCAA's values forum report in the Vote Office will be fulfilled? She gave that commitment to the House this afternoon under the procedures of the House and my hon. Friends are finding it difficult to locate the report even at this time of the evening.

Mr. Curry: My right hon. Friend made it clear that she was quoting from newspaper reports and said that she would take steps to make that document available at the earliest opportunity. I have no doubt that she has fulfilled her promise, as she always does.

Mr. Blunkett: A commitment was given and, as the Secretary of State is not here, may we presume that she is photocopying—*[Interruption.]* She is here—I apologise to the Secretary of State. I did not see her behind the—

Mr. Dobson: Arras.

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, the arras.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr. Curry has the Floor and may give way to whomever he likes. *[Interruption.]* Order. I must point out to the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) that this is the Chamber of the House of Commons and he should respect that fact. I call Mr. Curry.

Mr. Curry: On reflection, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have decided to give way to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mrs. Shephard: The documents will be available for hon. Members first thing in the morning.

Mr. Curry: In one of the few moments when he mentioned local government, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras spoke about housing policies. He quoted, I assume, from the document that deals with the extension of the rough sleepers initiative outside London. I hope that he is not suggesting that that is an undesirable thing to do. We made it clear that the policy has been extremely successful in central London. We then made it clear that, where there was a significant problem outside London, we would seek to apply the same mechanisms to address it.

To find out the extent of the problems, we paid a consultancy, Shelter; so nobody can say that the Government have sought to control the figures. Shelter has now reported and I shall shortly announce the conclusions in order to extend the initiative. The policy is widely acknowledged to be unique, successful and to rest on a collaboration between Government and the voluntary sector that many other people would like to emulate. If the hon. Gentleman is trying to politicise that policy and that relationship, he is making a serious mistake. I trust that he does not want to do so.

Mr. Dobson: If homelessness and rough sleeping have become so extensive that the Government need to conduct surveys in places such as York, Cambridge, Norwich, Bath, Exeter, Gloucester, Basingstoke and Reading—those places constitute about a third of the total—the problems are indeed extensive. I am condemning the Government not for carrying out the surveys but for implementing the policies that made them necessary.

Mr. Curry: In that case, perhaps the hon. Gentleman should wait for the results of the survey before he decides how substantial his fears will be. He may be somewhat surprised by the findings.

[Mr. Curry]

The hon. Gentleman referred to social housing, but he did not mention that co-operation with the private sector has brought £10 billion in private sector money to the delivery of social housing since 1988. He mentioned the worst estates—I have already referred to the hon. Member for City of Durham in that context. Our programme of transferring some of the worst estates into the private sector, with the consent of the tenants, provides new opportunities and hope to people in some of the most difficult circumstances. We have transferred large numbers of properties into the private sector, where private sector money can be mobilised for renovations and improvements. Without exception, the tenants benefit from and enjoy their improved circumstances.

In the housing Bill, we have made it possible to create housing companies so that local government, together with other agencies, can develop a new means of delivering housing.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): What happens to those areas where there is no private sector investment? The Government have cut investment and people are living in housing of an appalling standard.

Mr. Curry: The hon. Lady perhaps does not realise that the estates being transferred are in areas such as Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Greenwich, Durham and Sheffield. They are some of the worst estates in the country and they do not have any value. We are able to transfer them to the private sector because we are able to mobilise private capital. Local authorities are increasingly realising that that is the sensible way forward in housing policy. The Conservative Government have created those opportunities.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is locked into his obsession with council housing and with local authorities wanting to build more housing and wanting the patronage that goes with it. That is the old policy and it does not work. It is much better to move housing into the private sector, with the consent of the tenants, where it can benefit from full private sector investment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough raised a particular concern regarding local government finance. Hon. Members will know that, every year, we review the figures for the local government settlement. We try to ensure that we use up-to-date figures that most accurately reflect local authorities' spending needs. There have been a number of serious reviews this year, which we are discussing with local authorities. As I said last year, if we are satisfied that the surveys are providing better-quality, fully worked out information, we shall want to apply it. If we believe that the information is incomplete and needs further work, we shall adopt that course. I note my hon. Friend's concerns, which he has expressed consistently, about the situation in Northamptonshire and the funding of that local authority.

We have sought to bring to local government many new opportunities, a number of which are linked directly to education and the needs of people in the worst communities. We have developed regeneration programmes which have brought training, jobs, learning recovery, housing and town centre development. We have introduced programmes that have enabled local people to decide their own needs rather than having impositions from the top. We have delivered a great deal more opportunity to local government, so that it can develop new means of financing and new partnerships. Those partnerships are crucial for our future.

We have also brought to the rural areas a series of considered measures that will affect the people on whom we depend as the guardians of one of this country's most precious assets: the countryside. Our education measures show, yet again, that the Conservatives are masters of the political agenda. The measures that we propose for local government and the countryside show, once again, that creative thinking comes from Conservative Members.

The tired old nostrums and prejudices and all the old baggage of Labour were rolled into the non-stop rant of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. That shows the inability and the unwilling, debilitating egalitarianism at the soul of the Labour party. We will have nothing to do with it.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 297.

Division No. 1] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Clelland, David
Adams, Mrs Irene	Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Ainger, Nick	Coffey, Ms Ann
Allen, Graham	Cohen, Harry
Alton, David	Connarty, Michael
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*	Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*	Corbett, Robin
Armstrong, Ms Hilary	Corbyn, Jeremy
Ashdown, Paddy	Corston, Ms Jean
Ashton, Joseph	Cousins, Jim
Austin-Walker, John	Cox, Tom
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*	Cummings, John
Barnes, Harry	Cunliffe, Lawrence
Barron, Kevin	Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try SE)*
Battle, John	Cunningham, Ms R *(Perth Kinross)*
Bayley, Hugh	Dafis, Cynog
Beggs, Roy	Davidson, Ian
Beith, A J	Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C)*
Bell, Stuart	Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Benn, Tony	Davies, Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Bennett, Andrew F	Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Berrningham, Gerald	Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Berry, Roger	Denham, John
Betts, Clive	Dewar, Donald
Blunkett, David	Dixon, Don
Boateng, Paul	Dobson, Frank
Bradley, Keith	Donohoe, Brian H
Bray, Dr Jeremy	Dowd, Jim
Brown, Nicholas *(Newcastle E)*	Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Burden, Richard	Eagle, Ms Angela
Byers, Stephen	Eastham, Ken
Cann, Richard	Etherington, Bill
Callaghan, Jim	Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*	Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*	Fatchett, Derek
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*	Faulds, Andrew
Campbell-Savours, D N	Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Canavan, Dennis	Flynn, Paul
Cann, Jamie	Foster, Derek
Carlile, Alex *(Montgomery)*	Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Chidgey, David	Foulkes, George
Chisholm, Malcolm	Fraser, John
Church, Ms Judith	Fyfe, Mrs Maria
Clapham, Michael	Galbraith, Sam
Clark, Dr David *(S Shields)*	Galloway, George
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*	Gapes, Mike
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*	Garrett, John

Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Ms Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Miss Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Ab'd'n N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian D *(SE Staffs)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr L *(B'ham Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Kennedy, Mrs Jane *(Broadgreen)*
Killoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Miss Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stret'd)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian *(Makerf'd)*
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McCrea, Rev William
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Madden, Max
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Molyneaux, Sir James
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Oakes, Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Stanley
Paisley, Rev Ian
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Mrs B *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, John
Primarolo, Ms Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robertson, George *(Hamilton)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Robert
Shore, Peter
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spearing, Nigel
Squire, Ms R *(Dunfermline W)*
Steel, Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Thurnham, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Sir Harold
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Joe Benton and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clarke, Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Curry, David
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Tim
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hat'fd)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forth, Eric
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Galle, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel-Jones, Tristan
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson–Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Gryffs, Sir Michael
Gummer, John
Hague, William
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Sir Edward
Heathcoat–Amory, David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Higgins, Sir Terence
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guildf'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensb'ne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Jopling, Michael
Kellett–Bowman, Dame Elaine
King, Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox–Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lloyd, Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair–Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Mellor, David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Richard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pattie, Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, John
Renton, Tim
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Sir Timothy
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Heref'd)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Sims, Sir Roger
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsf'ld)*
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Jim *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Waldegrave, William
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'd)*
Wolfson, Mark
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Timothy Wood and
Mr. Roger Knapman.

Question accordingly negatived.

It being after Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.
Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Race Course Betting Cartels

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

10.15 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): I wish to raise a matter of great concern to some of my constituents, which I believe is also of great concern and interest to the wider public. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department will know from the files given to him by his staff, about my conversations with his predecessor, that I have been raising the issue for the better part of three years. I first raised it on behalf of a constituent, but the more I have looked into it, the more I have realised that a problem is developing.

The issue is the gradual creation of a betting cartel that will be—as all cartels are—to the detriment of the public and, eventually, the race course owners themselves, although they may not be aware of the matter now. Before I get into the meat of my speech, I shall take my hon. Friend through a couple of points of history, which are important because they relate to the way in which the issue has developed. He is no doubt aware of the events that led to the creation of the Ferguson agreement, which was set up to control the new on-course betting facilities and those who run on-course betting. For a short time, the agreement seemed to settle some of the problems caused by the arrival of off-course betting shops on course.

In the early 1970s, the first cracks appeared in the agreement, with race course owners realising eventually—some, I suspect, realised earlier—that they could receive some substantial revenue from the introduction of betting offices on race courses. So in 1972, as my hon. Friend knows, the National Association of Bookmakers formed a company entitled the National Association of Racecourse Betting Offices Ltd.—NARBOL—and it was agreed, to resolve the problems, that the Horserace Totalisator Board, the Horserace Betting Levy Board—the HLB—and the Racecourse Association would receive 1 per cent. of the achieved distribution between them. As a result of those discussions and of the NARBOL agreement, the Ferguson scheme was saved, albeit in a paste-and-patch-up form.

During the latter part of the 1970s, after the HTB had been permitted to enter the bookmaking arena, the Tote also became interested in operating on-course betting shop facilities. As a result, meetings took place between the RCA, the HLB, the HTB and NARBOL, together with the NAB, which led to what became known as the Cross arbitration. I know that my hon. Friend knows those facts, but I wish to put them on record because they set the scene for my main areas of concern. The effect was to permit the HTB to operate a betting office in the members' area on a race course while NARBOL continued to operate facilities in Tattersalls, which is the ring in which the race course bookmakers operate.

I shall come forward to the present. The livelihood of the ring bookmakers is today under serious threat. As we know, the Finance Act 1987 changed the way in which betting was done by making betting on course tax free. It was clearly aimed at enhancing attendance at race courses by getting rid of that tax. Yet today the public are rightly concerned and confused, because on-course betting shops charge people placing bets between 5 and 6 per cent. extra, often referring to that as a tax. I understand that there is also some concern about betting shops at football grounds that charge a similar levy.

The Minister will know that I began strongly objecting some time ago to the use of the word "tax", which misled the public into thinking that it was a Government levy, which it is not. Many people who place bets are occasional visitors to courses. They understand that bets in the high street carry the tax, but they are often unsure about whether it also applies to race courses. To be sure, some betting shops have decided to refer to a surcharge because of concern about the word "tax"—but not all of them. I notice, too, that the words "deduction" and "levy" are also occasionally used.

I have often told the Government that this practice should have been stopped years ago, but even getting rid of the word "tax" will change very little. People will still be left with the idea that there is some sort of link with the Government, so they will accept the charge without question. At no stage are they told what the surcharge is for or whether there is an alternative betting venue at a particular race course.

The truth, of course, is that the 6 per cent. is part of a deal done with the race courses when the NARBOL agreement finally terminated in 1992, leaving the Racecourse Association free to enter into agreements with the high street betting companies for the provision of on-course betting facilities. Betting shop facilities at all Racecourse Association courses are now in the hands of the Horserace Totalisator Board, Ladbroke and Coral, and the agreements have meant that betting shops pay as much as 10 per cent. of their gross turnover to courses for the facilities. Most important, part of that money is found by charging the general public a 6 per cent. surcharge which, as I said, has been disguised as a tax.

My hon. Friend the Minister may say: so what? The ring still exists, as does the Tote, so the public have a choice. I, however, question the amount of choice that the public really enjoy, now and in the next few years. The position of away bookmakers in the ring has been changed to their detriment; they will be the first to be squeezed out of the market. That is a sort of cold premonition of what is likely to follow for the rest of the ring.

In any properly functioning market, the public must understand what they are paying for and why. Secondly, they must be able to take their business elsewhere if they so choose: there must be an alternative. Most people who attend race courses irregularly have an extremely limited understanding of how the system operates, and once they enter these shops, they are usually uncertain as to the difference between an on-course betting shop and the bookies in the ring. The difference comes down to how much they pay, and the surcharge has merely added to the confusion. The position and prominence of the ring itself on the race course also matter a great deal.

I for one have never yet discovered where all the money goes. A heavy veil seems to have been drawn across the whole subject. We are told endlessly that the money is used to improve racing, but no one has ever told me how or where. The ring operates in all weathers, more often than not in the open. It is therefore—arguably—less user-friendly, particularly for the occasional visitor. Little effort has been made to change all that; I expect that that has a great deal to do with the fact that race courses

[Mr. Iain Duncan Smith]

receive from the ring only five times the entry fee, as specified originally in section 13(2) of the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963.

Even if a person placing a bet knows about the ring, he may be discouraged from using it during inclement weather. Moreover, the relationship between race course and ring is changing in some areas. As race courses realise that they can obtain a higher additional fee from the on-course bookmakers, they may feel tempted to marginalise the ring. There have been cases at a number of race courses where the ring has been moved further and further from the winning post, particularly after renovations and modernisations to the main stand areas. I understand that, in one case, the ring was moved out to the car park. There might be some interest in betting on the number of Jaguars in the car park, but I am not certain that it helps the free market to have the ring so far away from the stand.

Some may again say: so what? They may go further and say that that is a matter for the race courses and the ring to sort out, and not Ministers. I would say that because the reference to five times the entry fee was contained in the 1963 Act, we have a serious interest in what happens. No one has come forward publicly—nor, I doubt, to see my hon. Friend the Minister—to say that we need a proper debate about the way in which the ring works, the facilities available to it and the money that it passes to the race course owners. Furthermore, if it was simply an argument about the ring, the race course owners and the finance, I suspect that it would have been brought to my hon. Friend's attention some time ago. I do not believe that that is the case. What worries me is that so much of the matter is now being resolved by stealth.

It has been inherent in all the legislation since 1928 that bookmakers and the HTB should be on an equal basis, offering a perfect choice to members of the public as to the method of betting that they may choose. That situation no longer arises when it comes down to the multiples—including the HTB—being allowed to offer far better and more comfortable facilities to the public than can the bookmaker in the ring. To a large extent, the majority of race course betting offices are now situated within covered accommodation and—in certain circumstances—quite luxurious accommodation, including bar facilities and so on.

When the ring is moved or its position made less accessible, it clearly makes the individual members of the ring question the viability of their profession. As we have seen, many of them have begun to drift away from the business. That is immensely harmful for racing because, as my hon. Friend knows, they set the price. I can see them questioning whether they can fulfil such a role in future because there may be so few of them. It may not be worth people's while to try to visit them if it takes so long to get there. If so, we shall see the shrinkage of the free market, as I predicted.

The ring is being squeezed and will over a period be made less and less relevant to those who go racing, and to those such as myself who take an interest and believe that the historic relationships will be changed. The role of the on-course bookmaker in the stand will grow more dominant, and will undermine the Chancellor's decision in 1987. At this rate, if nothing is done, on-course bookmakers could eventually be setting the starting price, and thus change the nature of betting for the worse.

As soon as one raises the matter, one is told that one must "move with the times", "not sit back on historical perspectives" and "look forward". I have even heard business men say that there is a global perspective. Betting shops say that they are in the business of creating a vast global marketplace and that such matters just stand in their way. I must warn my hon. Friend to be wary of business men who come to him talking about global marketplaces. It is my understanding that that is always the beginning of an argument that runs along the lines of, "Wouldn't the world be a tidier place if, in every single business area, there were only one provider? That would make life so much simpler for the poor buyer, and the person in the high street would not have to make that ghastly thing called choice." That is essentially what will happen as companies seek to close down the system.

I do not doubt that there are vast sums to be made through video, Teletext links and away betting at different race courses in different countries. But we should act primarily in the interests of the person placing a bet here in the UK, as that has created the historical strength of the free marketplace. We should be careful if we intend to change that. Perhaps I may remind my hon. Friend the Minister—although I am sure that he needs no reminder from me—of the words of Adam Smith, who said that the "interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from and even opposite to, that of the public. To widen the market and to narrow the competition is always in the interests of the dealers. To widen the market may frequently be agreeable enough to the interests of the public; but to narrow the competition must always be against it, and can serve only to enable the dealers, by raising their profits above what they naturally would be, to levy for their own benefit, an absurd tax upon the rest of their fellow citizens."

I am sure that he was not necessarily thinking of on-course betting, but the use of the word "tax" had a certain resonance during my investigations.

In short, having been in business, I know that it is the desire of every business to become a monopoly or cartel or to create such a position. I hope that my hon. Friend will decide to consider the matter in that context, not merely because of the use of the word "tax", but because of the much wider problem of the changes that seem quietly to be taking place and which are underhand. He should ask himself whether they are in the interests of the racegoer, and if he has the slightest doubt, it is in our interest and that of racegoers for him to act. It started with the misrepresentation of the word "tax"; it will end with control of betting on course and off course in a small number of hands, with my constituents and those of my hon. Friend picking up the bill. That would be not only a tragedy, but a total injustice.

10.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Timothy Kirkhope): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford (Mr. Duncan Smith) on raising a particularly interesting matter for discussion. I am also grateful to him for his reference to Adam Smith. It does no harm for us to be reminded from time to time of his views and my hon. Friend used the opportunity of this debate to do so.

My hon. Friend has taken up the case of a constituent who makes his living acting as a bookmaker on race courses. In July 1994, he met my right hon. Friend the

Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), who was then discharging the responsibilities that I now have in the Home Office. Concern has been expressed that self-employed, on-course bookmakers are being forced out by unfair competition from betting shops on race courses run by major off-course bookmakers.

Before I comment on the issues that my hon. Friend raised, I must say a few words about the on-course betting market. The way in which betting and racing is organised has evolved over many years. It has stood the test of time and enjoys a reputation for integrity and orderly conduct. Racing depends largely on its attraction to the public as a betting medium. The bookmakers standing in the ring are part of the atmosphere of race courses in this country. Racegoers are able to watch the changing odds and shop for the best prices—I hope that that will always be the case.

The on-course betting market is complex and it is not easily understood by people outside the industry. On-course bookmakers play an important role in setting the starting price to which my hon. Friend referred, not only on the race course, but in the 8,500 to 9,000 off-course betting shops in the country. The starting price is the price or odds prevailing on course at the time that the race begins. It is compiled on the scene from the prices offered by the ring bookmakers at the race course. The starting price is the basis on which most bets placed off course in betting shops are settled. That means that it is important to have a strong on-course market. A race meeting that attracts only a few bookmakers and only a small amount of money in the ring could lead to the manipulation of prices.

My hon. Friend said that the on-course bookmaker is threatened by unfair competition. Indeed, he went somewhat further. The horse race bookmakers have an arduous profession, which requires stamina, exhaustive knowledge of the market and the courage to back their judgment in hard cash. The market cannot stand still—it has not done so in other markets and it is not doing so in the race course betting market. Those who run race courses are under pressure to give value for money, to improve their facilities and to keep prices and facilities attractive to the race-going public at a time when income from the horse race betting levy is not keeping pace with the needs of racing. I am glad to be able to say that recent years have seen many improvements on race courses.

We cannot consider the on-course betting market without reference to the position of the Tote, which is an established presence on race courses.

Mr. Duncan Smith: As my hon. Friend has touched on the improvements to race courses, in which I know that the levy board has had some involvement, will he condemn any idea that, as a result of those improvements, the ring should be moved substantially further away from the finishing post, thus further marginalising on-course bookmakers from the process of on-course betting?

Mr. Kirkhope: The precise details of locations are matters not for me but for the race course authorities and others. I hope later to refer more particularly to the negotiations and discussions into which I entered with those parties. I have already said that I do not want to see the role of the on-course bookmakers in the ring diminished, because it is an important role.

We cannot consider the on-course betting market without reference to the position of the Tote. The Tote is an established presence on race courses. It is obviously right that it should be. It was set up to provide pool betting on horse racing. In many other countries, pool betting is the only means of betting available to the racegoer. In this country, it has to compete against the privately owned fixed-odds betting industry. The Tote's profits go to racing and its payments to race courses are increasing. It also provides a form of betting which is perhaps more attractive to the small or first-time punter.

Unlike for other betting outlets, the siting of the Tote's pool betting kiosks is not subject to approval by the levy board. That is said to have led to a proliferation of Tote outlets, which is deemed unfair by the on-course bookmaker, who can stand only in an area which has been approved by the levy board. This situation was looked at some years ago by Lord Cross in what has become known as the Cross arbitration. He advised that the levy board should exercise its powers with regard to on-course betting in such a way that it would hold the balance fairly between the different classes of bookmakers while at the same time achieving a strong starting price and taking account of the interests of racing. Those are matters for the levy board. We are aware of the views of on-course bookmakers on this issue, but do not see any reason to challenge the Cross judgment.

The on-course bookmakers also consider that race course betting shops run by the major bookmakers are taking away custom from the ring. In recent years, extra facilities and betting options have been provided by those shops. On-course betting shops used to be run by the National Association of Bookmakers, but in the past few years, those have been the subject of open tendering. I understand that the increased competition for the provision of those facilities has considerably improved the range of services for the racegoer as well as improving the financial benefits to race courses.

From the point of view of the independent on-course bookmaker, no doubt the development of well-appointed, well-run betting shops is seen as a threat, particularly by away bookmakers who bet only on other meetings which are comprehensively covered by the on-course shops.

Mr. Duncan Smith: We know that much of the improved facilities are tied up with the up to 10 per cent. levy charged by the race courses. Does my hon. Friend agree that simply to pass that 6 per cent. straight to the person placing the bet, without any explanation, and even misleading him or her about tax, is wrong?

Mr. Kirkhope: I cannot acknowledge that. I am just about to come to the percentage deduction. Perhaps we can develop that further.

Members of the public may prefer to place their bets in shops rather than braving the elements outside. The ring can also—my hon. Friend has referred to this—be rather intimidating for the first-time racegoer.

No betting tax is paid on course by the betting shops or the ring bookmakers. As the betting shops impose a 6 per cent. charge for their services, the ring bookmaker has the edge over the betting shops in that sense. Regular punters, particularly those who gamble large sums, may well prefer to place their bets with the standing bookmaker.

[Mr. Kirkhope]

There is no betting duty on course, but the betting shops as a matter of practice—my hon. Friend referred to this—make a deduction from the customer, generally at a rate of 6 per cent. That is part of the terms on which they do business in receiving bets and is a commercial arrangement between the bookmaker and the punter.

Some have alleged that the 6 per cent. deduction by the betting shops is unfair—and using the term "tax" to describe that deduction is certainly misleading. That is not a new practice. It was customary when the NAB ran on-course betting shops. However, last year the levy board actively encouraged the operators of on-course shops to avoid the term, and I commend that action.

Practices in the ring have not changed for many years, and the onset of competition makes it even more important that the on-course bookmakers take advantage of new technology and practices to make the ring a more customer-friendly place. The NAB's market research has shown that the public want a better standard of service. Areas to be addressed, if on-course bookmakers are to compete with other outlets, include minimum stakes, size of bets, the availability of each-way betting and the provision of information.

The current climate also makes it even more important that agreement be reached between the race courses and the on-course bookmakers on the administration of the ring. We are aware that the Racecourse Association, representing the 59 race courses, and the National Association of Bookmakers, representing the race course bookmakers, have for several years been discussing improvements to commercial arrangements between the race courses and the bookmakers. Those are not specifically matters for the Government, but it is clearly in the interests of everyone concerned that agreement be reached without much further delay, and that the agreement should take account of the needs of both parties.

My hon. Friend called on the Government to take action to protect the viability of the present starting price system. The preservation of the system is in the public interest, in that it is seen by punters to be a fair and open means of arriving at horse-racing odds. We agree that the present system has much to commend it. We also wish to see the independent bookmakers continue to flourish on race courses, but I am not convinced that there is a need for Government intervention at present.

The bookmakers should first look to improving the service that they give to the public, to make themselves more competitive. It is not for the Government to become involved in discussions on the day-to-day management of race courses. Essentially, those must be commercial matters for the racing and betting industries to decide. I know that the British Horseracing Board and the levy board have said that they would be happy to assist in any way that they can.

The Government's role is limited to the setting of the statutory limit on the fees imposed on bookmakers by the race courses. Under section 18 of the 1963 Act, the race course management may not charge the bookmaker more than five times the highest charge made to members of the public to enter that part of the race course. I am talking about the charge made by the race courses to allow bookmakers on to the course. Commercial agreements between the race course and the betting shop operator for the use of the building provided is, of course, a separate matter. In some cases, such agreements will take the form of a lease.

I am aware that the Select Committee on Home Affairs, in its report on the levy in 1991, recommended that the Home Office should consider introducing legislation to repeal the statutory regime governing bookmakers' fees, and that courses should be able to put up individual pitches for sale by auction. It observed that on-course bookmakers paid a "relatively trivial amount". The Government's response was that we would give further consideration to such matters when the outcome of the discussions between the Racecourse Association and the NAB was known.

The Government have played their part in supporting the on-course bookmaker by removing, some years ago, the 4 per cent. tax on on-course betting. The ring bookmakers have been given an advantage over the betting shops on course, which charge their customers 6 per cent., and the off-course betting shops, where 6.75 per cent. duty is payable on turnover.

As I have said, in that sense the on-course bookmakers have the edge. Far from a cartel operating on race courses to keep up prices, the more the betting shops charge, the more the ring bookmakers have the advantage. We are seeing an improvement in the services to the racegoing public, which may mean increased competition, but not necessarily unfair competition.

Having heard my hon. Friend this evening, I wish to assure him that I shall re-examine the matters to which he has referred, and see whether further action is required to maintain the diversity of betting services available to punters at race courses. If any further action is needed, I shall not hesitate to take it, consistent with any powers that I may have.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 30 October 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Windfarms and Telecommunications Towers (Scotland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Bates.*]

9.34 am

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): I am glad to have the opportunity to raise important planning issues in Scotland relative to windfarms and telecommunications towers. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State is able to be with us. I know that he will give us the Government's view later.

If I were to declare an interest, it would be a deep love of the countryside. At one time, I was a Minister at the Scottish Office with responsibilities for the environment. I was a member of the Nature Conservancy Council and of various governing bodies that are interested in the countryside. I am not, however, involved in any pressure group.

I am concerned about the number of telecommunications towers everywhere in the countryside and the ever-increasing number of windfarms. Both types of structure are serious blots on the countryside and on the landscape generally. I believe that we require stricter controls.

It is no use the Government, who are keen on raising standards in the countryside, producing splendid glossy papers on the countryside, on our coastline, on rural improvements, on environmentally sensitive areas, on scenic areas and special protection areas, for example, if we allow unattractive pylons and generators to spread without the most careful consideration and thought.

Whatever we think of technical achievements, they do not enhance the scenic beauty of Scotland or elsewhere. I shall begin with telecommunications pylons. The masts sprout up almost anywhere without planning permission. I accept, of course, that modern technology is important. We must accept that the world has mobile telephones and other means of quick communication. I accept also that we need a first-class telecommunications system if we are to use such equipment.

Masts are permitted developments stemming from the Telecommunications Act 1984, the subsequent Scottish Office Development Department guidelines—25/85—and the general development order that was introduced in 1992.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): I accept that telecommunications masts in Scotland and elsewhere are ugly. Does my right hon. Friend include in his diatribe the equally ugly electricity pylons and poles that are used instead of taking the system underground?

Sir Hector Monro: I have not really started my diatribe. I appreciate, of course, my hon. Friend's thoughts.

If we were to begin again by taking ourselves back to 1900 instead of living in years near to the year 2000, we would think twice about the distribution of electricity by means of vast pylons, and by smaller pylons as the supply comes nearer and nearer to individual homes. There are a huge number of vast and unattractive pylons. Some were erected during the war. There are some in the valley near my old home, which were erected during the 1940s, when no one really understood what was going on in terms of planning. There is a pylon line right through the centre of the valley floor between Langholm and Hawick, which looks most unattractive. With hindsight, I am sure that we would not allow that to happen now. Much more consideration would be given to placing pylons nearer the hillside and below sight lines wherever possible.

Pylons cause great sadness to those who are interested in scenic beauty, and telegraph poles can be extremely dangerous when placed alongside roads. We know that cars frequently crash into them. If we were able to start again, I am sure that we would put many more heavy electrical cables underground.

There is no requirement to obtain permission from a planning authority before erecting telecommunications masts. I appreciate, of course, that orders and guidelines emphasise that developers must take account of the countryside and, in sensitive areas, must consult local authorities. That is in black and white. It is disappointing, however, when we see what such consultations have produced. It is time to reconsider our flexible and laissez-faire attitude to developers putting up masts wherever they want; if there is a code of practice, it is not effective.

There are masts and pylons all over the place. For obvious technical reasons, they have to be on the tops of hills or ridges, so they are extremely obtrusive; wherever one drives, one sees masts and little blocks of telecommunications structures. The masts can be 15 m high—or 50 ft, as I much prefer to use the old English terms rather than modern European jargon—and, if they are on buildings, the first 30 m is no problem, so there can be a 150 ft building plus a 50 ft tower on top, which means that a mast can be 200 ft high, without authority. That, however, is not my prime concern; I am more concerned about the free-standing towers all over the countryside.

Mr. David Harris (St. Ives): Only last week, I took up that very point with my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency, because the problem is widespread and we are now being afflicted by it in Cornwall, where mobile telephone masts are popping up all over the place in exposed positions. My right hon. Friend can rest assured that he has the backing of every hon. Member who represents a rural constituency, from Land's End to John o'Groats.

Sir Hector Monro: How right my hon. Friend is. Nobody looks after the interests of Cornwall and the Cornish coastline more than he does.

[Sir Hector Monro]

The phenomenon has grown like Topsy, and I expect that my hon. Friend the Minister will say that, with hindsight, we were a little free and easy with the arrangements that we made in the 1980s and that we did not expect quite such a rash of masts. The need to provide the best possible telecommunications for the general public must be balanced against their right to retain their beautiful countryside.

There are many anomalies: I understand from a newspaper article that I can put up a flagpole with a Union flag without authority, but that I would need to have planning authority to erect a flagpole to fly my own flag. If authority is needed to put up a flagpole, why on earth is it not needed to put up a telecommunications tower? Has my hon. Friend the Minister any idea how many masts there are in Scotland? What are we doing about sharing masts? Why should not the companies get together and share masts in the interests of the beauty of the countryside? Each police constabulary has its own system, but might not the police share with the telecommunications companies?

I do not want more bureaucracy, especially in planning—I was once chairman of a planning committee, so I know what it can be like—but I think that in this instance we should have stricter control, with formal approval by each authority. I hope that when my hon. Friend winds up, he will say that the Government are concerned and will investigate the possibilities.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): We have some masts in the Ribble valley, and they are a blot on the landscape. The argument is that they are not in an area of outstanding natural beauty, but just on the fringes; but even the fringes are beautiful and there should be more sensitivity towards them. We also have masts in towns, and in one instance Vodafone totally ignored public opinion and erected a mast right next door to a housing estate; the public complained, a campaign ensued and eventually we won and the mast was taken down. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the companies have a responsibility not only to consult but to listen to the public?

Sir Hector Monro: My hon. Friend had a debate on windfarms in the summer, to which I listened with great interest, because I feel about windfarms in Scotland much as he feels about windfarms in England; he is an expert on the subject and presents tremendous first-hand evidence that the Minister will no doubt take into account.

Windfarms are far more intrusive than masts. For obvious reasons, they are often in remote parts and can be seen over a wide area; in my opinion, they are particularly unattractive. I appreciate our policy of sustainable development, which has been developed in the interests of both environment and energy, and our responsibility to Rio in terms of global warming, in the form of the Scottish renewable obligation and the non-fossil fuel obligation in England—we think up the most wonderful names for these agreements—and I do not doubt the arguments in favour of renewables, which must go hand in hand with continued reduction in fossil fuel emissions from our power stations. Perhaps the Minister will touch on the progress that we are making towards that end.

We are making progress, but I want to highlight the balance between alternative fuels and their impact on the countryside. I am not saying that there should be a total ban on windfarms, but I want stricter planning controls, greater transparency and greater attention to the views of the local people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said.

Many alternatives are under consideration. From what happened earlier this year, wave power does not seem too promising. Solar power is useful only for individual homes, and the further north one goes in Scotland, the less sun there is and the less likely it is that it will have any practical impact on global warming. I have the highest regard for hydro power, which is most effective and can even be attractive, and we should encourage both large and small hydro schemes. We have talked before about barrages that drive generators as the tide goes in and out of great estuaries, such as the Solway barrage, which would be near my home, or the Morecambe barrage but, again, I am fairly convinced that they will not be constructed.

The Government have shown great interest in wind power, but it is financially attractive only because of the substantial subsidy available under the obligations.

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): As my right hon. Friend knows, there are large hydro schemes in my constituency. Is he aware that I strongly favour increasing hydro capacity, and that those of us with experience of hydro schemes believe that they are the best way forward?

Sir Hector Monro: Indeed, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. I saw a most effective and attractive scheme near Aberfeldy, which I am sure that he knows well, where the burn has been diverted through a pipe into a generator; from a few yards away, one would not even know that it was there, yet day by day it turns out sufficient megawatts to be valuable to the grid and it gives a good return to the landowner. We want to encourage hydro power wherever possible.

Mr. Phil Gallie (Ayr): My right hon. Friend probably recalls that I was the manager of a 100 MW hydro scheme, which ran for about 40 miles. When it was built in 1928-29, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of concrete were poured into one of the most beautiful parts of south-west Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend think that nowadays the environmental lobby would allow us to block glens and flood villages as happened in 1928-29? Would not the environmental disadvantage be difficult to overcome?

Sir Hector Monro: I take my hon. Friend's point about large schemes. I must not get too involved in historical matters, but I well remember the development of the Galloway power scheme, in which my hon. Friend later had a significant part to play. It was turned on in 1930 and provided the first hydro power to the whole of Dumfries-shire. As a small boy, I remember turning on the first switch in my home; until then we had used oil lamps. As a wee laddie, I thought that it was something very special to turn on the first electricity at home. That part of Galloway has been enhanced and is now very attractive, with its steps and the lochs down to Kirkcudbright—well done to everyone involved. However, I agree that were we to start again now, heaven knows what the opposition would be to despoiling the countryside.

My difficulty is accepting the small output of windfarms when it is viewed against the serious loss of amenity in the countryside. I find it impossible to accept that windfarms do anything other than destroy the countryside. In addition, there are transmission lines to the grid system. I have no argument with windfarm operators—they have seen an opportunity and are taking it—but I simply want to ensure that any further development is more carefully thought through in the future.

In the United Kingdom—I accept that the figures may be flexible—there were something like 13 wind turbines in 1991, whereas now there are 518, although the number is steadily increasing. Wind turbines are usually 100 ft high—or occasionally 200 ft high, which is as high as Nelson's column. Of course, the height of the blades must be added. I have seen windfarms in Wales, England, Scotland and Denmark and I am not surprised that the chairman of the Countryside Commission, charged with looking after the landscape in England, said:

"England's scenic countryside is in danger of being turned into a wind power wilderness".

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, who is extremely active as the Minister responsible for industry in Scotland, will frequently have gone up and down the M74 and will know that in Lanarkshire, west of the M74, the hillside is covered with wind turbines. He must accept that they are especially unattractive and certainly do not enhance an area that needs all the help it can get to return to its former glory since having been a coal-mining area. I am sure that my hon. Friend will therefore appreciate what I am saying.

On an average winter's day, the United Kingdom uses about 50,000 MW, yet the 40 or so windfarms produce about 64 MW a day, so the amount of electricity generated by windfarms is a minute part of what we use and out of all proportion with the despoliation of our countryside. The largest windfarm, in Wales, has 103 pylons and produces in a year what a conventional station produces in two days. At the moment, 0.1 per cent. of our electricity comes from windfarms. If the Government's target is 10 per cent., there will need to be an enormous increase in the number of turbines, perhaps to 20,000 or 30,000. However, I appreciate that technical advances may mean that more power can be produced from fewer turbines.

I have never lived near a turbine station, but people who have and who therefore have first-hand knowledge of the problems complain not only of their unattractive appearance but of the noise of sound waves and of electromagnetic interference. Birds are also affected. We can work out the flight lines of migratory birds and perhaps avoid placing windfarms in certain locations, but pylons represent a death threat for birds. There are a great many windfarms in California and I understand that they have killed 78 eagles. I am not suggesting that the figures are similar in Scotland, but we must realise that windfarms can have a detrimental effect on the bird population. Indeed, I cannot understand why the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds does not object more strongly than it does.

Surely the increase in the number of windfarms is due to the subsidy available under the renewable energy orders. Farmers see an opportunity for alternative land use—indeed, it is profitable for them to have a windfarm on their property—but the country as a whole has to consider whether it is getting value for money from the subsidy, bearing in mind the environmental harm caused by such farms. I do not accept that there is an employment argument to be made in that respect—only very few people are required to run a windfarm.

The most important aspect is planning—is the present system adequate? Do the guidelines give preferential treatment to would-be windfarm operators at inquiries? Are they fair to objectors, who often have greater local knowledge? In my constituency, only a few decisions have had to made about windfarms. One was approved at Carsphairn in Galloway, where the farm was welcomed by the authority and local residents—so be it. However, in my home town of Langholm, the situation was very different. The application was for a station to be built on a hill very near where I lived for the first 30 or so years of my life.

The local authority and many residents—500 people signed a petition—objected as strongly as possible. They produced a very well-argued paper against the windfarm for the public inquiry. The application seemed to fail under several PPG 6 guidelines on renewable energy, yet the reporter, in what must be a subjective judgment—every reporter has to make a subjective judgment—approved the scheme. That, of course, was the Secretary of State's decision. Nothing further can be done about that. I shall not criticise the reporter; indeed, it would be improper to do so. However, I am suggesting that the system is weighted against objections because of the words "special need", which imply support for a windfarm.

The reporter can disregard the normal view, which is against sporadic building in the countryside. The reporter can go through the six or seven points in PPG 6 and tick them yes or no. I disagreed with five in this instance, but the reporter agreed—such is life. The Minister should consider whether the guidelines are fair to both sections of the community, to the objectors as well as the applicant.

The planning system should be tightened. Windfarms with 10 or more turbines have to have an environmental assessment and be reported to the Secretary of State. I would go further and suggest that all windfarms should have an environmental assessment, to be examined by the Scottish Office.

On the credit side, Dumfries and Galloway has drawn up a windfarm strategy, and I commend the idea to all local authorities. It confirms which sites could be available and which could not. Maps have been prepared, showing where it would be possible to site windfarms without objection being expressed.

My view is that more applications might be granted along the coast than would be acceptable. When one sails from Oban to Skye, what niggles is the number of caravan sites along the coastline. One sees acres and acres of white caravans all along the attractive coastline up the west coast of Scotland. If the caravans were green, it would be better, but they are white. I do not want to see serried ranks of windfarms along our coasts, just because that is where the wind happens to be strongest.

Mr. Gallie: My right hon. Friend's comments on the coastline are important because, some time ago, there was great pressure for wave-generated power stations, which would virtually wipe out the whole of the west coast if

[Mr. Gallie]

they were to provide any volume output. Has my right hon. Friend given any thought to wave-generated power and does he have any fears about it?

Sir Hector Monro: I mentioned it earlier in my speech and I know that an experiment took place in Mull or Islay.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): Islay.

Sir Hector Monro: Islay had a wave experiment, which may be continuing. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) will remember the ship that was launched and taken up to somewhere near Dounreay this year. It was not a success, to say the least, and we must think carefully about the output that could be achieved from wave power. We must also think about the transmission lines from wherever the wave power centre is situated. I am in favour of any alternative that we can think of, as long as it is practical and does not despoil our countryside.

I praise Dumfries and Galloway council for the efforts it has made to prepare the way for possible applications for windfarms, so that applicants can know which sites would be least obtrusive. I hope that none will be chosen, but at least the council has prepared the way and I give it credit for that.

We must not forget our tourists. They come to see our unsurpassed scenery, not regiments of wind turbines stretched across the hillside. One interesting fact from the Dumfries and Galloway study is that if every site it suggests were taken up, only 123 MW would be produced. That would be a drop in the ocean, yet visually deplorable. I welcome the positive approach by Dumfries and Galloway and suggest that many councils should follow it in the future. Councils should have a restrictive policy and councillors must make their decisions carefully.

In conclusion, I believe that we must rethink our renewable policy on windfarms. They make a small impact on global warming and we should bear it in mind that we are expecting an increased coal burn at Longannet, Cockenzie and Ferrybridge and more gas-fired stations. I am not sure that those stations are going the right way, but I do not think that windfarms will make a sufficient impact on global warming to justify the disadvantages that I have outlined in my remarks.

I live near Chapelcross and I am delighted that nuclear power comes out with a clean bill of health. It is efficient, clean and reliable and we should bear it in mind in the future. I hope that our major nuclear power stations in Scotland run effectively for a long time and I am glad that Chapelcross has had another 10 years' extension.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister responsible for industry and local government to discuss with Energy Ministers whether we have our renewable policies right, given the changes in the years since the original policy was made. Yes, we must take global warming into account, but not to the extent of ruining the countryside by producing relatively little power from many windfarms. I ask my hon. Friend to think carefully about what I have said today and perhaps he can give me some encouraging thoughts.

10.3 am

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) on securing a debate on this important matter. It is generally known that the Liberal Democrats are in favour of the development of renewable sources of energy. Indeed, on the island of Islay in my constituency, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, wave energy has been researched and developed in conjunction with Queen's university, Belfast and it was the subject of an award two years ago.

The hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) mentioned the impact of hydro-electric power. Cruachan power station in my constituency is an excellent example of a station that has blended in well with the surrounding area and the environment. It is a wonderful place to visit.

Mr. Gallie: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady's comments, but I remind her that a similar scheme was considered for Loch Lomond side and environmentalists argued that down. I am sure that that scheme would have fitted into the environment in much the same way as Cruachan.

Mrs. Michie: That is a worthwhile point. Windfarms are a different matter and several applications for development have been made in my constituency of Argyll and Bute. Some are accepted and others fiercely opposed on the grounds of visual intrusion and possible noise pollution. Windfarms may not be erected in designated scenic areas, as the hon. Member—I cannot remember his constituency—said.

Mr. Nigel Evans: Ribble Valley.

Mrs. Michie: Thank you.

Mr. Evans: We won.

Mrs. Michie: We shall see what happens at the next election. On this occasion, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that in Scotland we try not to erect windfarms in areas of scenic beauty, but they are erected in areas that are very beautiful. We have areas of beauty everywhere in the highlands and islands.

Planning applications are often opposed for several reasons and I have already mentioned two. They are also often opposed because, although the initial construction may generate jobs, in the end little employment is generated, as each windfarm needs perhaps only one person to look after it. Many people feel that windfarms are of no benefit to the local population and, although they might produce much-needed income for a hard-pressed farmer, they are deeply resented when erected on the estates of absentee landlords. If windfarms were erected to supply electricity to a local village at reduced cost, folk could see some point to them, but of course that is not the case.

I ask the Minister to consider carefully the consequences when a planning decision is taken in favour of a windfarm in open defiance of local opinion. That has happened several times in Scotland. I therefore ask him to consider the proposal that responsibility for planning decisions on medium and small-sized stations should be passed to local communities and community councils with, of course, safeguards for the opinions of the local

authorities and a right of appeal. I also suggest that windfarms might be more acceptable, subject to the restrictions that I have already mentioned, if local communities could build their own turbines, using the electricity directly and linking into the grid to sell surplus power.

The right hon. Member for Dumfries said that every application should be subject to an environmental impact assessment. Some of the good companies do that already. For example, Scottish Power has produced a good environmental impact assessment document, and that is something that all applicants should have to do. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am not convince that we need so many windfarms when, especially in the highlands and islands, we benefit from hydro power. As I understand it, we have an over-capacity for electricity in Scotland anyway.

Mr. Nigel Evans: The problem is that, given the massive explosion in the number of applications, windfarms will inevitably be sited in scenic areas of the United Kingdom. If we were to put only a small proportion of the money used to encourage wind power into energy conservation, the amount of energy saved could be greater than the output of all the wind turbines throughout the UK.

Mrs. Michie: That is a valid point. As the right hon. Member for Dumfries said, we should question whether we are getting value for money by allowing the spread of windfarms.

Telecommunications masts raise further fears about the consequences of planning decisions, especially for beautiful parts of Scotland, which depend to a certain extent on the tourist industry. Visitors go to those areas to enjoy the vistas over mountain, sea and loch. It is feared they will look like pincushions, with telecommunications masks and windfarm turbines sticking up all over the place.

I am acutely aware that we in the highlands and islands cannot live in a time warp. We must move with the times, and not get stuck, immobilised, in the past. I am determined that my area should not become a theme park dotted with interpretative centres, museums and craft shops for the benefit of visitors and those who want the highlands to be left as a wilderness.

I welcome the £46 million initiative by Highlands and Islands Enterprise to provide state-of-the-art mobile telephone coverage across the area. We need that coverage if we are to keep up, and if our businesses are to develop and flourish. National surveys have shown that mobile telephony enhances business efficiency by as much as 20 per cent. That could be worth upwards of £25 million a year to firms in the highlands and islands, and could mean the creation of a further 200 new jobs a year.

Unfortunately, however, there always seems to be a down side to new technology. That initiative will require the installation of transmission equipment at 250 locations, from Shetland to Argyll, and from the Western Isles to Moray. I make a plea to the Minister that he ensures that good planning regulations are put in place. England and Wales have a code of practice, although I do not know whether it is adhered to. The right hon. Member for Dumfries referred to masts that are more than 15 m high; although he talked in feet. Companies often erect 15 m masts and then obtain permission to heighten them by 5 m. As the mast is already there, they are told, "You might as well go ahead."

The highlands and islands are different—I hope—in that Cellnet and Vodafone have agreed with the Scottish Office to erect shared masts throughout the area. That is welcome, although other telecommunications companies, such as Orange, could erect rival masts. The case for shared masts is important, but we must consider their visual effect, and the impact that they will have on sites of special scientific interest. I do not know whether they can be camouflaged: it is not possible to grow trees on the top of a ridge or a mountain to camouflage a mast. There should be full consultation on every mast that is erected.

A national computer-generated network examines those matters, but it does not consider how coverage can best be achieved with the least possible impact on the landscape. We could be in the ridiculous position of requiring several masts to cover one glen or one area. Masts should be tried and tested first, and data should be collected from areas beyond that covered by the mast. Masts that are 15 m or higher require the construction of a track leading to the mast, which also has a visual impact.

I am sure that the Minister will give serious consideration to those points. I hope that he accepts that planning consents and the impact of masts and windfarms raise real fears, and that he will consider ways of overcoming those fears.

10.15 am

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) on obtaining this debate, and on his well-argued, well-balanced case. Few people would disagree with him.

In the early 1980s, and even before that, the groundswell of opinion that something had to be done about the problems caused by the use of fossil fuels resulted in various initiatives. Although those initiatives were welcome, it is another matter to find viable solutions that are acceptable to the vast majority.

Large parts of my constituency are remote and rural, or even wild. People who live in such areas do not necessarily object to masts. Some are welcome, such as those erected by the BBC and other broadcasting companies that allow people to receive television and radio signals. However, they are not so welcome when, as the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) said, the benefits to the local community are not so clear and obvious.

Scotland depends on exports to survive. That is especially true for rural areas. It is difficult to imagine how we would survive without exporting whisky. I do not agree with those who argue that nothing needs to be done as we do not use much electricity and we produce a surplus. We must deal with the problem, because the export of electricity is an important part of Scotland's contribution to our well-being, and we all benefit from it. The trouble is that local people do not always see the obvious benefits.

My right hon. Friend was right to draw attention to the advantages of hydro power, the development of which we should encourage. There is still considerable scope in

[Mr. Bill Walker]

Scotland—including in my constituency—for further hydro schemes of all sizes; small and large. Some of the rivers that run into the Tay are not dammed by hydro-electric companies. Those rivers are often the source of the flood problems in the Tay valley. I would welcome some constructive thinking about hydro schemes to deal with that problem. One of the advantages of such schemes is that the water is controlled to some degree, and they could be part of a flood prevention scheme, such as I am keen to have for the whole of the Tay. A hydro scheme could solve the difficulties with the River Garry, which runs uninterrupted into the Tay, causing no end of problems further down.

My right hon. Friend rightly pointed out that we need to have another look at the way in which planning operates. His local council should be congratulated on having guidelines and policy; not all councils do, and, as he will know, when planning applications are made, all hell is often let loose. No one ever wants such structures in their back yard. Councils should have guidelines suggesting what may and may not be acceptable locally.

My right hon. Friend was also right in saying that nuclear power was reliable and safe, and did not damage the environment in any way. We in Scotland are fortunate in having nuclear power, and I wish that more had been done to promote the image of nuclear generation.

I can think of no part of my constituency in which anyone would welcome a windfarm. Anyone considering establishing a windfarm of any kind should bear it in mind that they will encounter considerable local hostility. Unless the issue can be dealt with sensitively and with some understanding of local circumstances, we shall have problems. Large parts of my constituency are deemed environmentally sensitive areas, and must be treated as such; however, vast parts of it are not deemed environmentally sensitive, although I consider them some of the most beautiful areas in Scotland.

Mr. Gallie: My hon. Friend probably heard the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) say that no planning consent should be given when it is in open defiance of local opinion. Given what he has said about his constituency, does my hon. Friend agree that that would more or less wipe out any chance of windfarms being developed in Scotland?

Mr. Walker: As my hon. Friend suggests, there is no simplistic solution. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries demonstrated, what we need is fresh thinking, along with careful attention to detail and new guidelines from the Scottish Office.

I personally think that windfarms may not be viable, because they do not generate much electricity and their environmental impact may well count against them. That does not mean, however, that we should condemn the idea out of hand; as my right hon. Friend suggested, it should be considered objectively and sensibly.

As for telecommunications masts, some rationalisation is needed. Planning and control must be encouraged. If six different companies are trying to provide a service, six separate masts will not be needed. As we know from military and other equipment, masts can carry more than one type of equipment to send and receive signals. We should think in terms of strategically placed masts that will cater for a variety of needs. That would be better than allowing groups or individuals to put up their own masts and compete with each other. Again, we need ideas and guidelines from councils.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will accept the view of Conservative Members that renewable energy needs to be considered. We welcome the measures that have been taken so far, but we feel that the time has come to review some practices and policies. There is strong evidence that some councils have been hostile to what I consider the best projects—hydro schemes. We should give more thought to the way in which we use Scotland's natural environment, much of which consists of water that runs out to the sea.

10.25 am

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I hesitate to trespass on what is basically a Scottish debate, but the issues that have been raised apply throughout the United Kingdom. Let me therefore take a few minutes of the House's time to ask the Minister some questions.

I am deeply grateful to the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) for raising a matter in which many of us from other parts of the United Kingdom take an interest. I own a small hydro-electric plant, which provided all my electricity until some years after I first came to the House. For various reasons, it became unwise for me to continue running the plant, but I hope to do so again in the future.

As the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) pointed out, hydro is a good way of producing electricity, but it is not without its costs. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware of the difficulties that we have experienced throughout the country in regard to migratory fish. The River Awe scheme, for instance, has wiped out a certain genetic race of salmon. Although I consider hydro to be the best way of producing electricity, I think that we should exercise much more caution than has been exercised in the past.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Cannot the current technology, costly though it is, protect fish where hydro schemes are in operation?

Mr. Ross: I want to return to that point. In the end, it is the cost that counts—the economics of production of non-fossil fuel by whatever means.

Ultimately, all those matters are covered not by United Kingdom planning law but by EC directives. I am not convinced that all those directives have been applied throughout the United Kingdom, and I am certainly not very happy about the way in which they have been applied in Northern Ireland. In our experience—I hope that this is not the case in Scotland—applications for planning permission lack precision in regard to the height and size of generators, which sometimes change between the initial application and the building of masts. That causes enormous difficulties.

A universal problem is the making of the environmental assessment by the applicant. I have always felt that such assessments should be made by planning authorities or Government rather than by individuals, who will sometimes be trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. People throughout the country are unhappy about the present position.

Another problem in various parts of the country is that machine blades can reflect and interfere with television reception. There is also the safety aspect; machines keep shedding blades all over the world, and the only way of avoiding damage is to site the machines in remote but prominent areas. I hope that that will be taken into account in Scotland.

The aspect of wind power and the like that really concerns me, however, is the cost of production. What makes hydro schemes so attractive is that the fuel costs nothing. I believe that the old method of costing was to set up a 2.5 per cent. sinking fund. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) pointed out, there are now ways of protecting fish, albeit costly.

I believe that it is now claimed that coal can produce electricity at a cost of about 3p per unit. The cost of non-fossil fuels, especially wind power, is a great deal higher at 8p or 9p.

Wind production of electricity depends upon wind speed, so it is intermittent. The machines operate within only a relatively narrow range of wind speeds. For example, in my part of Northern Ireland on Monday there was a raging gale in the morning, by lunchtime the weather was calm, but by 7 pm there was another raging gale. I understand that the grid has some difficulty dealing with such changes in production, as it switches on and off.

The contracts in Northern Ireland—I should be grateful if the Minister would enlighten us on the position in Scotland—stipulate that non-fossil fuel electricity has to be paid for regardless of whether or not it is used. How much of the production is actually used?

The Minister will be pleased to hear that the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the other place and the producers intend to ensure that in Northern Ireland, from next April, people will be able to buy non-fossil fuel production to boil a kettle—but they will have to pay extra for it. They will have to pay the going rate. I cannot understand why anyone would want to pay extra for electricity, but the Minister's noble Friend told me in a letter that people would be willing to do so. Will that policy apply also in Scotland and elsewhere?

Like most people, initially I was starry-eyed about the prospect of cheap power. However, the more I have thought about it, the more convinced I have become that the Government did not think through all the consequences on entering into obligations before putting their name to a piece of paper that ties us in the way it does.

10.31 am

Mr. Phil Gallie (Ayr): I shall be brief, to allow sufficient time for the replies. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) was right to emphasise that we are debating a United Kingdom issue. Indeed, Scottish Power is currently considering providing small, low-input windfarms in Northern Ireland. It is also considering providing an interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland. That has created problems relating to the requirement for transmission line runs in Scotland. A factor that we must take on board when considering windfarms is that people do not like transmission lines. If windfarms are scattered around the country, overhead transmission lines will be required. They are not popular and are environmentally disadvantageous.

Hon. Members have referred to telecommunications. One of the great benefits of privatisation is that companies have been allowed to operate in both the generation and telecommunications sectors. That has resulted in towers carrying both facilities—an environmentally welcome development. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman) referred to the problems with overhead transmission and distribution lines. In fact, urban areas are lucky because most cables in our cities are buried under roads and pavements. However, there is an environmental consequence as those roads and pavements need to be dug up, which causes aggravation. Any thought of a major national grid buried beneath the ground is unrealistic because the cost would wipe the country out of the commercial market. There are also environmental arguments against burying cables across the country.

I am only too well aware of the problems, especially heat, caused by windfarms. Back in 1980, when I was a district councillor, one of the first planning matters I dealt with in my ward was the application by the South of Scotland Electricity Board to build a windfarm—one wind generator—in the village of Fairlie, right next to the nuclear power station at Hunterston. The message from the community council was loud and clear, "We don't mind Hunterston C, but we don't want a noisy contraption in our ·'"..ge." That says a great deal about windfarms.

I went to Wales recently and saw what was at that time the largest windfarm in Europe. It is part-owned by Scottish Power. It has 104 wind generators, but generates only a measly 30 MW. Those people who, in the past, have argued for windfarms as being environmentally friendly are now the very people who are objecting to further farms because of the problems, especially noise, that they create.

Of course, matters have moved on and Scotland is to have 0.6 MW generators rather than the current 0.3 MW generators. The new generators are much quieter and more acceptable, but they are still a visual blot on the landscape. I sympathise with the view of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) that local opinion must be taken into account. However, it cuts across the idea of environmentally friendly, renewable sources—something that meets the aspirations of every environmentalist.

I strongly support the view of my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) on nuclear generation—compact sites and large-volume output. Indeed, a 2,000 MW site is quite feasible in a small area. Only one main transmission run is required and the emissions from nuclear power stations are virtually zero. There are no real problems.

Let us consider the transmission problems in Scotland arising from the installation of power sites. Currently, we transmit some 1,800 MW of power across our border to the south. There are plans to increase that to 2,200 MW. I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister to speak to his colleagues south of the border, to try to get early planning authority in North Yorkshire to upgrade the national grid crossover to 2,200 MW. After all, Scottish generation is environmentally friendly generation. It uses fossil fuel based on low-sulphur coal. That is environmentally friendly. Scotland can produce what is required without contaminating our atmosphere to the extent that happens with generation south of the border.

[Mr. Phil Gallie]

That brings me back to the comments made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry about the United Kingdom aspect. We are indeed talking about the United Kingdom and we should try to take advantage of systems across the country. I could say a great deal more, but I recognise that I must leave time for the replies.

10.37 am

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I shall be brief to allow the Minister time to reply.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro), who has been absolutely loyal to the Monro doctrine—that the environment counts very much. I know that he has taken part in every environmental debate in this House, certainly since I have been here. On issues such as national parks, his voice and his wisdom have been very welcome. I agree with the points that he made in opening the debate.

The issue is to embrace technological change without scarring our environment. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that currently there is a laissez-faire attitude to the erection of masts and pylons. I am sure that we could get together and co-operate in looking at these matters.

I accept that we all want to supply cheap, non-polluting and infinitely renewable energy and I agree that some areas in Scotland are ideal for windfarms. However, people in Cornwall, Cumbria, mid-Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland are divided between support for cleaner power and opposition to what they see as a desecration of their landscape.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to power generation. Currently, barely 1.5 per cent. of our power needs are met by renewable energy, compared with 25 or 26 per cent.—almost 50 per cent. in Scotland—met by nuclear energy. The remainder comes from traditional fossil fuels, mainly coal and gas. Wind power must be seen in that context.

There is an argument used by the advocates of wind power that local people come to accept turbines. A recent study by Exeter university found that in Cornwall opposition to an early windfarm at Delabole declined after several years. Even so, environment and conservation groups admit that the windfarm issue has divided their supporters. The debate is fractious and we have to accept that it always will be.

The key, as the right hon. Member for Dumfries said, is that wind energy generation should not be unsightly, either when functioning or after the end of the life of a windfarm. Efforts have been made to that end in Scotland, but, in December 1994, 30 projects were awarded contracts under the first order made within the Scottish renewables obligation, commonly referred to as SRO-1.

To identify planning and environmental issues associated with the development of windfarms and other alternative energy sources, an assessment of potential renewable energy resources in Scotland was published in December 1993. The assessment was carried out by Scottish Hydro-Electric, Scottish Power, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Scottish Office, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, with support from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.They put the issue of renewable energy in the context of the planning system, but I shall not read out the relevant chapters of their report. The report contains good guidelines, but there is a softness about them. At the end of the day, we need more firmness, especially in the planning system. The right hon. Member for Dumfries asked whether the system was being fair to objectors; I do not think that it is, but I will cover that point when talking about telecommunications masts.

In respect of telecommunications masts, planning controls in Scotland are similar, but not identical, to those in England and Wales. Scottish Office guidance to local authorities on planning and telecommunications has been set out in the Scottish Office Development Department's circular 25/85. Under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (Scotland) Order 1992, telecommunications companies have similar powers for the installation of apparatus as they have in England and Wales. The same height restriction of 15 m applies for masts to fall within permitted development and normally express planning permission must be sought for masts higher than that. However, the prior approval procedure for permitted development rights for masts less than 15 m does not apply in Scotland. I hope that the Minister will turn his attention to that point.

On any mast, microwave antennas may not exceed 1.3 m in any dimension and no more than 10 antennas are allowed on any mast. The order defines microwave as

"that part of the radio spectrum above 1,000 MHz".

That would seem to create an anomaly in respect of mobile telephone masts, because Cellnet and Vodafone networks operate at frequencies below 1,000 MHz, whereas Orange and One 2 One operate at frequencies above 1,000 MHz. In other words, it would appear that Cellnet and Vodafone masts would not be described as

"microwave antennas and their supporting structures"

under the order, whereas Orange and One 2 One's would. If Vodafone's and Cellnet's masts were not defined as microwave antennas, there would apparently be no restrictions on their use within conservation and national scenic areas. The Minister should look at that issue, because there would be great concern if masts were to be erected in such areas.

I asked the House of Commons Library to research the issue. The Scottish Office told the Library that it was unaware of any difference in the planning controls on different operators and that it was unaware of the issue ever having been raised. If this is the first time that it has been raised, I should be grateful if the Minister would give it his attention, but I do not expect an immediate response.

On the more general issue of planning control and mast development, I am aware that the four network operators met officials of the Scottish Office about three weeks ago. The Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland has expressed its concern. Scotland's four main mobile telephone operators want to install hundreds more transmitters before 2000, many in some of Scotland's most scenic areas. The APRS says that, every week, two or three new radio masts are erected by operators using "permitted development rights" that allow them to build structures up to 15 m in height without needing planning permission.

I shall give the Minister an example. According to the APRS, an installation erected by Orange on Bonartie hill, near Loch Leven in Kinross-shire, "glows and shimmers"

when the light catches its steel framework, totally dominating the surrounding landscape. That issue falls within the guidelines, but it is causing great concern among local people.

Scotland already has between 400 and 500 sites, but the operators want almost to double that number so as to extend their coverage throughout rural areas that have not previously been reached. The spur for that is their desire to exploit the Scottish mobile telephone market—we have no objection to that, but we must remember that Scotland has lagged behind the rest of the United Kingdom—helped by the licence requirement that demands 95 per cent. coverage of the UK. According to a Cellnet spokesman, that will mean that

"By 2000 some 12 million people will have mobiles, double the existing number, and Scotland is one of our big target areas."

In short, an existing problem will become worse in future and all of us have a duty to turn our attention to it.

The highlands and islands concept with Vodafone and Cellnet has already been mentioned. I do not object to the project because it is a positive development, but the right hon. Member for Dumfries and others will be concerned about the A9 corridor and how development will proceed there, especially because it is an area of scenic beauty that attracts tourists. We do not want our landscape to be scarred, so we have a joint interest in the issue, as this debate has illustrated.

The Orange representative, Richard Rumbelow, said that the company already had 180 sites in Scotland, mainly in the central belt, but was looking to add another 100 by 1998. Strutt and Parker, the land agent, has arranged 22 leases this year—double last year's tally—and is working on a further 20 sites in Scotland. The company says that smaller structures command rents of about £3,000 a year, with masts above 15 m earning £4,000 a year, so farmers and others have a commercial interest in the matter. Nevertheless, such development must be controlled.

The possibility of sharing masts is important. I hope that that will be done in the highlands and islands project. Highlands and islands spokespersons have said that, on technological grounds, sharing is not possible in many cases, but I hope that efforts will be made to encourage the practice.

The key issue is the scope given to operators by permitted development rights. The fact is that, if a company wants to build a mast on the summit of Ben Nevis, planning authorities can complain, but have few powers to do anything about it provided that the mast is less than 15 m high. Planners' only sanction is an article 4 order, under which they can forbid development in specified areas. However, according to a highlands and islands planner, Bill Hepburn, who is currently compiling guidelines for councillors:

"that legislation is extremely difficult to enact".

He adds:

"I suspect that planning authorities will not actually be able to make it stick."

It is therefore important that, in discussions with mobile telephone operators and rural and other interests, a framework is developed to cover that issue.

I want to give the Minister one last example. When Aberdeenshire council prevented Vodafone from hiding a large mast inside the Tower of Johnston on the Garvock hill overlooking the Mearns in Kincardineshire—I think that that is in the Minister's constituency—and secured protection for the monument, Vodafone simply went ahead and built a much more obvious 12 m mast only 150 yd away. The intentions of the local authority were thwarted in that case as they have been in others.

I agree that we have to reconcile environmental protection with technological innovation and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfries on raising this subject today so that the issues can be examined. Fruitful discussions should proceed so that we can come to a joint agreement for the future.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. George Kynoch): I, too, would like to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) on securing this important debate, which has given hon. Members a good opportunity to have a sensible discussion about an issue of great importance. I should also like to echo the recognition given to the significant work that my right hon. Friend did for many years when he was Minister responsible for the environment at the Scottish Office, when he ensured that planning guidelines were drawn up tightly to ensure a sensible balance between development and protection of the environment. I hope that I can try to convince my right hon. Friend and others that we can achieve that balance within those guidelines and our robust planning procedures and controls.

My right hon. Friend referred to the impact on the environment of wind turbines and telecommunications towers. I know that my right hon. Friend will understand, and I trust that other hon. Members will also understand, that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on any specific cases that are currently before the Secretary of State because that could be prejudicial to any future consideration of those proposals.

The Government have put in place a robust and comprehensive planning policy framework to secure sound planning decisions on renewable energy development proposals. That framework consists of a clear policy of careful siting of all renewable energy developments, appropriately strengthened in the case of wind-generated types. The extension of the legislation on environmental assessment has ensured the systematic evaluation of relevant proposals. To ensure a consistent and effective application of the policy at local level, the notification procedures have been reinforced to cover all wind power developments that the planning authority is minded to approve.

Firm foundations are set in national planning policy guideline 6 which was published in August 1994 following wide-ranging consultation with environmental, industry and community groups. NPPG 6 focuses on those renewable energy technologies that are likely to attract support under the Scottish renewables obligation, to which the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) referred, and on projects connecting with the electricity distribution system. I should like to add that the principles of those guidelines and the environmental regulations should be applied to smaller projects for on-site use.

Much of the framework applies to all forms of renewable energy-related development, but significant policy has also been set down on wind-generated energy.

[Mr. George Kynoch]

Our policy requires all proposals for renewable energy-related developments to be given careful consideration, to ensure that the localised environmental impacts are acceptable before consent can be given. We consider that to be essential in the interests of Scotland's natural heritage. It is also part of our commitment to sustainable development.

It almost goes without saying that those areas protected by international and national designations are scrupulously cared for within the policy framework in NPPG 6. I know that my right hon. Friend is only too well aware of that. We recognise, however, that outwith those international and nationally safeguarded areas, planning authorities may wish to identify, with appropriate justification in their development plans, other environmentally significant areas. Of course, the degree of outright protection that such areas will require will not normally be as high as that given to national or international designations, but potential developments in such areas still require careful consideration. I would therefore encourage hon. Members and those concerned about particularly important or sensitive areas within their locality to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the planning process to raise them with their planning authorities. The means exist at local level to highlight the special features that could be at risk if inappropriate development was permitted.

My right hon. Friend referred to the work done by Dumfries and Galloway council, which I welcome. Reference was made to the Government's guidelines on such work and, indeed, paragraph 66 of NPPG 6 contains the guideline that structure plans should include policies that express the regional council's strategy for renewable energy developments.

I acknowledge the reservations expressed by my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members about environmental assessment. I know that, for some time, he has been a firm advocate of tightening the controls on such assessments. My right hon. Friend called for the lowering of the indicative criteria threshold for formal environmental assessment set out in the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department's circular, 26/1994, from 10 wind generators to zero. I am not sure whether one could contemplate going that far, but I am happy to undertake to consider seriously my right hon. Friend's argument. I would like to discuss it further with colleagues at the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department and other Departments.

On notification direction, hon. Members will be aware that the Scottish planning system operates under the general principle that decisions should be taken at the most local administrative level unless there are strong reasons for taking them at a higher one. While the Secretary of State maintains that approach to renewable energy-related development because of the possible visual impact of windfarms on the Scottish landscape, he requires to be notified by the planning authority of any application where it is minded to approve a proposal for one or more wind generators. That provides him with the opportunity to consider if the individual case raises issues of national significance and to decide to call it in for his own determination. That practice will continue to ensure that the Secretary of State is able to monitor carefully all proposals for wind turbines and in particular their potential environmental impact. I understand the issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries, but I hope that he can rest assured that his comments will be carefully considered and taken into account in the future.

I share the concerns expressed by my right hon. Friend and others about the potential environmental harm that can be caused as a result of a spread of telecommunications networks. I represent a predominantly rural constituency, so I am well aware of the sensitivities involved. I am determined to ensure that the environmental impact of such developments is minimised. As with wind generator projects, however, it is important to take a balanced view.

It might be helpful if I described the regulatory background relating to the erection of telecommunications towers. The telecommunications code system operators are licensed by the Department of Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984. Their licences set target dates by which the operator must be able to provide services to a certain percentage of the United Kingdom population, and the operators are given powers to help them do that. They have the right to install apparatus on land with the occupier's agreement, as well as compulsory purchase powers and the power to carry out work and install apparatus in streets. But obligations are placed on operators. They are required, for example, to remove redundant apparatus and they must follow prescribed procedures in removing apparatus to allow public utilities to carry out street works.

Those licences also contain important conditions designed to protect the amenity. For example, before installing any apparatus above ground, operators must notify the planning authority and allow time for it to raise objections before installing the apparatus. That notification must include details of any other proposed apparatus in the authority's area to allow the authority to take an overview of the proposals. It has 28 days in which to raise concerns and to request changes to appearance, landscape and siting. The operator is expected to attempt to respond positively.

Tighter rules also apply in relation to designated areas such as sites of special scientific interest or of natural heritage. There are also strict rules on the way operators design their networks and implement them. For example, they are required to keep the number of items of apparatus to the minimum practicable, allowing for estimated growth in demand. They are also obliged to protect the visual amenity of properties in proximity to their apparatus as far as practicable.

Much has been said about the general permitted development order, which allows operators to erect free-standing masts up to 15 m in height without the need to seek planning consent. I stress that they still have to notify the local authority. I am particularly concerned from experience in my constituency and elsewhere that many of those structures are crude, and although they may be less than 15 m high, they can still constitute significant structures on the landscape. I am looking to the industry to meet its environmental obligations under the terms of its licences. I do not wish to hinder developments that are generally beneficial, but it is important to reach environmentally acceptable solutions. I am therefore considering whether the permitted development right provisions might be tightened to provide better control in

relation to substantial structures of less than 15 m in height. In addition, we have embarked on reviewing the operation of the safeguards that I have mentioned.

Earlier this month I instigated a meeting between officials and representatives of the leading telecommunications code system operators. I am sure that that meeting will be the first of a few. I intend that there shall be discussions with the industry to try to ensure a balance between allowing the significant technological development and communications improvements that were mentioned by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) and the interests of rural communities, the impact on the environment and the other aspects that have been raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and by other hon. Members.

In this useful debate, an important subject has been covered. I apologise to hon. Members for not having the time to reply to every issue, but I hope that I have given some reassurance.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

11 am

Mr. Joseph Ashton (Bassetlaw): I thank the House and Madam Speaker for giving me the opportunity to raise this complex matter, which is of great concern to everybody in health and especially to my constituent, Mrs. Diane Blood of Worksop.

Mrs. Blood and her husband Stephen were married in May 1991, having been courting for nine years. It was a long-standing stable relationship. Mrs. Blood worked in advertising and public relations and went on to set up her own company under the Government's enterprise scheme, doing public relations work for nursery products. That job involved advertising and matters relating to children, so she has much experience of children and babies.

Mrs. Blood's job was a struggle at first and she dealt with publications such as *Baby Magazine; First Steps; Mother and Baby; Parents; Pregnancy and Birth; Practical Parenting; Our Baby; Right Start; Twins, Triplets and More Magazine; Under Fire Contact; You and Your Baby; New Generation; Offspring; Maternity and Mothercraft; Nursery Choice—The Complete Lifestyle Magazine for You, Your Baby and Child* and others.

I have read out that list to show that Mrs. Blood was experienced in terms of babies, in knowing what to expect after a birth. She and her husband very much wanted children and they spent much time discussing a possible pregnancy. They had the good fortune to share similar religious beliefs and believed that one of the central purposes of marriage and of human existence is to found a family. They regarded the miracle of modern reproductive medicine in aiding procreation to be of great benefit to society at large. They also believed that the personal choice of parents must be respected and that, except where necessary, the state should not interfere with personal choice in such private and family matters.

Mr. and Mrs. Blood married in the Anglican Church using the traditional service from the 1662 "Book of Common Prayer" because that service places greater emphasis on procreation than the modern alternative service book which is now used. They regarded themselves and their bodies as joined together in holy matrimony and that is why this is a serious debate. It is about a possible mother being prevented by the state from having her husband's child. They were in favour of birth control, although her husband was against abortion. They both thought that artificial insemination was a wonderful way to help unfortunate people to have children.

Mr. and Mrs. Blood discussed at great length how they would be prepared to have a child if they discovered that they had problems in conceiving. They agreed that they would go to any artificial lengths if Mrs. Blood was unable to conceive from her husband's sperm. They saw no objection to the posthumous use of Mr. Blood's sperm, provided that the interests of the child and the other children of the family were properly protected. The arguments in favour of such use struck them as particularly compelling, especially in the case of a married couple since their reproductive material, sperm and embryo, would create a child who would be confident of his or her genetic inheritance from natural, biological parents. They saw no objection to taking sperm from a permanently unconscious or brain-dead husband for his wife's procreative use.

[Mr. Joseph Ashton]

Mr. Blood wished to donate his organs for the benefit of others and there is no doubt that he would have wished that sperm could be taken from him and used by his wife in the tragic circumstance of an untimely death. That would enable his wife to have the child that they had always wanted and it is the main reason for Mrs. Blood wanting her application to succeed: she wanted to respect her husband's wishes as well as her own. They discussed the issue many times, especially because of conversations that resulted from newspaper articles and the magazines that I have mentioned. Such conversations arose because of Mrs. Blood's profession.

The couple talked specifically about newspaper items, about widows who wanted to use the sperm of their late husbands to have a baby, and they both thought that widows were right in wanting to have babies in that way. They did not think that a woman should be compelled to start again by remarrying or have to use somebody else's sperm, nor did they think that her desire to have a child should be confused with thoughts of the reincarnation of her husband.

Mrs. Blood remembers saying that she would not want to remarry if anything happened to Stephen and that she would want his baby. He stated categorically that that was his position. She remembers that, when she went to the hospital, the conversations came back to her when her husband was ill and unconscious. They were undoubtedly strong factors in persuading her to ask the doctors to take sperm from her husband for artificial insemination.

In 1995, Mrs. Blood's career was stable and she and her husband were ready to have a child. From that time they began trying to conceive. They installed new furniture in the spare bedroom to make more storage space and chose the name for a possible baby. Then Stephen fell ill. However, up to that time the topic of having a family was a constant source of conversation. There were some signs that they would be successful and that their desire would be fulfilled because they thought that Mrs. Blood was pregnant.

On 26 February Mr. Blood complained of feeling unwell. Four days later he was dead. At first it was thought that he had influenza, but he was rushed to hospital because it turned out that he had meningitis. While he was in hospital two samples of sperm were taken, and Mrs. Blood wishes to have an artificially assisted pregnancy using that sperm either in the United Kingdom or abroad. Tests have shown that she would have no problems relating to that.

On the evening of Sunday 26 February, Stephen started vomiting and at about 10 o'clock Mrs. Blood rang the duty doctor. He arrived at 11 o'clock and after conducting an examination said that there was a slim chance of meningitis and that Mr. Blood should be admitted to hospital. The ambulance arrived at 11.15 and doctors began treating Stephen with drugs for meningitis. On Monday 27 February the doctors decided to move him from Worksop to a hospital in Sheffield and Mrs. Blood accompanied him in the ambulance.

On Tuesday the doctors finally succeeded in performing a lumbar puncture, which had been attempted several times since Stephen's admission to hospital. At about 6 o'clock the cardiac arrest team was summoned and the doctor told Mrs. Blood that although they had kept her husband's heart beating, they were unable to sustain his breathing without a machine, and that his condition was not at all good. Mrs. Blood mentioned that they had been trying for a family and that there was a chance that she was pregnant. They asked whether she had been given any tablets to protect her from meningitis and put her on a course of tablets. They knew then that there was a chance that she was pregnant.

Stephen Blood was moved to intensive care on the top floor of the hospital and at that stage Mrs. Blood asked the doctor to find out whether it would be possible to take a sperm sample from her husband for later use because his condition made her fear the worst. She knows now that, even had Stephen recovered, sperm retrieval would still have been sensible because his illness may have rendered him sterile. That would have given them a chance to have a child, even if her husband recovered. The idea of preserving the sperm came to her because of their discussions and because they were trying for a baby, after all the time of waiting. When Mrs. Blood mentioned taking the sperm sample, the doctor did not seem to know immediately whether it was possible.

On the morning of Wednesday 1 March, Dr. Edbrook told her that things had got worse in the night. Hospital staff had tried to get her husband to breathe on his own by withdrawing sedation, but he was unable to do so. At that stage, Dr. Edbrook informed Mrs. Blood that, as for the sperm sample, it was an unusual request, but that the hospital happened to have the foremost expert in the field, a registrar, Mr. Tophill, who was prepared to take a sample. Mrs. Blood asked if the sperm might be infected by Stephen's illness and the expert said that it would not be.

Mrs. Blood discussed the matter with her parents and Stephen's parents. All four agreed that the sample should be taken if possible. Mrs. Blood received counselling in relation to the taking of the sample. She was also warned that there may be some problem in relation to inheritance rights and that the sample might not be successful, but she was prepared to take that chance.

Mrs. Blood went into the room where her husband Stephen was lying unconscious and sat with him. The woman doctor in the room told her more about the possible use of the sperm after Stephen had died. This bit is important. She told her that it would be taken to Jessop hospital first, a maternity hospital in Sheffield, but that Mrs. Blood did not need to use it there. It could be moved to wherever she wished later. The doctor mentioned the need to sign

"an organ, or in this case semen, donor form".

Mrs. Blood was happy to do so, but no form was ever produced for her to sign, despite her repeatedly asking whether the form had arrived. Later the same doctor said that, because of legal reasons, the hospital was not sure whether the sample could be taken, but Mr. Tophill arrived and confirmed that he was willing to take the sample.

Before the sample was taken, Mrs. Blood was again specifically asked for consent to the procedure taking place. It was clear to her that it was important and the medical staff in the room were asked to be witnesses to her response. She assumed that she was being asked to give her consent and the consent that Stephen would have given, had he been in a position to do so. She may have been asked whether she consented on Stephen's behalf, but she certainly would have done so.

At 6 o'clock, Mr. Tophill said that the first sample had not been successful, but that he would, if necessary, take another on Saturday when he returned. He was concerned that freezing the sperm might cause its condition to deteriorate. Mrs. Blood then said that she was happy to have the treatment there and then while, technically, her husband was still alive, if that was the best option, but Mr. Tophill said that there were other alternatives, including growing sperm from a sample of testicle tissue.

At that time, Mr. Blood was being kept alive on life support machines. I will go into detail because this is important as to whether this matter falls within the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Mrs. Blood was anxious that the machine should not be turned off until further attempts had been made. Dr. Edbrook said that the second test as to whether Stephen was clinically dead had not yet been done and that it would not be done until at least the following morning, depending on his clinical condition. He said that there was no reason why Stephen should not be kept on the support machines.

Mr. Blood's parents visited him for the last time on Thursday and indicated their acceptance that he was dead. Later in the afternoon, Dr. Edbrook said that the hospital was going to do the second test as to whether Mr. Blood was clinically dead. He then confirmed to Mrs. Blood the good news that the first sample had been much more successful than the hospital had initially thought. He said that it was

"a million times better than expected".

He asked whether, given that the first sample had proved okay and that the second test had confirmed Stephen to be clinically dead, it would be all right to turn off the machines. Mrs. Blood agreed.

If the insemination had taken place while Mr. Blood was alive on the machine, there would have been no problem. Mrs. Blood would have been bearing her husband's child. At that time, she thought that she was pregnant, so it may not have been necessary to use the sperm. That was why she did not agree to use it there and then. Obviously, there was great grief when her husband died and Mrs. Blood resolved to have his child by any means.

No other child's interests in relation to inheritance rights might be affected by the use of the sperm. There is no risk to a possible child's health or to Mrs. Blood's health. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has not suggested that allowing her to procreate in such circumstances, even in other countries, would offend against the policy of the 1990 Act or moral values, or create a substantial risk of injury to any public interest. Mrs. Blood does not understand what conceivable good reason there might be for preventing her from having her husband's child by combining their reproductive material, simply because he was unable to give his written consent when he was unconscious and dying. He undoubtedly did give his consent to the taking and use of sperm so that his wife might have his child. It is not fair or reasonable, under any law or any circumstances, moral, legal or otherwise, that this woman should be denied the right to have a child by her husband.

The sperm samples are being held at the Infertility Research Trust for Mrs. Blood. She has been invoiced and asked to pay a charge. She has paid the most recent invoice—a charge of £100—for keeping the sperm there since March. Unlike third party donors, who receive payment for donating sperm, she has had to pay another £250 for obtaining the sperm from her husband. The law looks more and more like an ass.

If Mrs. Blood is permitted to export the sperm, she can have the treatment abroad. She can have it in the European Community, in Belgium, in New York or even in Greece. Insemination can be done there, but this point of law should never have arisen. Who would have objected to the HFEA giving consent for a wife to be inseminated with her husband's sperm? What are its reasons? The way that it objected is absolutely appalling.

Mrs. Blood applied for the sperm to be used. Her application was rejected in May 1996 and, even though the HFEA received an affidavit in June 1996, it still refused to change its mind or to review its decision in any way, shape or form. Mrs. Blood has now been compelled to go to court to seek a judicial review of the 1990 Act. It has cost between £30,000 and £50,000—she does not receive legal aid. She has had to take a second mortgage out on her house to challenge the HFEA's view of the law.

There are 21 members of the HFEA, a quango that has discretion to use its common sense, we would think, without having to be challenged. What is the point of having this quango if we have to go to court? We may as well let people just take a chitty in, as they do to get married in a register office, yet it has refused to use its discretion.

There has been enormous sympathy for Mrs. Blood. Throughout Britain, people's response has been fantastic. Their views are all along the lines of *The Times* editorial, which said:

"How can a dead man's interests be harmed by such use"

of his sperm by his wife? It goes on:

"Parliament gave it"—

the authority—

"total discretion on the import and export of sperm and embryos."

The sperm could be used anywhere in the world, so what is stopping it from being used here? As the editorial says:

"The authority should now use the discretion it possesses under the Act".

Baroness Warnock, who chaired the committee whose findings led to the creation of the HFEA, said:

"We didn't think of this kind of contingency"

and that the case was "extremely exceptional". Every hon. Member has sat on Standing Committees making law and has tried to imagine what could happen. We probe and table amendments, not because we want to vote on the amendment, but simply to find out what could happen.

During the passage of the 1990 Act, no hon. Member asked, "What would happen if a man went into a coma and died?" It is no one's fault, because none of us has a crystal ball. However, we expect the people who are put in charge of such authorities or privatised industries to use their common sense to act in the public's best interests—especially if the public do not object to a given course of action. Mrs. Blood is facing that type of situation.

Lord Winston—professor of fertility studies at Hammersmith hospital—said that it was "cruel and unnatural" for such a decision to be taken, and that he would consider introducing in the other place a Back-Bench Bill, to which he thought there would be very little opposition, to remedy a situation in which a man can donate

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"his kidneys, his lungs, his heart and every other organ without any informed consent, but is unable to give sperm to his wife. That seems ridiculous."

The judge who conducted the judicial review—Sir Stephen Brown, president of the High Court Family Division—said that, although he deeply regretted the law's rigidity and the case had "stirred the emotions", he had no option but to carry out the law and to maintain its dignity. There was tremendous national media interest in the case after he said that and Mrs. Blood lost the case. The Secretary of State for Health was interviewed and said that he had great sympathy for her and that he would do what he could to resolve the situation.

Mrs. Blood has two or three options. She could appeal against the decision—although I know that her legal advisers have asked her to delay such action until we have heard the Minister's reply to this debate. There may be an appeal, depending on what the Minister says. Perhaps the Government could find time for the House to consider an amendment tabled by Lord Winston in the other place. The Act requires only one more phrase, specifying that "in normal circumstances" written consent must be provided by donors. The addition of that phrase would mean that a husband could not give consent in abnormal circumstances—such as if he were in a coma. If the couple were not married, the authority might refuse consent.

The necessary amendment would be very small and would require very little of the House's time. Perhaps the Government could provide one and half hours after 10 pm to change the law, which could be changed in two or three weeks. I should welcome such action, but we must also deal with the matter of Mrs. Blood's costs, which now total between £30,000 and £50,000 and will increase if she appeals against the decision.

Perhaps the Minister will say, "We can find a sympathetic hon. Member who has won the ballot for private Members' Bills." But, as hon. Members who have won the ballot know, it is very difficult to amend the law with a private Members' Bill. Hon. Members can talk out an amendment, and a sufficient number of hon. Members must come on the day to vote in favour of it. The current Session is very short, and there may be only two or three Fridays for private Members' Bills. Moreover, the election is approaching, and an hon. Member who wins the ballot may have a marginal seat and may not wish to introduce controversial legislation. So even that approach is fraught with difficulty.

The Minister must tell us what he intends to do about the situation. Late this morning, I heard on the BBC that the HFEA has said that it will re-examine the case. I do not know what that means. Does that mean that the authority will change its mind and approve Mrs. Blood's request, after the court has said that it cannot? That seems unlikely. Will the HFEA use its discretion to allow Mrs. Blood to take her husband's sperm abroad so that she can be inseminated? I do not know, because it has said only that it will re-examine the case.

The authority has made no guarantee, and much firmer assurances will have to be given. If not, poor Mrs. Blood—who is determined to have her husband's child—will once again have to face the harrowing experience of going to the Court of Appeal and of paying for a provision that Parliament would gladly have made in the 1990 Act, had anyone thought of it at the time.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity of this debate, and I thank hon. Members for listening so patiently. I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

11.24 am

Dame Jill Knight (Birmingham, Edgbaston): The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) deserves to be paid great tribute for the way in which he has presented his constituent's case. He has been very factual, but he has also been very moving. He has demonstrated what the House is all about, and has undermined the arguments of those who constantly attack hon. Members and think that they do not do their jobs. The overwhelming majority of hon. Members, from both sides of the House, behave honourably and do their utmost in serving their constituents. The hon. Gentleman has done his utmost, and I can pay no higher tribute to him than that.

The Blood case is very sad, and no one can help but be moved by Mrs. Blood's plight. I sometimes think that only those who have lost a beloved husband can understand what such a loss means. I have lost a husband, and I understand. I have the greatest possible sympathy for Mrs. Blood. Moreover, from what the hon. Member for Bassetlaw has told the House, I have no doubts about Mrs. Blood's excellent character, her experience and interest in children or the fact that, if she and her husband had been able to have a child in the normal way, they would have been extremely good parents.

I cannot help thinking, however, of the old adage about hard cases making bad laws. The only aspect of the speech by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw that worried me was that not one word was said about the child. I am very concerned about children. I am concerned that, when children are brought into the world by methods that I can describe only as "unnatural"—that sounds unkind, but it is not meant to be; it is meant to be factual—or by a scientific procedure, they have the right to expect the law to protect them, because they are so utterly vulnerable. They have no say in whether they are to be born.

Some years ago, when the House considered such children, we rightly said that the child's interests should be paramount. There were no two ways about it: we said that their interests are paramount. After hearing the tragic circumstances of the Blood case, which the hon. Gentleman has explained so well, in my heart I still cannot believe that the child's position should be downgraded because of the mother's tragic despair. I am extremely sorry for Mrs. Blood, but I should be very sorry for a child who would be bound to know when his father had died.

All hon. Members understand that a child might not be born in this case at all, and that it is not correct to say that a child would definitely be born if Mrs. Blood were successful in her request and underwent the procedure. If it were successful and a baby were born, however, the child might grow up to be imaginative. For him to have to take on board the fact that he was born as the child of a dead man, and not until many months after his father's death, would be enough to cause nightmares in that child.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Dame Jill Knight: No; I should like to finish this argument first.

All hon. Members understand that children are sometimes born and their fathers then die. We weep about such desperately sad cases, although the mothers in such tragic cases often bring up their children very well. Surely, if the interests of the child are paramount, there cannot be any doubt that the best way to have a child is with a father and a mother. Sometimes, that is not possible because something terrible happens, such as the father being killed in an accident. Of course I am not saying that a single mother or father—it could be the mother who dies—cannot bring up a child well. Many single parents do a marvellous job of bringing up their children.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dame Jill Knight: Forgive me, but I must finish this point. My hon. Friend must be a little patient.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Please do not sit down without letting me in.

Dame Jill Knight: I shall let my hon. Friend make her point, but I must say that there can be little doubt that the ideal way to bring a child into the world is with a father and a mother. It is no use saying that that is not the best way just because tragedies can occur.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: I rarely disagree with my hon. Friend on such matters, but I cannot for the life of me understand her strong objection in this case. Given the fact that the mother will clearly adore the child and bearing in mind the history of the family, with the father also having wanted a child, why should the child have nightmares? He should be thrilled that his parents so wanted him.

Dame Jill Knight: How can a child be thrilled that he has no father? How can a child be thrilled that he has only one parent? He can be sad about that, but he cannot be thrilled about it.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: He will not have nightmares.

Dame Jill Knight: A sensitive child might well have nightmares at the certain knowledge that he was born from a dead man. That frightens me.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dame Jill Knight: Yes, but this is the last time, because we do not have much time.

Mr. Illsley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Is not consent the issue? If Mr. Blood had given written consent before he died, the child would have been born to a single parent. The issue is consent, not the effect on the child of being born by a particular procedure.

Dame Jill Knight: The hon. Gentleman's point is reasonable, but it does not address the whole situation, which is as I have described. We do not know what the gentleman might have done. We think that we know, but we are not sure. We cannot judge on what can be only a presumption. We know that such a child would be born from a dead man months and months—more than a year—after the father died. I do not think that it is ever a good thing deliberately to bring a child into the world with no father.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw rightly made some important and sympathetic points, but those points cannot give the child a father, which is what I am worried about. It cannot be right to say that fathers do not matter much or that it does not make two bits of difference whether a father is there. If the interests of the child are paramount, we must consider the fact that a child needs a father.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw said that the birth was prevented by the state. It was not. It was prevented by the tragic death of the poor man. The situation is not the same as for kidney, hearts or livers because, as I am sure that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw knows, such organs can be used only if they come from a virtually living man. Hearts or livers cannot be frozen. The two situations are not the same.

I am sorry for Mrs. Blood and her predicament, but I would be even sorrier for a child deliberately brought into the world with no father.

11.34 am

Mr. David Alton (Liverpool, Mossley Hill): The debate so far has been conducted thoughtfully. We should all be grateful to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) for the way in which he has put the harrowing details of the case before the House—details that illustrate the moral choices that we have to make as a result of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. The hon. Gentleman will know that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Dame J. Knight) and I voted against that legislation because, as we said at the time, it opened a Pandora's box. The fact of being scientifically possible does not necessarily make certain actions right. We said then that the Act would inevitably lead to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority having to consider circumstances such as those of this tragic case.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Edgbaston on how hard cases can sometimes make bad law. However, that does not relieve us of the responsibility of examining the conduct of an authority established by Parliament. I entirely agree with the remarks of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw on the conduct of the HFEA and the need to reform that body. Most of my speech will address that.

Before I come to that, I shall follow the hon. Member for Bassetlaw in addressing some of the issues raised by Mrs. Blood's case. The hon. Gentleman cited Lord Winston, with the example of someone giving consent for their kidneys, lungs or any other organ to be taken. Many of us carry organ donor cards because we recognise the need for medicine to have access to organs to save lives. However, there is a distinction to be drawn between the organs that we give to help maintain another person's life and those elements that create new life. That is the distinction that the House and the HFEA must examine carefully.

Many people have argued that Mrs. Blood's desire to have her husband's child should be satisfied and that it is harsh and pedantic to use the law to prevent that, but it is important to consider all the ethical issues raised by the

[Mr. David Alton]

case, particularly in view of the fact that the interests of Mrs. Blood may not be as clear cut as has sometimes been suggested.

Great emphasis has been laid on personal choice. I have never accepted that the word choice should be paramount above the right to life. In his moving introduction to the circumstances behind the case, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw mentioned the fact that Mr. Blood was opposed to abortion. He believed, as I believe, that there must be limitations on choice. People do not have the right to do certain things. Our rights language has become one of the biggest problems that we suffer. Everything is considered to be a claimed right. We do not say enough about our responsibilities, duties and obligations. The right to create or destroy life is highly contestable. Parliament has a duty to protect the interests of a child and to weigh them carefully alongside the rights claimed by parents, doctors or scientists.

Mrs. Blood's case is not simply about rights. It raises issues of consent, but it also concerns respect for human generation, the posthumous generation of children from dead parents and, as the hon. Member for Edgbaston said, a child's need for a father.

An act of artificial insemination after the father has died cannot represent a couple's on-going commitment to each other, nor can it lead to the welcoming of new life into an existing relationship. The father is obviously no longer present as a living human being. To use a part of him to make a child is a travesty of normal, conscious human procreation.

The need of the child for a father is one aspect of the case which has been neglected in the public discussion despite the fact that the HFEA specifically requires that need to be taken into account in giving fertility treatment. Indeed, that was the decision the House took when we considered the 1990 legislation. It is a provision that we laid down, so the HFEA is acting on something that Parliament insisted on.

Mrs. Blood has argued that she could have had sperm from an anonymous donor who could, indeed, be dead by the time his sperm was used in fertility treatment. It is true that single women are sometimes given fertility treatment. However, that practice is of doubtful legality and it is a matter to which the House should return in due course. I hope that the debate that has been instigated by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw today will open a review of the legislation and of the workings of the HFEA.

To treat a father simply as a source of genetic material and as someone whose presence will not be required at any stage is to ignore the strong interests of children in forming relationships with those who bring them into being. It is well known that adoptive children who, of course, are usually adopted by couples, frequently develop a strong desire to know their birth parents. The child of a single woman is deprived not simply of his or her genetic father, but of any father, genetic or social. Children need a male as well as a female parent in order to learn about human relationships, and boys in particular need a male role model at home.

It has been claimed that Mrs. Blood has a right to the use of her husband's sperm, but that is very doubtful. Society has a strong interest in the creation of children in circumstances that are conducive to those children's well-being, especially when health care professionals are involved in their procreation.

Whatever a person's desire to have a child, a single woman faces a difficult task in bringing up a child single-handed. If the father is not present at any stage, not even during the pregnancy itself, the woman is deprived of an irreplaceable source of support. Two people, in a committed marriage relationship, should be involved in the creation of a child and two people should be involved, as far as is possible, in caring for the child so created. That is a perfectly reasonable demand for Parliament to make, even though it means that from time to time there will be terribly tragic cases of the sort described today.

It would be wrong to breach the principle that wherever it is reasonably possible, if we are deliberately creating life, there should be a father and a mother to bring up that child. That is clearly in the best interests of the child, and in saying that, I am not making any judgment about people who, through other circumstances, are having to bring up children by themselves. Most people who are in that situation would say that they would much prefer to have the support of the father or the mother, depending on who is absent.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw has a strong point when he talks about the conduct of the HFEA. A year or so ago, the HFEA began the process of public consultation on the use of eggs from aborted girls who were to be selected by a scientist in Edinburgh who had sought permission to do so. The HFEA felt that it was a reasonable enough proposition to go out to public consultation. It failed to take an immediate stand on the principle of the deliberate selection of unborn baby girls and the harvesting of their eggs for use in subsequent fertility treatments, which would mean that the child's mother would be an aborted foetus and the grandmother the person who allowed the abortion to take place. That was a pretty hideous proposal which, as a result of the amendment tabled to subsequent legislation by the hon. Member for Edgbaston, which I supported, was outlawed.

That proposal contrasts with this case, and it is no wonder that people are confused. To place such importance, as the HFEA has done, on the issue of sperm donation, whereas a fertilised egg is not to be treated in precisely the same manner, raises the question of the basis on which the HFEA operates.

The constitution of the HFEA is the genesis of its dilemmas. On 18 November 1993, BBC Radio 4 broadcast the "Analysis" programme. The presenter, the admirable columnist from *The Observer*, Melanie Phillips, laid bare the way in which Parliament was manipulated into passing the 1990 Act. One example concerned the way in which membership of the Warnock committee of inquiry was determined.

On 23 July 1982, the Government had announced the terms of reference for an inquiry into the ethical issues associated with human fertilisation and embryology. That was done largely to spike an attempt by Enoch Powell, then a private Member, to ban human embryo experimentation. The Oxford philosopher Baroness Warnock was appointed to chair the committee, which reported on 18 July 1984.

During her interview with Miss Phillips, Baroness Warnock admitted that she vetoed the appointment of a particular member of the committee because of that person's religious and moral beliefs. Miss Phillips had referred to the constitution of the committee, saying that

"the shape these committees take is so important in determining their eventual conclusions."

Baroness Warnock replied:

"The potential chairman is approached either by the Minister or by the permanent secretary or both. But, of course, one doesn't know how many other people have been approached.

I sometimes get the feeling really that they sort of wade through dozens of names and then come up with someone who's a sucker and says yes. But, at any rate, after that, the thing is shrouded in mystery really.

I was then given a kind of draft list and asked whether there were any other people I thought would be obvious choices.

Maybe people who were not yet among the great and the good. And was, with some difficulty, allowed a power of veto."

In the interview, Baroness Warnock then said that she used the veto to exclude one nominee on the ground of that person's religious and moral convictions. She said:

"I just knew that I couldn't work with him. We went right up to the day before publication with the civil servant saying, 'But there's nobody else in the world.'

So, in the end, the night before publication, I said, 'Well, will you please tell the Minister that it's a very bad way to embark on working on a committee when you know that there's somebody you're not going to find easy to work with.'

The following morning two names were suggested. So I did win on that but it was very, very hard and it took a lot of persistence."

I subsequently wrote to the Prime Minister to protest at the way in which a parliamentary committee had been rigged and to call for a better balance on committees considering ethical questions, between those who believed that ethical actions carried consequences and those who believed that there were no consequences. My letter received a courteous enough reply, but no action was taken.

Baroness Warnock got her committee and she got her report. However, difficult ethical questions were ruled out of court from the beginning. In her own words, the committee deliberately excluded

"questions of when life or personhood begins."

That comes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw. As that question was one of the central ethical issues in determining the new law, it seemed an extraordinary omission.

The report was widely cited in both Houses of Parliament during the passage of the 1990 Act. The Government, having established the committee, laid the committee's proposals before Parliament and hid behind the august figure of Lady Warnock as if the Bill had nothing to do with them.

The 1990 Act for the first time permitted destructive experiments on human embryos. The debate today is in sharp contrast with the decision this summer to destroy up to 3,000 fertilised human eggs. This debate is an extraordinary contrast to the way in which the HFEA dealt with that issue.

The relative ease with which the Warnock committee secured its objectives became the model for the composition and operation of the HFEA. Apart from loading its membership with people who share the Warnock view of ethics, the HFEA finances itself from the very clinics it is supposed to police. Fees account for 70 per cent. of the authority's income. That is utterly incestuous. It means that people cannot afford to say no too often and, in the case of the HFEA, ever.

The HFEA earns money from the creation of spare embryos, because it is funded through the licences it grants to the clinics that create the spares and then undertake the experiments. In terms of job security and future funding, it has a built-in incentive to make the situation even worse. That is no basis for good ethics.

The members of the HFEA were chosen so that there would be no squeamishness about the practices that it was established to regulate. Its members are a mixture of the politically and religiously correct. They include Liz Forgan, the managing director of BBC network radio, and the Bishop of Edinburgh, who said that

"we are all born with adulterous genes"

and that

"genetic engineering may be compared with corrective medicine, such as the fitting of a pair of glasses."

Another member is the actress Penelope Keith, best known for her starring role in "The Good Life". She is a neighbour of the former Secretary of State for Health, now Secretary of State for National Heritage.

There is not and never has been a single member of the HFEA who upholds the sanctity of human life from fertilisation. Such old-fashioned religious belief is thought of as quaint at best and as dangerous bigotry at worst.

The HFEA behaves in an arrogant and unaccountable manner, arrogating powers to itself. For example, it has refused to allow Members of Parliament sight of the study that it undertook into the freezing of human embryos—so much for freedom of information, public disclosure or access. The HFEA has also been deceitful, and was forced to withdraw a published claim that French scientists had withdrawn their work demonstrating a link between the freezing of human embryos and subsequent disability.

The House must return time and again to those questions and others raised by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw today. The HFEA must be reformed and members appointed to it who uphold the dignity and sacredness of human life. There is also a need to address the deep and complex questions that have rightly been placed before the House today.

11.49 am

Mrs. Elizabeth Peacock (Batley and Spen): I greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss this important subject and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) on obtaining today's debate. It gives us time to consider the various issues and the workings of the HFEA.

I intend to raise various questions and, perhaps unusually in the House, suggest some answers. But, as a mother myself, I want to say at the outset that I have the greatest sympathy for Mrs. Blood and the tragic circumstances in which she now finds herself. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw put across her case with great dignity and she has the sympathy of the House in the predicament in which she now finds herself.

We are often asked whether the HFEA is doing a good job and working well. As the hon. Gentleman said, it may not be. It was established as a watchdog to oversee the test-tube baby procedure, but in practice it has become more the lapdog of the embryo research industry.

[Mrs. Elizabeth Peacock]

The legislation establishing the HFEA was argued for largely on the ground of helping the infertile to have children, but the research licensed by the authority has included studies with the opposite aim—of trying to prevent the birth of children to fertile couples, as the recent case suggests, and that has included the testing of drugs such as RU486, designed to cause abortion, as well as those designed to prevent conception.

Does the HFEA provide full information about its work and the embryos created and used in research? It has failed to give a satisfactory account of the fate of thousands of human embryos created in laboratories under the aegis of the authority. The Department of Health, using figures supplied by the HFEA, left 175,000 embryos unaccounted for. We do not know where they are. A further set of figures on that subject were inconclusive.

HFEA statistics have recently been criticised by one of its own members, Dr. Brian Lieberman, who pointed out that the authority's practice of citing the so-called adjusted live-birth rate as the main figure in the league table of fertility clinics is misleading, as it masks the number of twin and triplet births occurring.

Dr. Lieberman said:

"One is concerned not just with adjusted live-birth rates, but with live, healthy, non-handicapped babies . . . I'm concerned about triple pregnancies. The higher the rate of triple births, the higher your chances of having handicapped children."

That was reported in *The Independent* on 9 October 1996.

Was the HFEA right to refuse to Mrs. Diane Blood permission to be inseminated with sperm taken from her late husband while he was in a coma? Many criticisms may be fairly levelled at the HFEA, but whatever one may think of the decision, it was following the letter of the law. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw suggested that that law should be changed.

The requirement that a person's gametes should not be used to create embryos without explicit written consent is perhaps the only criterion that the HFEA is required to apply that is not an arbitrary restriction. All the other criteria that it is called upon to enforce, such as time limits on the keeping of embryos, the kind of scientific research for which embryos may be created, or the number of children who may be fathered by a sperm donor, are, to a certain degree, arbitrary. We may argue, as many of us do, that some of those arbitrary criteria are wrong, but at least the requirement for consent is a morally valid point.

Should the requirement for written consent be changed in some way to allow for cases such as that of Mrs. Blood and others, tragic though they are and with which we all have sympathy? If so, it is most important that specific circumstances should be spelt out in law. It would certainly not be wise to give the HFEA discretion in the matter and it would be completely unacceptable to give it discretion over the use of female gametes. The HFEA keenly promotes egg donation. It facilitates embryo experimentation, both on so-called spare embryos left over after fertility treatment and on embryos created specifically for experiments.

It may be true that if insemination had taken place before Mr. Blood died—the point made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw—it would have been within the law. However, my understanding is that the HFEA needs written consent for such action to be taken. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will confirm that when he replies. If we are now saying that that is wrong, changes will have to be made. But once a change is made, a precedent is set, whether or not the authority made the decision without the protection of the law. As we all know, much of our law is based on precedent, which then becomes case law. It is the responsibility of the House to take such action, not to leave it to the say-so of the authority or lawyers making representations.

The HFEA, in its 1994 report on new ways of obtaining eggs for IVF treatment and embryo experiments, stated that it believes that

"there is no objection in principle"

to obtaining ovarian tissue from a dead woman to provide infertility treatment as long as she has given consent. In the section on using cadavers as a source of eggs to create embryos for research, it discussed only the issue of consent as a bar to using a dead woman's eggs in that way. To allow the HFEA to disregard consent would give it carte blanche to license activities involving vast numbers of embryos as guinea pigs.

I understand that the HFEA recently banned payments to gamete donors. Surely that shows that it is restrained in its promotion of sperm or egg donation. Such a move is to be welcomed, but it must be seen in perspective. Previously, a maximum payment of only £15 was permitted to gamete donors. But the HFEA has in other cases, particularly with reference to egg donors, shown contempt for the principle of consent. It has argued that in the case of an aborted female foetus, it would be permissible to retrieve the primitive egg cells from such a baby and use them to create embryos for research. That is not yet a practical possibility, thank goodness, but technically it may be feasible.

In such a case, as we have already heard, the mother of the embryo would be an aborted baby who could never possibly consent to the use of her eggs. The authority argued that, as next of kin, a mother should not be allowed to give consent on behalf of her dead daughter. That suggests a minefield of great moral and legal issues, which the House should consider carefully and discuss at greater length than is possible this morning.

The HFEA has rejected the use of eggs from aborted female infants for infertility treatment. However, that decision was based not on moral principles, but on social and psychological considerations. In the event, its ruling was academic as the amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Dame J. Knight) and supported by many hon. Members, had already been approved and was subsequently incorporated into statute.

There are objections to the workings of the HFEA. It was not established with a remit to protect the human embryo, but rather it was established to apply certain limits on the abuses to which an embryo might be submitted. The law imposes restrictions on what may be done to test-tube babies and provides wide-ranging protection for them, but it also creates broad exceptions and established the HFEA in the role of licenser of all manner of abuses of the embryo. The objection to the HFEA is not simply that it fails to protect the embryo, but that it was never intended to do so. I suggest that it was established to add a veneer of respectability to the

business of using embryonic humans as laboratory animals, freezing them for long-term storage and even allowing them to be the object of trade.

The HFEA may withdraw or withhold a licence from a clinic or research project if it fails to meet required standards, but in practice those standards have little to do with showing respect for the embryo in the test-tube. A research project may fail to receive a licence because it is not scientifically sound, but it is unlikely to be rejected because it is morally bankrupt. An IVF clinic might be in danger of losing its licence to treat infertile couples because too few babies were born to its clients, but not because it destroyed too many embryos in the process.

Time is moving on and does not allow us to discuss fully all the points arising from the debate. The matters that I have raised, like those raised by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, suggest that we should carefully re-examine the decisions taken by the HFEA and the rationale behind them. I warmly welcome the opportunity that the hon. Gentleman has given us to discuss these important issues, which I believe the House will consider more fully in future.

12.1 pm

Ms Tessa Jowell (Dulwich): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) on securing the debate. He has been tireless in his support for his constituent, Mrs. Diane Blood, and I am sure that other hon. Members will join me in thanking him again for giving the House the opportunity to discuss the important issues raised by that case.

This is not an issue that divides the House along party political lines. It touches the conscience and sensitivities of every Member. No one could fail to have been affected by Mrs. Blood's determination in fighting her case, and to have been moved by the distress that it clearly caused her and her family.

With such issues, the legislation must be kept under regular review. Raw human emotion is aroused, and technological advance creates moral dilemmas that may not have been anticipated only a few years ago. Precisely because of that, the House passed the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, but the recent judicial review of Mrs. Blood's case exposed flaws in the Act and it is right that Parliament should have the opportunity to revisit the issues.

When the Bill was debated in Parliament, the then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), said that there was

"genuine agreement about the need for statutory regulation in this highly sensitive and fast developing area of science and medicine."

That consensus still prevails, but I believe that hon. Members on both sides of the House will share my view that the recent case has tested the 1990 Act and identified an aspect to which the House should urgently return.

The Government have implicitly acknowledged the inadequacy of the Act to judge such cases. The Secretary of State for Health stated that the Government did not intend to stand in the way of a private Member's Bill. While the Government seem to be adopting a disinterested stance in this case, it is not clear that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is fulfilling the role that they envisaged for it when the legislation was introduced.

One of the explicit purposes of the Act was to remove from the political domain the responsibility for decisions on such matters. During the Second Reading debate in 1990, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe implied that the Government intended the HFEA to be able to act independently and use discretion. He said:

"It has been argued that, rather than having a completely independent authority, Ministers should be responsible for these matters. We decided against that, because it would place Ministers and the House in a permanently difficult position if, as a semi-political issue, it was said that Ministers should take this or that view on medical or scientific matters . . . The code of practice of the authority will have to be submitted to the Secretary of State and laid before the House, but some independence in medical and scientific matters is in the interests of Parliament and the Secretary of State."—[*Official Report*, 2 April 1990; Vol. 170, c. 915-20.]

We can therefore assume that the authority was intended to use independent judgment in particular cases, not simply and slavishly to follow established rules and procedures. The Blood case has shown that the authority does not believe that it has such powers and independence. Ruth Deech, the chairman of the authority, said:

"Parliament carefully constructed the . . . Act so that courts would not have to judge each case individually, asking questions of an applicant which may prove difficult—often agonisingly difficult—to answer. It was made clear that decisions about people's genetic and reproductive material should not be left to the discretion of doctors or next of kin."

She seems to mean that such decisions should not be left to anyone's discretion.

We are left with stalemate. Ministers stand back from the work of the authority, but the authority says that it can work only to the letter of the law. The court says that it cannot now substitute its discretion for that of the authority, unless the authority has acted with manifest unreasonableness. Parliament, however, intended that there should be room for discretion. A straitjacket has been created where none was intended.

It is clear that the authority has already used its discretion once in the Bloods' case. The Act states that sperm can be stored only with the written consent of the donor, yet the authority waived that requirement after taking into account the compelling and compassionate grounds in their case.

In his judgment, Sir Stephen Brown referred to a note of a telephone conversation that took place in March 1995 between Professor Cooke of the Infertility Research Trust, where Stephen Blood's sperm was to be stored, and Flora Goldhill, the then chief executive of the authority. In her note of their conversation, Ms Goldhill recalled that

"The current situation was so traumatic for the wife in that the decision to turn off the life support system would be made in the next few hours that it would appear uncaring and unnecessarily bureaucratic to insist on the provision of proper legal consent at this time."

That was a sensitive, practical and humane response.

The authority now says that Stephen Blood's sperm was stored illegally. That may be so, but I do not believe that anyone in the House would condemn Ms Goldhill for taking that decision. She clearly reached it after careful thought in the light of the compelling circumstances of the case, and I believe that it was the right decision.

The question that follows is this: if the authority has already acted once in this case with discretion and with attention to the special circumstances, why does it now

[Ms Tessa Jowell]

adopt the view that it can no longer exercise any discretion—and therefore compassion—in this case? Technically, perhaps, it should not have consented to the storage of Mr. Blood's sperm, but the fact that it did so suggests that agreement to the eventual use of the sperm by Mrs. Blood cannot have been ruled out.

The Act was framed in unequivocal terms. It was the product of growing unease in the House and in the country about the pace of development in reproductive technology and the complex moral questions that that posed, and to which several hon. Members referred today. Indeed, Sir Stephen Brown states:

"It is no doubt because the whole field of the artificial insemination with sperm obtained from a man who subsequently died was and is highly sensitive and ethically controversial that the Act of Parliament permitted no element of discretion on the part of the Authority."

The current chair of the authority, Ruth Deech, shares this view. After the ruling she said:

"The court's decision has confirmed, however, that the Authority complied with Parliament's wishes as set out in the HFEA Act 1990".

She has also said:

"The authority has been damned as heartless, stubborn and pedantic. But the law is clear and mandatory."

That, perhaps, is the nature of the problem. Cases of this kind are by definition enormously complex and individual. No two cases will be the same and they cannot all be judged by an over-rigid set of rules. Somewhere along the line, it is vital that there is scope for informed and sensitive discretion to be exercised by properly authorised people.

There are other problems with the legislation. We know that the issues raised by the case that we are considering today were not fully dealt with when the Bill went through Parliament. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has already said, Baroness Warnock, who chaired the committee of inquiry, now admits that the committee did not even hypothetically consider a case of this type; but that if it had, she felt that it would have seen no ethical or public policy objection to allowing the woman to become pregnant by her husband's frozen sperm, in this country or abroad. That acknowledgment provides important evidence of the fact that neither the Warnock inquiry nor Parliament considered the issues raised by Mrs. Blood's case.

There are also other reasons that justify the House revisiting the issue. It is now six years since the Bill passed through Parliament. Such is the pace of change and development that, even without this case, we should now have had to consider whether the original legislation is still adequate. Mrs. Blood's case simply makes the need for further parliamentary consideration more urgent.

Science has moved on since the Act was drafted; it is now possible for a child to be conceived posthumously by other means. As my hon. Friend said, it is now possible, outside the terms of the Act, for testicular tissue to be taken from a man in a coma and for sperm to be created from it. Today, we are calling for the House to look again at the adequacy of the legislation to judge cases of this type. There is a case for the Secretary of State for Health to intervene and instruct the authority to amend its general direction so that it can exercise greater discretion. No single piece of primary legislation will ever be sufficient of itself to deal with such a complex area and with such fast-moving technology.

Moreover, we urge the Minister to come up with proposals that will give the authority more discretion and to allow Parliament to debate those proposals on a free vote.

Lord Winston, who has great experience of the issues surrounding fertility and embryology, is considering introducing a Bill in the other place to amend the Act and allow greater flexibility in such cases. By whatever means an amendment to the law comes about, we urge Ministers to act with speed.

Diane Blood's case has aroused enormous public sympathy. At judicial review, Sir Stephen Brown said:

"I have found this to be a most anxious and moving case. My heart goes out to this Applicant."

It would seem that the authority alone is unmoved. It has sought to defend the position it has adopted by dismissing opposition to it as the product of sentiment. I suggest that any public agency such as the HFEA has a responsibility to listen to, and take heed of, public opinion.

The HFEA has struck conflicting poses in explaining its position. On the one hand it has stated that it "profoundly sympathises" with the applicant, but its chair has also accused supporters of sentimentality. She has said:

"Critics of the HFEA say . . . consent was implicit because Mrs. Blood and her late husband clearly wanted children and Mr. Blood would certainly have agreed to the procedure. This argument is understandable, but it is sentimental."

On the issue of consent, a parallel has been drawn with cases where the courts have ruled that a woman has no right to risk her own death and that of her unborn child by withholding consent to a caesarian birth. The rulings represent a trend in which the courts have edged away from the principle that medical interventions cannot be imposed except when the patient is mentally ill or unconscious. As *The Independent* has said:

"They show that the principle of consent is becoming a much more flexible concept when seeking to preserve life but not, it seems from Diane Blood's case, when seeking to create it."

It is quite clear that public opinion is overwhelmingly sympathetic to Mrs. Blood and feels that she has been unjustly treated. There is absolutely no evidence from the case so far that any child born into Mrs. Blood's extended family would not find itself growing up in a secure and loving family. In short, it would not be disadvantaged. Mrs. Blood has incurred great hardship in meeting the enormous legal costs inherent in a case of this kind, but everyone to whom she turns wrings their hands and says that there is nothing to be done.

Parliament is responsible for this stalemate; Parliament should resolve it by giving the authority a reasonable but not excessive amount of discretion, to enable cases at the margin to be sensitively and speedily resolved. Technology will always be faster on its feet than the legislator, but we must be able to deal with the difficult and sometimes heart-rending decisions that changing technology will force us to confront without constant recourse to primary legislation.

I hope that this House will act and, in so doing, will recognise the suffering that Mrs. Blood's case has exposed.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): We are all extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) for initiating this debate so early in the new Session. These are important matters and it is right that they should be debated in Parliament. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the moving and thoughtful way in which he put the case for his constituent.

I should like first to remind the House of the framework within which the authority and clinicians have to operate. Fourteen years ago, in 1982, in the light of concerns about techniques such as in vitro fertilisation and the use of human embryos for research, the Government asked Baroness Warnock, as she now is, to chair a committee of inquiry. The committee's recommendations were published in 1984. There followed a consultation period. In 1986 the Government issued a consultation paper and, a year later, a White Paper which formed the basis for the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. That Act contains important provisions on research on embryos, on the welfare and legal status of children born following the provision of relevant treatment, on the need for those providing gametes, eggs or sperm to consent to their use in particular circumstances, and on the establishment of the HFEA to regulate the whole system.

There has been a remarkable amount of public consultation over many years. The legislation was passed on a free vote after lengthy debate in both Houses. It was the first such comprehensive piece of legislation in the world, and it provides the parameters within which the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority operates. The authority's role is to regulate the activities of treatment and research centres, to promote good practice and to provide information and advice. The authority is fully accountable to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State who, in turn, is answerable to Parliament for all matters concerning the authority. It produces an annual report which is placed before the House, as well as a code of practice to guide those offering and providing treatment. Like all such bodies, the authority is subject to review every five years.

In recent months much attention has been directed to individual cases. I can deal only with the issues that they raise and the broader framework within which decisions can be taken. Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I recognise the human side of such cases as well as the emotion that is integral to them and which they generate more widely. However, as I have said, Parliament decided that there was not to be a free-for-all in these matters, so there must be rules which must be observed by those to whom they apply. Sadly, at times, wherever the line is drawn it will result in some hard cases.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw spoke about the case of his constituent, Mrs. Diane Blood, who wishes to be inseminated with her late husband's sperm. The president of the Family Division has described this as

"a most anxious and moving case".

That point was made also by the hon. Member for Dulwich (Ms Jowell). I concur totally with the feelings of the hon. Lady and the president on this matter. We have all admired Mrs. Blood's courage and determination and have great sympathy for her. I understand that Mrs. Blood has been granted leave to appeal, should she wish to take it, against the recent High Court judgment, so although she has decided to abandon her anonymity I must avoid going into too much detail.

There are some general issues that have been widely commented upon over the past couple of weeks and which we should cover. Some of them have been dealt with during the debate. First, Parliament decided in 1990 that written consent must be provided before eggs or sperm—or, for that matter, embryos—may be stored or used for treatment or research. The notion of consent goes to the heart of the legislation and featured prominently in the Warnock report which preceded the Act. As with the storage or use of embryos, consent is not something that can simply be waived. It is a statutory requirement. I confirm that to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Mrs. Peacock) who raised that matter. It is a statutory requirement under the Act as passed by Parliament.

Secondly, the 1990 Act enabled the HFEA to specify in directions the conditions and circumstances under which gametes may be exported abroad. Accordingly, in 1991, the authority issued general directions which permitted the export of eggs and sperm where written consent had been given. By the same token, it prohibited such export if the gametes could not be used for the intended purpose in the United Kingdom. Otherwise, of course, the regulation that exists in this country could simply be circumvented by removing the gametes to another jurisdiction. So once again, on the question of export, consent is a fundamental issue.

Consent is fundamental to all medical interventions. There are many issues to be considered by those embarking upon assisted conception, including the welfare of the new child as well as that of any existing children—although there are no existing children in this case. Also, we all respect—and must respect—the right of the individual to determine what, if anything, is to become of his or her genetic material. It is not for the HFEA to try to second-guess the wishes of any patient in that regard.

Even where consent is obtained, the welfare of the child must be considered. Paragraph 4.4 of the Warnock report said:

"The majority view expressed to us however, saw AIH (artificial insemination by husband) as an acceptable form of treatment, where clinically indicated. We see no moral objection to its practice. We believe that where there is the intention to bring about the birth of a child and this takes place within the context of a stable relationship, such intervention is acceptable. It is simply a means of bringing together the sperm and egg of a husband and wife so that fertilisation can take place in vivo. Nevertheless we have grave misgivings about AIH in one type of situation. A man who has placed semen in a semen bank may die and his widow may then seek to be inseminated . . . This may give rise to profound psychological problems for the child and the mother."

In paragraph 10.9 the report says:

"The use by a widow of her dead husband's semen for AIH is a practice which we feel should be actively discouraged."

Professor Michael Hull, professor of reproductive medicine and surgery at Bristol university, commented on the case of Mrs. Blood in a letter to *The Times* on 24 October. He said:

"The fundamental ethical concern in all fertility treatment must be for the welfare of the offspring . . . Is the fact that children are born fatherless due to accident reason enough to allow treatment which plans such an outcome? Is our society ready to abandon its foundation on the traditional family?"

[Mr. John Horam]

All those concerned in this case should take that to heart.

As the hon. Member for Dulwich conceded, the HFEA has behaved sympathetically in the case of storing the sperm. She recounted the telephone conversation that took place. It would be wrong to say that the HFEA has been unsympathetic. I know that it would wish to be sympathetic and to give full consideration to the circumstances in which Mrs. Blood finds herself. Therefore, it decided last Thursday to give further consideration to one aspect of the case, which is whether the gametes could be exported. Accordingly, I understand that Mrs. Blood, through her solicitors, has been asked if she wishes to place any additional material before the authority. I can assure the hon. Member for Bassetlaw that that will happen.

Mr. Ashton: May I press the Minister on that? It is a welcome assurance but Mrs. Blood is now having to decide whether to go to the Court of Appeal, virtually this afternoon. That assurance is a sympathetic assurance in that the authority will look kindly towards the export of the sperm. However, is the Minister saying that there is no way in which the Government will provide the House with an opportunity to alter the law in the near future?

Mr. Horam: I was about to come to that point. Suggestions have been made by the hon. Members for Bassetlaw and for Dulwich and others that the law should be amended to allow variation of circumstances and greater discretion in order to take into account evolving medical developments. This is genuine free-vote territory and it is for the House to determine whether it wishes to go down that route. If, in due course, it wishes to do so—it would take time—my advice would be for the House to ensure that it is in a position to take a genuinely balanced view of all the implications.

The present legislation was passed after substantial public and parliamentary debate and is carefully drawn. It is therefore not an area in which either policy or legislation should be tinkered with on the spur of the moment. I have listened carefully to the points made by hon. Members today and I have noted carefully the views expressed on both sides of the argument over the past few weeks.

Mr. Michael Alison (Selby): Will my hon. Friend comment on another aspect of the post-natal well-being of the child, since the interests of the child are paramount? There is an allegation that not enough is being done to gather data about how the so-called test-tube babies get on later in life and the extent to which they are exposed to the risk of suffering from a late congenital disorder that they contracted via IVF. Those are important issues and, as I understand it, no monitoring is being undertaken.

Mr. Horam: I am glad to reassure my right hon. Friend that two studies have been undertaken, one in Cambridge in 1994 and another at Manchester university. Both studies found that there was no real difference between children born of a frozen embryo and those born more normally.

Finally, I am sure that we all agree that the HFEA has challenging responsibilities.

Ms Jowell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Horam: No, I have only a few moments left.

The authority has faced a long summer and autumn in the full glare of publicity. It has an extremely difficult and often thankless task, and in my view it has acquitted itself extremely well.

Veterinary Education and Training

12.30 pm

Sir Colin Shepherd (Hereford): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning), for coming to the House to help with a matter that is of such concern. The entire veterinary profession will be grateful to her.

My hon. Friend will know that for some years I have served as a Privy Council-nominated member of the council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. As a lay member of that council, I express my alarm at the concern that is continually voiced by my veterinary colleagues on the council and in other sectors of the veterinary profession that there is no uniformity of standards in education and training across the European Union and the European economic area.

My years with the council have left me in no doubt about just how seriously the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons regards the maintenance of standards within the United Kingdom veterinary profession. It is jealous indeed.

I need not remind my hon. Friend of the crucial need to have common high standards of theoretical, practical and ethical training throughout the EU and the EEA if there is to be public confidence in the ability of the European veterinary profession to provide for the safe movement of animals into and throughout the EU. With the removal of border checks, there is an increased need for standardised, reliable and unambiguous certification and all that flows from that in terms of confidence, especially among livestock owners. There is also a strong link between basic veterinary education and certification as we have in the United Kingdom.

My purpose in raising the matter today is to press for progress in achieving the goal of comparable high standards across all the schools in Europe. As the royal college is obliged to register anyone who applies and has a recognised qualification from a European veterinary school, it must be beyond doubt that the letters MRCS have to be unequivocally a hallmark of quality that is completely reliable.

I first became alarmed in early 1993. I need not rehearse the legislative background that resulted in the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Veterinary Training back in 1978 in line with the European directives, with its responsibility

"to ensure a comparatively high standard of veterinary training in the Community".

I am now alarmed by the fact that the committee is being denied the means to discharge its work. I refer to the reduction in the number of meetings and the withdrawal of financial and managerial support for the system of visitations to veterinary schools.

The importance of confidence in the quality of veterinary qualifications was brought home to me by a reported experience in a United Kingdom abattoir when a Spanish official veterinary surgeon was unable to recognise the nervous symptoms displayed by a cow during an ante-mortem examination. It became clear that the OVS was not familiar with the signs of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, was unsure what action to take and did not have the nous to read the operations manual.

I am reliably told that much of the training of Spanish vets in food hygiene can be extremely good—perhaps better than ours. However, we need to know that it is uniformly good so that we can be confident in hiring a vet with recognised qualifications from Spain or elsewhere overseas.

I am also reliably informed that veterinary faculties have been opened in some regions of the EU—particularly Spain, Italy and Portugal—purely on the ground of local political pressure and without regard to demand for their product or the inadequacy of funding.

It is clear that the system of visits is vital and that they should be as rigorous and penetrating as those that have been practised in United Kingdom schools. Whereas United Kingdom schools have been visited every seven years or so, it is worrying to note that in the past 10 years only 22 of the 52 EU schools have been visited. We must bear it in mind that there is also the need to visit EEA schools and those in non-EEA states that have common borders with the EU. With visits currently planned at about four per year, there will be an interval of nearly 15 years between visits—far too long a gap.

It is also worrying that an excessive number of veterinary students are being trained in Europe, while there is a perceived need to increase the numbers being trained in United Kingdom schools. As the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe put it in its discussion paper of May 1996:

"Excessive student numbers add to the growing unemployment figures of veterinarians in a number of countries and result in a lowering of standards in schools which has implications not only for the state concerned but other members who are the recipients of exported animals and migrating veterinary surgeons."

That is particularly important for the United Kingdom, as Mr. Roger Eddy, a council member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons pointed out in his address to the British Veterinary Association congress in Chester this year:

"In each of the last five years more graduates from overseas have been registered than from the UK. In 1995 only 45 per cent. of registrations were from the UK and there were more graduates from Spain than from Ireland which has always been a supplier of graduates to the UK."

It is worrying that some courses in Italy have such deficiencies that they are technically in breach of the directives. Schools which should be declared delinquent are still turning out graduates whom the royal college still has to accept. It is also worrying that such a rigid attitude should be taken by the European Commission. Directorate-General XV appears to be concerned only with the regulation and the internal market when perhaps it would be sensible for it to collaborate with DG VI, which has to deal with the consequences of inadequate veterinary standards, as was pointed out in 1994 by Mr. Barry Johnson, the then president of the royal college, in his letter to DG XV.

In 1994 the matter was raised in another place by Lord Soulsby, a distinguished former president of the college. He expressed the worries of livestock farmers that there was an animal disease time bomb ticking away as a result of the mad rush to a single market in the movement of animals without ensuring that the necessary standards of veterinary education and veterinary practice applied throughout the EU. He went on to say that those responsible in the Commission would bear a heavy responsibility if our worst fears regarding imported animal

[Sir Colin Shepherd]

disease were confirmed. An equal responsibility will lie on the Council of Ministers if it allows the Commission to get away with it.

I do not think that the noble Lord had BSE in mind, but that catastrophe serves to demonstrate the scale of the problem when things go wrong. Let us not forget swine fever, Aujesky's disease or foot and mouth disease, all of which can easily achieve pandemic proportions. It is an important matter, given the need for many United Kingdom cattle farmers to restock in the aftermath of the BSE culls.

In his reply, Lord Howe, the then Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, expressed his shared concern. In the light of the Commission's December 1993 report on subsidiarity, he said:

"The United Kingdom supports the application of subsidiarity and will, of course, examine the results of any such review. Nevertheless, the potential costs to the Community and the UK of inadequate standards of veterinary training are such that any proposed changes would have to be examined very carefully."

Two years on, the question must be: what further thoughts does my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary have? Subsidiarity may be all right in the United Kingdom, where we trust our standards, but can we trust standards everywhere else?

Later in his reply, Lord Howe said that

"financial arrangements for the EAEVE visits are still unclear and discussions are continuing with the Commission to resolve the question of funding."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 July 1994; Vol. 556, c. 1218-19.]

If I understand the position correctly, the Commission has now completely backed off funding, leaving it to the deans of the schools. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that or put me right?

The then Minister referred also to the withdrawal of support from the sectoral directives, which would have the effect of doing away with the Advisory Committee on Veterinary Training. Given that the Department of Trade and Industry is espousing the deregulation exercise through the simpler legislation for the internal market—SLIM—initiative, how does that square with the implied support by the then Minister for the ACVT? This is particularly worrisome because one of the ACVT working party meetings for 1996 has been cancelled. All the signals are that there is no support for the mechanism that is to be used to examine training.

Given the conflict between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, what interdepartmental consultations are taking place between the Department and the Ministry that might parallel the consultations that should be taking place between DG XV and DG VI within the European Commission?

At the end of his reply, the then Minister said that assurances had been received that the principle of visitation is one which the Commission firmly supports. Pressure would be maintained, he said, to ensure that the proposed voluntary scheme for visitations would get off the ground and that there would be a proper programme of visits. The then Minister said that he would ensure that if deficiencies were identified, the Commission would be pressed to take action. Alas, it is clear from the correspondence between the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the Commission, and from the concerns and frustrations expressed by the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe in its paper, that little progress, if any, is being made.

Throughout all the papers and comment that I have read and heard runs a common thread. That is the need for strong political pressure to be applied by most member states.

We are fortunate in the United Kingdom in that legislation bearing on veterinary surgeons promotes a close relationship between the governing body of the profession, Ministers and Parliament. Other veterinary bodies in other member states are not so well placed. It behoves the United Kingdom, therefore, to take a strong lead in securing the equalisation upwards of standards in European veterinary education and training. I note that my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) and for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), who take a keen interest in veterinary affairs, nod in assent. I know that many other colleagues who serve as honorary associates of the BVA, as I do, will share my view.

I press my hon. Friend the Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to take a lead and to ensure that visitations take place at a proper rate. There should be at least twice the number of visitations, or more. They should take place with proper rigour and depth. There should be proper support to ensure that there is swift analysis and reported results. We have had a hint from the BSE crisis. We just cannot afford to get things wrong.

12.44 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mrs. Angela Browning): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Sir C. Shepherd) for bringing about a useful debate on an important matter. It is obviously of importance to my hon. Friends who are in their places in the Chamber. Given the amount of correspondence that I receive about animal welfare, it is a great pity that veterinary standards are not, apparently, of interest to Opposition parties.

I think that we are all agreed that to ensure the health of animals and the safety of animal products moving both within the European Union and into the Community from third countries, we must deal with extremely important matters. I agree with the concerns that have been expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford.

It is important that veterinary surgeons from all member states who are responsible for the certification of movements are trained to a comparably high standard. We can all recognise that to ensure confidence in the internal market, it is necessary for all veterinarians to be trained to a comparably high standard in accordance with the two sectoral veterinary directives. Deficiencies in training could lead to a failure to recognise serious animal disease, and could put the EU at risk by the spread of disease through the movement of animals or their products.

Perhaps I might draw on the specific case mentioned by my hon. Friend regarding an official veterinary surgeon and the identification of neurological symptoms. I have not been given the full details by my hon. Friend, and if the case that I refer to is not the one that he referred to, perhaps he will correct me.

My hon. Friend mentioned the case of a Spanish veterinary surgeon acting as an OVS at a slaughterhouse in Cornwall. The OVS was carrying out an ante-mortem inspection when she observed an animal exhibiting nervous signs. She sought advice from a senior colleague, the principal OVS. The principal OVS could not attend the slaughterhouse as she was some distance from it, and advised the OVS that she should seek the opinion of a Ministry veterinary officer. That officer attended the slaughterhouse, examined the animal and ruled out any suspicion of bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

I can assure my hon. Friend that the correct procedures were followed and that any inexperienced veterinary surgeon would be expected to follow the same procedure in similar circumstances. It might be helpful if I say that, in the case of BSE, in about 20 to 25 per cent. of the animals which are slaughtered showing the clinical symptoms of BSE, it is only on post-mortem pathology that it is identified that the disease is of a different neurological kind.

If I have referred to the case that my hon. Friend had in mind, I am reassured that the right procedures were followed. If it is not the same case, I would wish to take immediate steps to investigate the matter to which my hon. Friend referred.

Sir Colin Shepherd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for clarifying the matter, which was one that worried me. I was unable to arrive at the detail that my hon. Friend has presented to the House. My hon. Friend has set my mind at rest. Nevertheless, the importance of standards and the ability to recognise BSE symptoms are important.

Mrs. Browning: Indeed. I think that my hon. Friend and I are at one.

It is important that the public, too, have a right to expect the same high level of competence when their livestock or companion animals are treated by a veterinary surgeon, irrespective of his or her country of origin. In the single European market, a prerequisite for trade in animals and animal products is that consignments meet all the conditions of intra-Community trade. That is dependent upon properly completed and valid veterinary certification, to prevent the spread of disease and to protect the welfare of animals in transit.

There have been occasional errors in veterinary certification. I can assure the House, however, that they have been taken up immediately with the member state concerned. The RCVS, the BVA and MAFF have drafted 12 principles of certification, which have been adopted by the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe, the FVE. The United Kingdom is pressing for harmonised EU standards of veterinary certification, based on these 12 principles.

The regulatory body and competent authority for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom is the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Its council is constituted under section 1 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. It is comprised of elected members of the profession, members appointed by the six universities that provide veterinary training and members appointed by the Privy Council. As my hon. Friend mentioned, he is one such appointee and has been a member of the council of the RCVS since 1983. We are all grateful for the knowledge, experience and expertise that he brings to this debate and to many others.

In 1978, two European Community directives prescribed procedures for training in veterinary surgery and for the mutual recognition of qualifications in the EC, and provided for the freedom of movement and right of establishment of veterinary surgeons. The directives, which were implemented in the United Kingdom in 1980, require member states to allow any veterinary surgeon who has undergone the prescribed training and obtained a scheduled qualification to practise on any of their territories.

The Advisory Committee on Veterinary Training was established by Council decision in 1978. Its task is to help to ensure a comparably high standard of veterinary training in the Community. As many of my predecessors in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food have said, we are most anxious for uniform, high standards to be applied throughout the Community and we think that the ACVT has an important role in carrying out that task by exchanging information on training methods and on the content, level and structure of theoretical and practical courses provided in member states.

The ACVT includes three experts from each member state, one representing the practising profession, one from the veterinary science teaching institutions and one from the competent authority. It is supported secretarially and financially by the Commission. As an advisory committee, it can make only recommendations to the Commission, which holds the legal powers to ensure compliance with the veterinary training directives.

In the United Kingdom, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has a statutory duty to carry out visits to our veterinary schools to ensure uniform standards. Visits take place at regular intervals and the reports of those visits are discussed in an open forum at the RCVS council. The standards of UK veterinary training are therefore not at risk.

In 1993, the Commission stated its intention to withdraw its financial and secretarial support for the system of visits to veterinary schools by the ACVT at the end of that year. That naturally caused considerable concern to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Association. The Government shared that concern and the then Minister, my right hon. Friend who is now the Secretary of State for the Environment, instructed officials to enter into discussions with senior Commission officials in the hope that they would agree to support the ACVT.

Later that year, MAFF officials and representatives from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons met the Director-General of DG XV to discuss their concerns. They were encouraged by that meeting to believe that the Commission was sympathetic to their arguments. In January 1994, the RCVS was informed by the Commission that it acknowledged the value of the present system and proposed that the responsibility for visiting should pass to the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education—that is, to the deans of veterinary schools, as mentioned by my hon. Friend.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the then Minister, together with senior veterinary officials, met the president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and his colleagues in February 1994. Following that meeting, she wrote to Commissioner Steichen expressing her concern that the

[Mrs. Browning]

Commission was withdrawing support from the ACVT. Assurances were received from Commissioner Vanni that the Commission would continue to monitor the results of visits by the EAEVE and to receive the opinions and recommendations of the ACVT. I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is in the nature of my job to come across long names, which we try to abbreviate somewhat.

The EAEVE visits are currently funded by a one-off grant from the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe and by the schools themselves, but I understand my hon. Friend's concern about funding and I shall deal with that question in a moment. A further approach was made to the Director-General of DG XV by our permanent representation in Brussels, asking the Commission to maintain direct support for the ACVT and its visitation programme. Unfortunately, the reply received indicated that further approaches were unlikely to bear fruit. Consequently, in further discussions with the RCVS by senior veterinary officials, it was agreed that the approach of the RCVS would now be to gain active support from other countries in the European Union through the FVE.

The position has moved on somewhat since the speech by my noble Friend Lord Howe in another place, but I share my hon. Friend's frustration, and the Government and the RCVS are both still concerned about standards, and about how those standards are monitored and implemented. My hon. Friend mentioned the SLIM initiative, which the Commission is currently reviewing and which affects the legislation that covers the mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

The United Kingdom has submitted a paper explaining the benefits of the sectoral committees, including the ACVT, because we consider it paramount that they be recognised, while suggesting possible improvements to their operation. My hon. Friend mentioned subsidiarity; the necessary definitions are still being discussed, and I share his concerns about that.

Commissioner Monti will make proposals for simplification that have resulted from the SLIM review at the Internal Market Council in November. Once they are received and we can see what they comprise, the Government will discuss the proposals with the RCVS, because we think that it is important that its views be taken into account.

The increased trade in animals and animal products as a result of the single market places increasing reliance on veterinary certification at the point of origin, as my hon. Friend said. That is a principle of the single market, and for it to be successful it is vital that satisfactory EU standards of veterinary education are maintained on an international basis, and that a common understanding is developed and put into practice on the principles of certification.

Previously, we have been assured that the Commission will continue to monitor the results of visits by the EAEVE and that member states will receive the recommendations and opinions of the ACVT on those visits. I share my hon. Friend's concern about the length of time that it has taken for the visits to be put in place and I assure him that we will maintain pressure to ensure that the proposed voluntary scheme for visits to veterinary schools in member states continues with a proper programme of visits and that, if deficiencies are identified, the Commission is pressed to take action, because only the Commission has the power to ensure that action follows inspection. My hon. Friend drew the parallel between the system of visits and inspection in state education. It is vital not only to inspect but to follow through when deficiencies are found.

Sir Colin Shepherd: Some of the schools can still opt out of the visiting process by saying that they cannot afford it, so we have to maintain pressure on the schools concerned, especially on those that do not come up to the mark, and ensure that they cannot cop out on that basis. How is that to be done?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We shall certainly talk to the Commission about how that is to be effected, because it is clearly unacceptable for schools to opt out simply through lack of finance. I can assure my hon. Friend that I will investigate the matter and will pursue it as vigorously as possible.

We await the proposals of the Commission for simplification as a result of the SLIM initiative with respect to mutual recognition of professional qualifications. We shall want to discuss that with the various bodies in the United Kingdom including, of course, the RCVS, but before we can agree to any proposal for change we would have to take into account the potential costs both to Europe and to the United Kingdom of inadequate standards of veterinary training. If the standards were inadequate, the possible cost would be unacceptable to many of us in the House. I am anxious that the House should be aware of our determination in the matter.

The Government continue to support the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in its efforts to ensure the maintenance of high standards of veterinary education throughout the EU. Coincidentally, I have a meeting in my diary for three weeks' time with the RCVS and in view of the case made by my hon. Friend, I shall raise the matter with it then.

Sports Academy

1 pm

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise the question of the British academy of sport when there is great uncertainty about its future. Time runs out at 12 o'clock tomorrow for the bids to own and run the academy. Some £100 million is on offer from the national lottery to guarantee sporting success but no one, even at this stage, knows how that success will be achieved and who for.

The Minister has been economical, to say the least, with his vision. Since the academy was announced in "Raising the Game" in July 1995—the principle of the academy has been accepted and supported by the Labour party and, indeed, all parties for some time—the Minister has said very little. In a debate last year, the Minister said that bids would be invited after consultation. He continued:

"They will be assessed by the Sports Council, which will announce its decision next summer."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 1995; Vol. 264, c. 1223.]

It is now nearly November and not a single bid has even been opened. What has led to that delay?

A potentially far-reaching proposal has been hindered by lack of clear direction from the Government. Even those closest to the idea—the bidders, the sports bodies, the centres of excellence and the coaches—are stumbling around in the dark. The Minister appears to be unable to get off the starting blocks and there has been indecision and uncertainty about how the academy will proceed. Just one day before the bids close, the British academy of sport is as unclear as the hereafter is to mortals. We all have a different image of paradise and that is how it is with the academy—everyone has an idea, but nobody has co-ordinated those ideas.

The Government have spectacularly failed to supply the vision. Where have they laid out their view in any detail? Do they have a view of the details of the academy? The 56-page prospectus provokes more questions and concerns than it gives answers and reassurance. The sporting world is at a loss and is unsure whether any of the practical questions will be addressed. We all agree that we want an academy.

Ownership of the academy will be in the hands of a new consortium and its remit will include the need to search for commercial viability. Does that mean that the new owners will have to turn to running ad hoc fitness regimes for middle managers to make money or to other non-sporting events to earn the cash? Will we see the academy hosting wedding receptions, for example? Surely the academy should be run by sport for sport and sport alone.

One of the great unknown factors, which causes the most serious concerns, is who will pay the on-going revenue costs of running the academy. On a practical level, for example, who will pay for the young people to attend the academy on sponsorships? Will it be the academy itself or the governing body of the relevant sport? What will be the role of the young people's coaches? Will their personal coaches and mentors have a role to play? Who will pay the coaches and how will that be decided? What will be the role of local education authorities? Young people are the responsibility of the local education authority. Will the academy have the power to require athletes and sportsmen and women to break the link with their local or regional clubs or the power to decide which events they participate in? Who will have priority in selection? That is especially important because of the vast sums of money involved in some sports and the ability and desire of athletes to decide where they will take part. Who will make that choice?

The academy will, we are told, cover sports medicine, but we have had no clarification of how those medical services will be provided. Will the physiotherapy and pharmacy services be provided by the national health service or someone else? More important, what guarantee will there be that the home country sports councils will always co-operate with and participate in the financing of the academy? The royal charters give them independence, but what will happen if they choose to exercise that independence? In an article in *The Times* yesterday, David Miller wrote:

"Sir Rodney Walker, the chairman of the England Sports Council . . . has said . . . that if the England Sports Council does not approve of the choice of academy site by the UK body, it will not allocate the £100 million of National Lottery funds that has been set aside for it."

Will the Minister comment on that statement? After we have been through the whole process, will someone, somewhere, decide that they have a veto over the money?

Incidentally, can the Minister tell us what the status of the English and the United Kingdom sports councils and their royal charters is at the moment? Why has the English Sports Council not met officially for a year? Why is it taking so long to get the financial memorandum sorted out? What confidence can we have in the future of the academy if the setting up of the UK Sports Council and its relationship with the other sports councils has still not been resolved? Surely we owe more to the new chief executive of the UK Sports Council, Howard Wells, and to the chairman, Sir Ian MacLaurin. They must be allowed to get on with the job and the problems must be sorted out quickly.

The academy should be a linchpin in a strategy for success in British sport, but it will not succeed unless there is a clear structure, from primary schools to clubs to the national level, with bodies identifying talent and pushing it on to the next stage. Were the school sports associations specifically asked to contribute? We all want success, but of course we do not need muddle. If we are to take the country with us on an expensive academy, there is no room for muddle. Everybody needs to be aware of just what the academy can do for the individual youngster, boy or girl, who has the potential to succeed. The public must know that the academy can do something for such young people. We need much more clarity on the subject.

A number of questions still have not been answered, but they are not new. The sports' governing bodies have been raising those questions with anyone and everyone for some time and I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to answer them.

Will the Minister also clarify his role in the set-up? How will the national sports recreation centres fit into the new plans? Are they being sidelined in any way? Surely all those issues should have been agreed with the relevant governing bodies before the prospectus was issued. The UK Sports Council, the governing bodies and the British Olympic Association will be crucial whichever bid wins. What will be the involvement of those bodies and why has the Minister not been able to secure more agreement on the proposals before starting the bidding process?

[Miss Kate Hoey]

Will governing bodies lose their grants for elite training or will they be free to send competitors to train in camps overseas if that best suits their needs? Elite sport sounds glamorous, but it comes from the grass roots. It is long term and expensive and there are no guarantees. Many of our great champions get to the top despite rather than because of the system. Some people are critical of giving money to the excellent. All of us who care about sport believe that we must have excellence at the top, but the pyramid must be as wide as possible at the bottom. I am not clear about how those links will be achieved.

The National Coaching Foundation should play a key role in the decisions on how the academy should be run. An article in the autumn edition of its newsletter was headed "Bricks and mortar, but too little vision?" It was critical of the fact that many of the proposals in the 56-page document are not clear. Bidders are not being given a clear direction in which to go. The Minister should explain how the details will work out in practice. We all want the academy to be established, but if bidders are not able to take account of the different factors, whoever wins will have to talk to sports bodies to ascertain the requirements of any particular sport. Much of that work could have been done already.

Even though the Minister has slightly changed his mind about the use of a huge green-field, 200-acre site for the academy, the 56 pages of that document were based on the premise that it would still be a green-field site. Does the Minister accept that consultations with the sports governing bodies showed that there was no support for a large green-field site for the academy? We already have centres of expertise. We need a pinnacle—an administrative and co-ordination centre—but it must be in touch with what is happening in the regions.

British sport wants success, but now more than ever it needs answers so that it can plan for the future. The Government have asked for bids, but their policy is not clear. Great interest was shown, but we will not know the final number of bidders until 12 o'clock tomorrow. Those bidders have been put in a difficult position, because they are being asked to provide the vision thing for the Government. The Minister should have made matters much clearer.

I have left the Minister time to reply to my questions. If he is honest, he will accept that, since the original announcement, despite the prompting of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry), we have been unable to obtain clarification of the position. There has been no debate in the country. If the average person in the street were asked what he thought of the academy and what it was all about, he would have no idea how it relates to him and his local community, and how it will benefit local youngsters with sporting talents and abilities. I hope that the Minister will give me some answers, but perhaps the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Sir I. Patnick) will say a few words first.

1.13 pm

Sir Irvine Patnick (Sheffield, Hallam): I thank the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Miss Hoey) for that courtesy: I appreciate it. My hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Mr. Coe), who was in the Chamber a moment ago, has done a lot for sport.

I want to put down a marker on behalf of Sheffield—the city in which I was born, where I live and work, and which I represent. It has not had the difficulty to which the hon. Lady referred, although I appreciate that she argued her case in great detail.

Sheffield has produced a glossy prospectus, which states:

"The Sheffield-based Academy will provide all the facilities, the resources and the services necessary to achieve gold medal performances. The city's concentration on sport over the past few years has provided much of the services, the knowledge and the expertise required, along with much of the infrastructure."

It would be wrong if I did not mention the fact that many people associate Sheffield with something that went on many years ago. However, Sheffield now has major sporting facilities, and, along with many other cities, has submitted a bid. I am sure that the Minister, with his expertise, will consider that when making his decision. I hope that the academy will not be London based, but be situated somewhere in the provinces.

1.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department of National Heritage (Mr. Iain Sproat): I thank the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Miss Hoey) for raising this important subject, and for allowing my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Sir I. Patnick) to say a few words. He has done tremendous work to promote Sheffield, especially with regard to sport, and I am grateful to him for the advice that he has given me in the past few months on a range of sporting issues. I look forward to seeing the bid from the city that he so ably represents.

On 14 July 1995, the Government published the policy document "Sport: Raising the Game", which sets out a wide range of proposals designed to rebuild the strength of every level of British sport. It highlighted three vital and linked elements of sports policy. The first was the need to restore sport and, particularly but not exclusively, competitive team games to the heart of school life. The second element was to extend the sporting culture by strengthening the two-way links between schools and local sports clubs. The final element was to ensure that talented competitors at every level received the support necessary to allow them to exploit their talents to the full—all the way to the Olympic podium.

We therefore proposed the establishment of a British academy of sport that would aim to offer the highest standards in the world in sports science, sports medicine, coaching and training facilities. Moreover, the academy would be the pinnacle of a regional network of centres of sporting excellence and academies for individual sports, which would offer more locally accessible, high-quality training facilities and support services.

We recognised that a world-class facility would not be cheap. However, the national lottery could provide the means for its achievement. The Prime Minister announced that up to £100 million of national lottery money could be available to help to fund the establishment of the academy.

Why are we doing this? The approach of other countries has become increasingly professional. They have chosen to provide the very best facilities for their athletes, and so should we. To date, our athletes have done well, and some have excelled. They have made the most of the facilities that are already available. We want to

ensure that from now on our facilities are second to none. The aim of the academy will therefore be to help our athletes to compete with, and beat, the best in the rest of the world.

A key factor in the development of the Government's proposals for the British academy of sport, and for the regional network of facilities, was the insight that I gained from my many conversations with sports administrators, governing bodies and athletes and, not least, from my visit to Australia in January 1995. I saw for myself the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra, which provides valuable lessons for our British academy of sport. I also saw and studied the New South Wales State Institute at Narrabeen and the South Australia State Institute in Adelaide, both of which provide valuable lessons for our regional institutes of sport. I saw and studied the Australian cricket academy at Port Henley, near Adelaide, and the Rugby League academy inside, as it were, the New South Wales State Institute at Narrabeen, both of which provide valuable lessons on how academies of individual sports that are owned and run by the governing bodies for those sports might work in this country.

I do not want to copy everything that I saw in Australia, because the opportunities and problems there are different from those we have, but I pay tribute to what Australia has achieved. I have learnt a great deal from its excellent example.

The policy document recognised that much of what is needed to help our sportsmen and sportswomen to develop to the highest level of achievement and sporting excellence is already in place. However, it is clear that we lack a vital asset for all national sport—a British academy of sport of world-class standards, and a coherent and unified programme to allow those with the greatest talent to use that talent to best effect.

"Raising the Game" set out the Government's proposals. We want to ensure that the academy provides a range of services for sportsmen and sportswomen and, very importantly, their coaches—top-class training facilities; expert support services in sports science and sports medicine, including advice on training techniques, nutrition and sports injuries; good-quality accommodation for short or long-stay training camps or courses; financial support for individual athletes; access to local education facilities for long-stay students; personal development programmes; use of up-to-date laboratories; and advice and access to information using the latest audio-visual techniques. The academy will be a specialist centre for the training of coaches and those in the fields of sports science and sports medicine and also a centre of excellence in research and development.

The British academy of sport will work co-operatively with the regional institutes of sport and sports-specific academies, although such regional institutes will not be owned or run by those who will own and run the British academy of sport—or if that were to happen, I should be surprised. Of course, there is nothing to stop people attempting to do that, but at the moment we are inviting bids only for the academy.

The Government are not in the business of nationalising sport or overly centralising it. The regional institutes will offer locally accessible, high-quality sports training and facilities; high standards of sports science, medicine and coaching; links to the British academy of sport for sportsmen and sportswomen and their coaches; and scholarships and sponsorships for individual athletes.

The academies of particular sports—for example, the academy of cricket, the academy of rowing or the academy of cycling—will be run by the sport's governing body; provide coaching in technical skills in their particular sport at the highest level; make use, as appropriate, of the general facilities of the British academy of sport and the regional institutes; and offer scholarships and sponsorship for individual athletes.

In December 1995, the Sports Council conducted a wide-ranging consultation exercise on the academy with the United Kingdom's top performers, coaches and administrators, to ensure that what is put in place will have a direct impact on performance on the world stage. Written responses were invited and 12 open meetings were held in different parts of the UK. Some 1,600 people attended the open meetings and about 600 written responses were received. The responses were analysed by an independent consultancy firm and confirmed wide support for the concept, set out in "Raising the Game", of the academy as the pinnacle of a network of regional institutes and academies for particular sports.

In addition, there was overwhelming support for three key functions proposed for the academy: that it should be an integral part of the existing programme for the overall development of excellence in UK sport; that it should provide what is needed by different sports, their national governing bodies and their top-level performers; and that it should focus primarily, but not entirely, on the needs of top-level performers.

On 24 July this year, just over a year after "Raising the Game" was published, the Department of National Heritage and the Sports Council jointly published the prospectus inviting bids to set up the British academy of sport. Tomorrow is the closing date for bids by different consortiums, typically comprising a couple of private sector companies, a local university, a local authority and a group of well-known sportsmen and sportswomen who might be the trustees of the charitable trust that will be set up to own and run the academy.

The prospectus is based on the proposals set out in "Raising the Game" and conclusions reached following the consultation process. It contains details of how to draw up a bid which may, at a later stage, be eligible for funding from the national lottery. The prospectus sets out a number of principles for the academy, including the following: that the successful consortium will form itself into a charitable trust, which will run the academy in the interests of British sport as a whole; that it shall have the highest standards in sports facilities and services, including training, coaching, sports medicine and sports science and other relevant matters; that it shall work closely with other sports organisations and, in particular, with the new United Kingdom Sports Council—which I hope will get off the ground as soon as the lawyers can work out the difficult details—with regional sports institutes, academies for individual sports and other bodies involved in sports-related matters; that it shall be run primarily, but not exclusively, for elite athletes, including athletes with disabilities; that it shall provide residential accommodation; and that it shall provide scholarships for athletes and encourage other bodies to provide scholarships for athletes at the academy.

What I intend to say next will answer many of the proper questions asked by the hon. Member for Vauxhall. Unfortunately, there will not be time to deal with all her questions, but if she so wishes I can respond to them in

[Mr. Iain Sproat]

writing. The essential point about the prospectus is that it is not intended to be rigidly prescriptive about what the academy should be in every detail. It is our expectation—from what I have heard about a number of the bids, it is an expectation about to be fulfilled—that bidders will come forward with their own innovative ideas, adding value to the original concept, on how the principles I set out earlier can best be achieved.

The hon. Lady raised important matters, such as the arrangements with local schools for young athletes. For example, young girl gymnasts reach their prime earlier than other athletes, so they are likely to be at the academy at an early age and schools must be provided for them. Depending on where the winning bid is, the winning consortium will form relationships with local authorities, grant-maintained schools, independent schools or whatever. The precise details will depend on which consortium is declared the winner.

We are dealing with unsealed bids. It may be that a consortium that we do not think will win will actually have a good idea that, with general agreement, we will mix and match with another bid. I do not want to say what the academy will be in every detail. From what I know already about the bids, people will come forward with good, innovative ideas which I do not want to shut out. That is why the prospectus is not intended to be rigidly prescriptive.

The assessment process will be carried out by the new United Kingdom Sports Council and the Department of National Heritage. Once a decision has been reached, the successful organisation or a shortlist of organisations will be eligible to apply to the home country sports councils for funding from the national lottery. Because of the possibility of an application for lottery funding, the home country sports councils will play no part in the evaluation process.

Miss Hoey: I asked two specific questions which I would like the Minister to answer. The first relates to the charter of the home country sports councils. Is it possible that they will have a veto? Will the Minister talk us through how he thinks that will work? Secondly, will the hon. Gentleman clarify his role? What is his job in all this?

Mr. Sproat: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the home country sports councils. The initial judgment on who we reckon is the best contender—there may be three contenders; it depends what happens with the lottery application—will be made by my Department and the United Kingdom Sports Council. The UK Sports Council, as the hon. Lady knows, has on its board the chairmen of all the home country sports councils, so their involvement and judgment are already involved. If I may mix metaphors, the process involves quite a fine Chinese wall, but I have every expectation that, given the fact that the British Olympic Association and each of the home country sports councils are represented on it, the UKSC recommendations will be generally acceptable to the sports world.

As for my role, much of the vision, such as it is, is my own—getting sport back into the heart of schools and recognising the importance of identifying talent at an early age and fostering it through primary and secondary school, at county and under-21 level—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. We shall now proceed to the next debate, on taxation of the racing industry.

Racing Industry (Taxation)

1.30 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (Bury St. Edmunds): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to introduce this Adjournment debate this afternoon. I thank my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury for being here to reply. This is the first opportunity I have had to congratulate him formally on his new appointment—I know that he will perform the job with his characteristic panache.

In 1668, King Charles II commissioned the construction of a palace at Newmarket. He was the first individual to establish racing stables in the town—the first proper racing and training establishment in the world. Today, Newmarket is synonymous with racing, which has developed there successfully for more than 300 years. I have the privilege to represent the town of Newmarket in this House.

At the State Opening last week, the Sovereign came to the Palace of Westminster in a horse-drawn carriage. The horse has played a central role in our military past, and does so now in our pageantry. At the other end of the spectrum, millions of children have learnt to enjoy riding at pony clubs. Affection for this frail, beautiful and temperamental animal lies deep in the hearts of a wide cross-section of the British public.

Out of all that has evolved the best-ordered racing and finest bloodstock industry in the world. Recently, the industry was threatened by the arrival of the single European market and by unbridgeable VAT differentials. In Newmarket, one in three people are directly or indirectly employed in racing. The potential damage to the town and to the industry in general would have been immeasurable had the battle on VAT been lost. I therefore express again my profound gratitude to the Treasury for facilitating the introduction of the VAT registration scheme. The arrival of Sunday racing also helped.

Last year, in response to the impact of the national lottery, my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor cut general betting duty by 1 per cent. I express to my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary, on behalf of the industry and my constituents, my thanks for the Government's action, which showed their understanding and support for the industry. It is much appreciated.

What is not clearly understood is the immense economic importance of the British horse racing and breeding industry. It directly employs 31,600 people; if we add all those employed in ancillary services and in on-course and off-course betting activities, the total figure is 100,000 people. Income generated by the industry is more than £600 million, with substantial additional sums being spent by race course visitors away from the course.

It is estimated that exports total £90 million, and that tax revenues, excluding general betting duty, amount to £142 million. Training and breeding employ the equivalent of one in eight agricultural workers. We are therefore debating a highly significant employer and generator of wealth and of tax revenues.

The linchpin, of course, is the race horse itself. It is a simple equation: there has to be some incentive to become and to remain a race horse owner. After the initial purchase price, the average training cost is now £13,700 per annum. Of course, there are those to whom such a sum is insignificant, but they are a small minority. The industry's viability ultimately depends on a broad and deep base of race horse ownership. I have part-owned two race horses, so I speak from personal experience. The blunt truth is that, in Britain, the risk-reward ratio is, absolutely and relatively, disastrously unfavourable and worsening.

It has become fashionable to produce international league tables. This country, for all its long history of racing and the industry's excellent reputation, is now increasingly in the relegation zone. Nothing could more graphically illustrate that than the fact that present or potential British race horse owners are simply voting with their feet.

This week, the second biggest individual British race horse owner announced that he was substantially scaling back the number of horses he has in training, and others, in the past few days, have made similar depressing indications of intent. Indeed, the number of owners with horses in training has fallen since last year, and the number remains below the effective threshold necessary to develop a full race programme.

One especially clear indication that the long-term health of the industry is under threat is the fact that ownership of the key two-year-olds in training is falling. The number has fallen 21 per cent. since 1988, and, tellingly, it has fallen almost 5 per cent. in the past 12 months. About 30 per cent. of owners drop out each year.

The reason is simple: prize money in this country is now ludicrously low, even for our most famous races. The Derby is ranked only 21st in the world. Although £850,000 might seem a considerable sum, it pales into insignificance when compared with the Dubai cup, at £2.6 million, the Japan cup, at £2.5 million, and the United States Breeders cup, at £1.8 million.

Some years ago, the Japanese sent shock waves through the art market by purchasing impressionist paintings for record prices; they are now doing exactly the same in respect of bloodstock, much of it originally British. Today, the average flat race in Japan is worth £170,000, whereas a similar race meeting here might offer prizes of about £5,000—a truly staggering differential. Every other sport, no matter how belatedly, has had to react to the finite life of its participants—even cricket has succumbed.

Although owners contribute the vast bulk of racing's financial input, racing does not have direct control of its financial destiny. Out of 40 countries examined, Britain languishes joint 36th in the prize money league. Expressed as a percentage of keep and training costs, prize money per horse recovered in Britain is only 21 per cent. In Japan the rate stands at 95 per cent., in Hong Kong at 143 per cent and in the United States at 47 per cent; our European neighbours in Italy and France enjoy a rate of 49 per cent., and those in Germany a rate of 45 per cent.—all more than double the UK percentage. In any given year, only 6 per cent. of new owners and 6 per cent. of all active owners cover their costs.

This autumn, Tattersalls in my constituency recorded some remarkable auction prices for bloodstock. There is no doubt that there is more optimism in the world industry. However, 75 per cent. of the turnover was due to foreign buying. Perversely, that will exacerbate the negative impact on Britain flowing from the greater internationalisation of racing. In 1991-95, the number of British-trained horses that won or were placed in overseas

[Mr. Richard Spring]

race meetings increased by 57 per cent. Here, in the same period, foreign-trained entrants actually decreased by 20 per cent.

With higher prices of quality bloodstock and our low prize money returns, those deteriorating trends will become worse. The warning signs are everywhere. Owners will be less motivated to race their horses here. Ultimately, that will affect fixture lists and crowd attendance, and therefore betting levels. It is a disturbing outlook. No other industry could be more aptly described as having flesh that is willing, but a spirit that is weak.

At the heart of the industry's dilemma is the wholly inadequate return to racing from betting turnover, which is based on a complex system that in practice brings little stability and certainty. The percentage of horse race betting turnover returned to the industry in the United States is 8.9 per cent. In France it is 6 per cent., in Ireland it is 5.7 per cent., and in Germany it is fully 14.9 per cent. In Britain, it is a derisory 1.2 per cent.

The very success of the national lottery has had a negative impact on racing's viability. Some months ago, the Home Office produced a publication called "The Impact of the National Lottery on the Horse Race Betting Levy". it started with a reminder that the Home Office had made a commitment to monitor the impact of the lottery on the levy. The levy board prize money contribution is expected to fall in 1996-97 by £2.7 million to £27.5 million.

In May last year, a survey suggested that three quarters of betting shop customers purchase national lottery tickets, and that between 6 and 7 per cent. now stake less money in betting shops. In consequence, the Henley centre reported that betting office turnover was down by 3.2 per cent. in 1995, or 5.8 per cent. lower than it would have been without the national lottery.

Happily, this year, following the Chancellor's most welcome 1 per cent. cut in general betting duty in the Budget, the situation has begun to stabilise. Turnover for the first six months of 1996 showed a small rise of 1.8 per cent. on the same period last year. However, the announcement by Camelot last week will effectively eliminate the benefits of the cut and abort any betting turnover recovery. Many hon. Members have greyhound stadiums in their constituencies, as I do, and their future is under a cloud, too.

I have absolutely no quarrel with the introduction of the national lottery. On the contrary, it has produced significant sums for good causes, not least in my constituency. Its inception was long overdue, but it puts an onus on the Government to consider carefully its impact. Because of the lottery, there are 3,400 fewer jobs in the betting industry than would otherwise have been the case, and 4,000 jobs are in jeopardy. By Christmas, 650 betting offices will have closed, and another 1,300 are vulnerable. The second weekly draw probably makes those figures look like an underestimate. Fresh applications for betting office licences are at their lowest since legalisation 35 years ago.

Betting shops should, at a minimum, be able to sell lottery tickets. Equally, there is a clear inconsistency whereby punters can bet on Irish lottery numbers but not on the outcome of our national lottery. General betting duty currently stands at 6.75 per cent., and the effective rate of tax on horse racing is 30 per cent. Some interested parties have called for a cut to 5 per cent.; that would at least bring the effective tax rate down to 22 per cent., compared with the pools and lottery rate of 24 per cent. and the casino rate of 17 per cent.

I have bombarded the Minister with a plethora of statistics. Last year, when Madam Speaker gave me permission to draw attention to this problem in an Adjournment debate, I painted a rather more impressionistic picture, but in the past 12 months, as these figures starkly show, the reality has become all too apparent. The help given by the Chancellor in last year's Budget of a 1 per cent. cut in general betting duty has, to all intents and purposes, been wiped out by the new, second weekly lottery draw. The figures I have presented spell out the severe impact that the national lottery is having and will have on the racing industry.

Some weeks ago, the jockey Frankie Dettori won seven races in a row at Ascot, which resulted in one very happy and exuberant jockey and one infinitely richer punter. But it was also a magical moment for the whole nation—a nation which throughout its history has cherished the horse in whatever shape, size or form. At the top of this equine pyramid stands the British race horse, whose future, I fear, is at best uncertain.

I fervently hope that a material cut in general betting duty can be effected on 26 November and that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor will spell out specifically that there should be a clearly defined division between help to the punter and help to racing via the levy. The Minister of all people knows that this is a remarkably successful time in Britain, with the renaissance of so many skills and industries. Sadly, however, the racing industry is proving an exception and its position and world excellence is under real threat from forces that the industry itself simply cannot control.

I appreciate that, at this time, my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Treasury are besieged with requests for special help. I hope that I have demonstrated that racing has an unassailable case that ought to be heard sympathetically. I earnestly beseech the Minister to give the matter his generous and urgent consideration.

1.45 pm

Mr. William McKelvey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring) makes a most eloquent and unanswerable case for assistance for an industry that he obviously knows well and loves. Perhaps I should declare an interest, because I wish to speak briefly on the greyhound industry. I am chair of the all-party greyhound group and was recently elected as a director of the British Greyhound Racing Board—unpaid, of course. I own and run greyhounds at Shawfield, and although they may not be as expensive to run as horses, I should not like to mention exactly what it costs me to run those three greyhounds, lest my wife reads *Hansard* some time.

Greyhound racing, like horse racing, has had a difficult time this year. We have lost tracks at Cradley Heath, Ramsgate and Sittingbourne. Middlesbrough is due to close in November, and the threat of imminent closure hangs over Bolton, Canterbury and Hackney. The ground on which the greyhounds run is more valuable for other uses, and we must try to reverse that trend.

The Gerald Eve report makes it clear that greyhound racing has already spent £6.6 million on safety measures, and still has to spend another £4.8 million and

£1.1 million a year to obtain certification under health and safety at grounds legislation. The greyhound industry, unlike the owners of football stadiums, has no additional help to meet the cost of those measures.

Once again, the off-course betting industry is asking that a betting duty reduction should go straight to punters. A similar duty cut last year added £27 million to the profits of the betting industry, but that industry still refuses to pay £2 million per year to the British greyhound racing fund, because its contributions are designated by the Government as voluntary. We collect an average of only 65 per cent. of the possible tally that is due.

What I would call the respectable bookies—the big firms such as Ladbroke, Hill and Coral—pay their share, although recently some of them have argued that they may resist paying unless they get their way in some of the fund meetings. The British Greyhound Racing Board seeks a reduction of 1 per cent. in the general betting duty, with the benefits of that reduction being passed to greyhound racing and horse racing. It also wants a statutory mechanism to ensure that all moneys that are intended to benefit greyhound racing are passed to the sport and do not form part of the betting industry's retained profits.

I know that the Government say that they are a liberalising body, but unless we in the greyhound industry have the statutory requirement, bookmakers will resist paying the full amount of money due, and they can always threaten to withhold that fund unless they get their own way.

The British Greyhound Racing Board has been unsuccessful in obtaining a meeting with the Minister and his assistants. May I ask him—I will write to him in any case—to give the board the opportunity for a brief meeting? I know that he has been given all the relevant articles, and I am sure that he has read and understood them, but it is important that such an important part of the racing industry receives the opportunity, just as the horse racing industry has done, for a meeting with him to explain the details of what we are asking.

I am grateful for the opportunity for this short speech; this is an important issue for us in the greyhound racing industry.

1.50 pm

Sir Fergus Montgomery (Altrincham and Sale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring) on raising this important issue. I must also declare an interest: I am a consultant to the National Association of Bookmakers Ltd.

My hon. Friend's point is of great importance to bookmakers throughout Britain, because the yearly drop in the number of betting shops causes great concern. I am told that there are about 9,000 betting shops, whereas, in the late 1960s, after betting shops had been legalised, there were about 16,000. The betting industry is having great difficulty in sustaining a profit level. If it cannot sustain that level, there will be more betting shop closures and more job losses.

My hon. Friend cited the example of Franco Dettori the other Saturday at Ascot, who went through the card and rode seven winners. That was phenomenal. A racing tipster studying all the form, receiving information and going through the card on any day happens once in a blue moon. For a jockey to have done that was incredible. I cannot believe the number of people who apparently back every horse that Franco Dettori rides. Some people backed all seven horses, in all sorts of combinations and permutations, and won a great deal of money.

The barber I go to in Victoria street does the horses, and he told me, in great rage, that he had backed only six of Franco Dettori's horses. The barber had spent about £5. If he had backed all seven, he would have won £15,000. Because he had backed only six, he won £2,000. I told him that, if I ever won £2,000, I would be grateful, because I had never won anything like £2,000 on the horses, the football pools, the national lottery, the premium bonds or anything. I can only think that I must be lucky in love.

There is a need for a further cut in betting duty. My hon. Friend has stressed the concern over the proposed second weekly national lottery draw. The national lottery has had a devastating effect on the betting industry, but there is a simple solution, and I do not know why it has not been tried. It would help enormously if betting shops could sell tickets for the national lottery.

I cannot understand why we cannot allow bookmakers to take bets on the national lottery. It is amazing that I can go into a betting shop, see the fact advertised that I can bet on the Irish national lottery, but not be able to put one on the United Kingdom national lottery. It does not make sense; if betting shops could sell tickets for the UK lottery, it would give bookmakers an enormous boost, and help to keep some of them in business.

I am grateful for this chance to speak in the debate.

1.53 pm

Sir John Cope (Northavon): I make little apology—but I do make a little one—for taking a little of the Minister's time, because the real reply to this debate will come on 26 November, from my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I was the Treasury Minister involved in the VAT change to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring) referred, so I have an interest in the matter. I am chairman of a joint taxation committee of the British Horseracing Board, the British Horse Society and other equine interests.

My hon. Friend has set out well what, in some respects, is a specialised example of the problems of globalisation in many other sectors, but when I was in the Treasury, we thought that it was important to preserve horse racing in Britain and to adjust the taxation system to achieve that end. Horse racing is something that we do extremely well. As he pointed out, it is of great economic importance and many jobs depend on it. It is in the national and, ultimately, in the Treasury's interest that my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues should consider carefully the arguments that have been advanced.

1.54 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Phillip Oppenheim): May I first thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring) for his kind words? He is recognised in the House as a tireless and effective advocate for the horse racing industry. He said that he had made an unassailable case. I must warn him that that adjective has been somewhat devalued in not so distant years, but I catch his drift and agree that he made a strong case.

[Mr. Phillip Oppenheim]

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale (Sir F. Montgomery), my right hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Sir J. Cope), my predecessor, in a manner of speaking, and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. McKelvey). I should be delighted to meet the British Greyhound Racing Board. I am just about old enough to remember when dogs ran at Stamford Bridge when I was a child, so I have a particular love for that industry.

I acknowledge the importance of the racing industry, in all its various forms, in our national life. It is an intrinsic, colourful and particularly beautiful part of our national life. It is important and has been a success.

I am grateful for the acknowledgment by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds of what the Government have done in recent years. The allowance for owners to register for and to reclaim VAT has been important. The duty cut in the last Budget has been mentioned, and the deregulation of betting shops, which can now open on Sundays and weekends, has also been important. Many of the points that have been made have been put to me in representations from the British Horseracing Board and other parts of the betting industry.

I want to touch briefly—to the extent that I may—on the points made about the national lottery's impact. I hope that hon. Members will understand the limitations on what I can say, because this is primarily the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage. I am aware of the many arguments that the lottery has been given special privileges, and that it unfairly distorts a sector of the economy. I think that everyone acknowledges the money that has been given to good causes as a result of the lottery, but, at the same time, it has created a large vested interest.

There are also people who say that a Government who believe in open markets and free choice should perhaps be more sympathetic to allowing the laying of bets on lottery results. The anomaly has been raised that it is legal to take bets on the Irish lottery, but not our own. I merely report those views rather than endorse them, because, as I hope my hon. Friends understand, the difficulty of my position is that I am not directly responsible for that sector, but I hope that the Secretary of State for National Heritage will carefully consider hon. Members' points on those issues.

I hope that the House will understand that, with the Budget only four weeks away, there is little more that I can say, but I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House that their comments will be taken into careful consideration in the run-up to the Budget.

It being three minutes to Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

BILLS PRESENTED

City of Edinburgh Council Order Confirmation

Mr. Secretary Forsyth presented a Bill to confirm a Provisional Order under section 7 of the Private Legislation Procedure (Scotland) Act 1936, relating to City of Edinburgh Council: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Tuesday 5 November and to be printed. [Bill 4.]

Edinburgh Merchant Company Order Confirmation

Mr. Secretary Forsyth presented a Bill to confirm a Provisional Order under section 7 of the Private Legislation Procedure (Scotland) Act 1936, relating to Edinburgh Merchant Company: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Tuesday 5 November and to be printed. [Bill 6.]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kashmir (British Hostages)

1. **Mr. Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when was the last time that direct information was received about the condition of the British hostages in Kashmir; and if he will make a statement. [683]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Sir Nicholas Bonsor): I apologise for the absence of my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is accompanying Her Majesty the Queen on the state visit to Thailand.

We are deeply concerned about Keith Mangan and Paul Wells. The last proof of life we received was on 29 August 1995. We continue to work closely with all the countries concerned, in a joint attempt to find the kidnap victims.

Mr. Simpson: This is the 485th day that my constituents, Paul Wells and Keith Mangan, have been in captivity. Will the Minister explain why, in all that time, no Minister has come before the House to give us a detailed statement on the Government's knowledge on the hostages' state of health or state of existence? Why has no information been given to the House about the organisations with which the Government are working, about the nature of their contacts with the Kashmiri community and about the specific action that is being taken to secure the hostages' prompt release? Will the Minister assure us that—before the hostages reach an anniversary of 500 days in captivity—a Minister will come before the House to give us an opportunity to know in detail what the Government are doing to secure the hostages' safe release?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I am extremely surprised to hear those comments from the hon. Gentleman. My office has made every effort to keep him fully informed of our efforts to find out about, and, we hope, obtain the release of, the hostages. It would not help the hostages if we were to release all the information available to us. I have told the hon. Gentleman and the House that we have had no proof-of-life since August 1995. We are making every effort—with other members of the G4, our allies—to find the hostages. We have kept constantly in touch with the families, who know absolutely what the Government are doing. We are working to the best of our abilities with America, Germany and Norway to find the hostages, and the hon. Gentleman is being extremely unfair if he is implying that there is something that we should be doing that we are not doing. It is open to him, or to anyone else who has a suggestion, to make it.

Mr. Devlin: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion, because there is a feeling on Teesside that Keith Mangan has been neglected. Although I know that my hon. Friend and his colleagues have made great efforts to keep me informed of the efforts that are being made in Kashmir—for which the Mangan family and I are deeply grateful—the public perception is increasingly that more could be done. Now that we have reached the 485th day, I should very much welcome an opportunity to visit the Minister and his officials to discuss specific measures—before we reach the two-year mark, when it will be even more difficult to find those people.

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: My right hon. Friend the Minister of State has frequently been in touch with the families, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary met them last week in India. There is no question of any members of either family being unaware of the Government's efforts. We keep in touch with them and listen carefully to what they have to say to us. We have also kept my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Devlin) fully informed. If he wishes to come to see me or any of my ministerial colleagues, as he knows, our doors are always open.

Mr. Madden: Will the Minister confirm that well-known Kashmiri political leaders have condemned hostage taking and have demanded the immediate release of hostages alive and well? Those concerns have been reinforced by numerous public demonstrations by the people of Kashmir against hostage taking. Will the Minister explain why several offers by Kashmiri political leaders to mediate and to attempt to locate the hostages have not been taken up?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I am not aware that any such offer that could be taken seriously has not been taken up. The Government are in close contact with Kashmiri leaders. We have had unsubstantiated reports of sightings of the hostages. We have also had unsubstantiated reports of their death. It is difficult to get to the truth in that troubled province of India. We have made every effort to find the hostages and we shall continue to do so.

Cyprus

2. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's initiatives in respect of ending the partition of Cyprus. [684]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. David Davis): We are working closely with the United States, our European Union partners and others in support of the United Nations-led effort to achieve a political settlement. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has appointed Sir David Hannay as the British Government's special representative for Cyprus. My right hon. and learned Friend plans to visit Cyprus before Christmas for talks with both leaders.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I welcome what my hon. Friend has said. It is clear in retrospect that the partition of Cyprus after the invasion by Turkey 22 years ago should not have been tolerated. Will the Minister give an assurance that the United Kingdom Government, as a co-guarantor, the United Nations, the European Union and the United States will make the reunification of Cyprus the top international political priority in the coming 12 months?

Mr. Davis: We take our duties as a co-guarantor seriously. Our appointment of Sir David Hannay and the

visit of my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary—the first bilateral visit of a Minister to Cyprus for decades—show how seriously we take the issue. Although the task will be incredibly difficult, there may be an opportunity in the coming year.

Mr. Cox: The House will welcome the forthcoming visit to Cyprus of the Foreign Secretary. Will his discussions with Mr. Denktas centre on the return of Famagusta—something that, as the Minister knows, has long been promised but has sadly never happened?

Mr. Davis: I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend will focus on every issue relating to making Cyprus a single country again, guided by the ideas of the United Nations Secretary-General. I am sure that all those matters will be in front of him when he sees Mr. Denktas and Mr. Klerides.

Mr. Waterson: Does my hon. Friend agree that, when Cyprus accedes to membership of the European Union, it would be preferable if it did so as a whole island which was no longer partitioned? Will he also confirm that no party has a right of veto over the accession negotiations moving forward?

Mr. Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary said last week that it would be much more difficult to arrange entry to the European Union for a divided Cyprus. Reunification is therefore clearly desirable for that reason, but it is also desirable for its own sake to return Cyprus to what the United Nations Secretary-General has described as a bizonal, bicommunal federation. Every effort will go into that. My hon. Friend is right that, in maintaining that policy, we must ensure that no party has a veto

Mr. Trimble: I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary, on his visit to Cyprus, is for the first time to meet the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community. It is right that the two communities in Cyprus should be treated equally. I urge the Minister to persuade our colleagues in the European Community to afford them similar status and to ensure that the European Community is not used by the Greek Cypriot community in Cyprus as a tool with which to beat the Turkish Cypriots.

Mr. Davis: We have always made balanced contacts with both communities without, of course, recognising the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus; we recognise the proper Government of Cyprus and will continue to do so. We shall do everything possible to ensure that the European Union does everything in its power to bring that divided country together again.

Middle East Peace Process

3. **Mr. Batiste:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress of the middle east peace process. [685]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): Redeployment from Hebron was scheduled for the end of March in the interim agreement. Both sides must abide by commitments under the interim agreement. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Arafat have both said they will do so. Concrete steps are necessary soon or there is a risk of the peace process slipping backwards. We also wish to see the reopening of the Syrian track.

Mr. Batiste: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, since the democratic process produced a change of Government in Israel, all parties have had to adjust to changes in priorities and in the nuances with which they approach the peace process? Nevertheless, is he satisfied that all parties remain committed to its success? What steps have the British Government taken since the House rose in the summer to assist that process?

Mr. Hanley: I agree with my hon. Friend that, in the time scale following elections, such as those in Israel, one may need to reflect. However, agreements such as the one on Hebron have already been made between the parties. They have agreed not just that Hebron should be returned, but on the other outstanding elements of the Oslo accords: redeployment from areas B and C, the rural west bank; the release of Palestinian prisoners; and free passage between the west bank and Gaza. Those are issues that have been agreed, and although I understand that the security situation changes from day to day and needs to be addressed seriously, we also need to see progress very soon.

Mr. Kaufman: I congratulate the Minister on the reply that he has just given. Does he agree that, amid all the discourtesies and incompetences that accompanied President Chirac's visit to Israel and to Palestine, it was somewhat curious that the Israeli regime was willing to accept European Union aid, but not to accept a European Union role in the peace process? Taking into account the fact that, as the Minister has pointed out, those agreements are international, ought it not to be pointed out to the Israeli regime that, if it accepts international aid, it should also pay attention to international views on an international agreement?

Mr. Hanley: The European Union is the largest aid donor to the Palestinians and we favour a strong European Union role supporting the peace process. We are ready to play an active part, commensurate with the scale of European Union interests and economic support for the peace process. That is why we welcome the decision to appoint Ambassador Moratinos as the European Union's special envoy. That will help the European Union to have a stronger role within the peace process. The mandate makes it clear that there is no intention to cut across the mediation role of the United States, but that we should support and complement the United States' role.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Batiste) that Britain has taken a very firm line with the European Union and with the United Nations; as my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear in his recent speech to the United Nations General Assembly. It is important that the international community works together to bolster the peace process. There is nothing inconsistent in President Chirac's visit—it was clearly part of an attempt which has been co-ordinated with actions by allies, such as the visit by my right hon. and learned Friend to Israel next week.

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the light of the Israeli Government's

extraordinary and unacceptable pursuit of the peace process, a visit by any British Foreign Secretary to Jerusalem gives the opportunity for a visit to Orient house, and that our right hon. and learned Friend should be strongly urged to make such a visit because, by doing so, he would send a message without having to use offensive language, which would offend him as our foremost diplomat?

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend's decision not to visit Orient house next week is in line with European Union policy that short working visits need not include a call on Orient house. That in no way changes our firm policy that visits are important in maintaining the European Union position of principle on Jerusalem. I paid a longer visit to Israel earlier this year and I called on Orient house. That was completely consistent with the European Union position, as is the action of my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Last week, the Secretary of State told the House that he would not indulge in megaphone diplomacy when he visited the middle east, and that, I think, gained general acceptance throughout the House. Notwithstanding that, may we have an undertaking that he will pursue robustly the case against any further settlements in the occupied territories, not least because they are extremely provocative and they provide ready fuel for fundamentalist action?

Mr. Hanley: Those who know my right hon. and learned Friend know that he needs no megaphone, nor will he seek to use one in the way that the hon. and learned Gentleman suggests. He will state firmly to the Israelis our position on Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Under the fourth Geneva convention, all settlements in the occupied territories are illegal and an obstacle to peace. We have regularly raised that issue with the Israeli Government and the expansion of settlements can prejudice the final status talks. My right hon. and learned Friend will make that clear.

Sir Timothy Sainsbury: Does my right hon. Friend agree that successful economic co-operation between Israel and her neighbours, including the Palestine entity, is an effective way of progressing and strengthening the peace process? Will he therefore consider the obstacles that exist to the use of public or private finance from the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom's considerable expertise to help that economic co-operation? For example, there are a number of obstacles which he might like to discuss with his right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Hanley: Yes, I thoroughly agree that trade can help to underpin the peace process. I have said before in the Chamber that a prosperous Palestine is a peaceful Palestine, and there is no doubt that a prosperous Israel, which is self-confident, with the freedom to trade with its neighbours and beyond, is an Israel which will maintain the peace. Trade relations between our two countries have increased greatly during the past three or four years and it would be tragic if any reduction of effort or reversal in the peace process caused a reversal in economic relations, which are so valuable to all people within the region.

Mr. Robin Cook: The Minister will be aware that I visited Hebron and Orient house last month. Anyone who has seen Hebron must be aware that there can be no peace progress so long as a city of 100,000 Palestinians is dominated by the presence of Israeli military and by road blocks around the city centre. In view of the question of the hon. Member for Elmet (Mr. Batiste), will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Oslo accords have the status of an international treaty and are binding on the new Government of Israel, who must now honour the commitment to withdraw the military occupation of Hebron? Finally, will he press the new Israeli Government to recognise that their legitimate aim of peace with security for Israelis can be achieved only on the basis of peace with justice for Palestinians?

Mr. Hanley: I agree with every word that the right hon. Gentleman has said. He is absolutely right about Hebron. Unless there is a solution there before long, there will be no peace. It is the next step, but other steps clearly must follow. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the Israelis and any Government of the Israelis must make security a priority. It is vital for them. They must take that into account. That is why we urge restraint upon all those who might be tempted to loosen their tempers in reaction to what has happened during the last few weeks and months. Remarkable restraint is being shown. Therefore, the right hon. Gentleman is correct.

The Oslo accords have been agreed by the parties. Prime Minister Netanyahu told my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he would stand by the Oslo accords—by any agreement that had been signed by Israel. I believe that he means what he says.

Mr. Cyril D. Townsend: Has my right hon. Friend made any representation to the Israeli authorities, perhaps through our excellent consul general in Jerusalem, over the recent killing of a Palestinian youth who was throwing stones at an Israeli settler? Is it not extremely important that justice should be done in such a situation? Is he aware that the settlers, who are armed to the teeth, frequently behave in an offensive and ridiculous way?

Mr. Hanley: I agree with my hon. Friend about that tragic action. Indeed, I regret the death of anyone in that area. I regret, too, the deaths of two Israeli soldiers in the past couple of days in south Lebanon. I regret any death. We must have peace. I admire those who do not over-react or even react in anger to such tragic actions. We need calm, peace and justice. My hon. Friend is right: justice should flow from that tragic act.

Intergovernmental Conference

4. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress within the intergovernmental conference. [686]

Mr. David Davis: The intergovernmental conference is progressing extremely well.

Mr. Kennedy: I am sure that hon. Members from all parts of the House will warmly welcome such an upbeat assessment. Will the Minister clarify the Government's position in one respect? We have heard the recent contributions from France and Germany and the comments of the Foreign Secretary. If, as seems likely, a

federal core involving Germany and France develops for the purposes of deepening integration, what will be the Government's stance towards such a development? Will their stance be to stand to one side and wave it through but not to participate, or to stand in the way and block it? What will be the approach?

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary place the formula of the Government's policy before the House last week—that is, any proposal for flexibility must in its implementation be agreed by all and open to all. That means that any proposal can be assessed in terms of its impact on Britain's national interest at the time. That decision can be taken with respect to general or detailed proposals.

Mr. Harris: When does my hon. Friend expect the intergovernmental conference to consider the important amendments that the Government have tabled to the treaty to deal with the scourge of quota hopping? What support have the Government received from other member states to see that that practice, which is wrecking our fishing industry, is put to an end?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend raises a matter of considerable importance to the entire country and especially his part of the country. We have raised the matter with the Union and tabled our proposals. We have made it clear that we require those proposals to be discussed and debated fully, and that will probably occur towards the end of this year or early next year. It must be done well before the end of the conference so that—to answer the second part of my hon. Friend's question—we can get a clear idea of how much support we have and of what detailed argument there is in any direction. The argument will be conducted in detail and in parallel with discussions outside the IGC, which also may yield results.

Mr. Watson: What is the Government's attitude to the Swedish Government's proposed amendment with regard to convergence for economic and monetary union? It is proposed that an employment chapter should be added to the Maastricht treaty. The United Kingdom Government are almost alone in opposing that suggestion. Will the Minister explain why they do not consider it important for the intergovernmental conference to deal with protection for jobs, and why once again they are swimming against the tide in Europe?

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to say "almost alone". The first comment I heard on that matter came from the reflection group, in the form of a cryptic remark from a member of that group who said, "Oh my God! Not reconstructed Keynesianism again." The fact is that a number of countries are concerned about that proposal, for a simple reason. The Labour party has clearly not yet learnt that jobs are created not by Governments but by businesses and individuals. The job of government is to make it easier for that to happen—not harder by increasing bureaucracy.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: I thank my hon. Friend for being careful about the doctrine of flexibility. The danger, surely, is that if other countries proceed with a federal Europe, we may find them hijacking the European institutions in whose jurisdiction we are included, so we are in danger of being dragged along in the slipstream of federalism unless we provide ourselves with adequate protections for the sovereignty of this kingdom.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is right. That is precisely the sort of argument, both detailed and general, that will apply when any practical proposal on flexibility comes up. It will apply not just in terms of the IGC but, if we decide on a flexible outcome, at each stage thereafter. It is only at those stages that we shall be able to assess the effects of a smaller group's actions both for that group and for the Union at large and the countries outside the group. It is critical not to lose sight of that point.

Sudan

5. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contacts he has made recently with the Government of Sudan on the war there. [687]

Mr. Hanley: I discussed the continuing civil war with the Sudanese ambassador on 2 July.

We are in frequent touch with the various parties to the conflict and consistently tell them we look to all sides in the Sudanese civil war to make genuine moves towards peace.

Mr. Flynn: Will the Minister recognise the work of human rights campaigner Rev. Richard Rodgers, who is fasting at this moment outside the Foreign Office to draw attention to this war, which has received very little attention—possibly because the television cameras have not witnessed the dreadful events of that war, including flagrant abuses of human rights, tens of thousands of deaths and possible attempted genocide? Is this not the right moment for Britain to use her good standing and reputation with both sides, as a post-colonial power, and to act as an honest broker by intervening to bring the conflict to a peaceful end?

Mr. Hanley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the work of Dr. Rodgers, of Light and Hope for Sudan. I was pleased to ask him to come and discuss his proposal with me on the 10th of this month. We had a good discussion and I asked officials to follow up his ideas with him.

However, I must admit that, despite the excellent work of our ambassador in Khartoum, Alan Goulty, and the work of officials and others—including my noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development, who has been in discussion with the parties—we do not believe this to be the right time to introduce a British initiative. We do not think it would be fruitful at the moment. We look for greater progress between the parties. If both sides ask us to undertake such an initiative, we shall of course willingly consider it.

Mr. Rowe: Does my right hon. Friend have any advice for the growing number of hon. Members in this place and the other place, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, who are increasingly anxious about the

effects of the war on southern Sudan and who wish to give him effective assistance in the difficult task that he has to undertake?

Mr. Hanley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are of course gravely concerned about southern Sudan. The United Kingdom, after all, is one of the largest bilateral donors of emergency aid. We have committed more than £95 million, which includes the United Kingdom's share of EC food aid to Sudan and Sudanese refugees, since 1991. The bulk of that aid is distributed through non-governmental organisations and the UN operation Lifeline, in the south. We continue to call on the Sudanese Government not to obstruct their excellent work.

Intergovernmental Conference

6. **Mr. Betts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the timetable for the intergovernmental conference. [688]

Mr. David Davis: The intergovernmental conference is expected to conclude in mid-1997. This objective was agreed at the Special European Council in Dublin on 5 October.

Mr. Betts: Is the Minister aware of a recent survey by the Institute of Management which showed that 68 per cent. of United Kingdom managers feel that the Government's policies have weakened the United Kingdom's position in Europe and that 56 per cent. of those managers believe that, as a result, we need a change of Government? As well as setting a timetable for the IGC, should not the Government also set a timetable for the general election to give the British people and British managers the chance to vote for a Labour Government who will be willing to give this country a new start in Europe?

Mr. Davis: The most terrible timetable this country could face would be under a Labour Government, when we would see the shortest and fastest loss of sovereignty that the country has faced in many years.

Mr. Cash: Will my hon. Friend take the opportunity to rule out a single currency before the Labour party does so, in line with the comments made by the shadow Foreign Secretary during the "On the Record" programme last weekend?

Mr. Davis: I was a Maastricht Whip for too long to get sucked into the Labour party's problems.

Mr. Robin Cook: I congratulate the Minister on having at least reached an agreement that the IGC should end by mid-1997. It is one of his few areas of agreement and he has been able to reach it only because he does not expect to be in office in mid-1997. Can the hon. Gentleman enlighten the House about the timetable for ending the beef ban? Does he recall the Prime Minister telling the House that a start would be made on lifting the ban by October and that most of the ban would be lifted by November? Will the Minister confirm that tomorrow is the last day of October and that Ministers now have no idea when the ban will be lifted because they have broken the commitments they made in Florence and the promises they made to British farmers?

Mr. Davis: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his optimism, if nothing else. The Prime Minister made clear yesterday the position about Florence; I was there, so I remember it too. The decision at Florence was to make any moves on the basis of the best science available. No doubt the right hon. Gentleman has read the Anderson report on the BSE epidemic and how long it will be before it is complete. That is the best science available. When the right hon. Gentleman has read that report, I will talk to him again about the timetable before us.

Mr. Forman: In the context of the IGC timetable, is my hon. Friend aware that many Conservative Members, from different points of view, believe that the Franco-German idea of a flexibility pact, in whatever form, would be dangerous to the interests of this country and would be a snare and a delusion from the British point of view? I make that comment because it would deprive us of the leverage that we now have in prospect of using our national veto on all those important constitutional issues where we want the principle of subsidiarity to work and we do not want to see further creeping European competence.

Mr. Davis: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Two years ago, the Prime Minister made a speech at Leiden talking about variable geometry and flexibility. He did not have in mind the idea of creating some sidestep around the British veto, particularly on constitutional matters, which will change things for all time in the relationship between Europe and its constituent countries. I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said.

Sir James Goldsmith

7. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what dates in the past 18 months Government Ministers met Sir James Goldsmith in their official capacity to discuss matters relating to a referendum. [689]

Mr. David Davis: None, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: This is intended to be a helpful question. Is there nothing that the Government can do to appease further Sir James Goldsmith's escalating demands? Is there not something more that they could concede?

Mr. Davis: I have a great fondness for the hon. Gentleman—he and I met frequently in the past at various human rights meetings—so I shall be more charitable than I might otherwise be. However, he has not yet listed any concessions that we have made.

Mr. Marlow: On the subject of referendums, am I right in believing that the general election result would not be sufficient for a Conservative Government to seek to enter a single currency in the next Parliament, whereas that is not the case for the Labour party? If the Labour party won the election—which God forbid—it might think that that would be sufficient and adequate instruction from the

British people to join a single currency. Is there not, therefore, a great deal of clear blue water between ourselves and the Labour party?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is right, certainly in one respect. We are the real referendum party in the House. The muddle in the Labour party has been the most confusing thing that the British public have seen in the past couple of days.

Ms Quin: Can the Minister give us a little more information about the contact between the Foreign Office team and Sir James Goldsmith? I understand that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley), has been targeted by the Referendum party at the next election and that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Boothferry (Mr. Davis), was reported to have been involved in discussions with Sir James, and we know that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Upminster (Sir N. Bonsor), was sharpening his Euro-sceptic credentials in the summer with his attack on the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Is not the Foreign Office team of Ministers a vivid microcosm of the huge split on Europe in the Tory party? How does the Foreign Secretary intend to hold his warring Ministers together?

Mr. Davis: I suppose that there could be a problem if a single fact that the hon. Lady has stated were true. I have had no contact with Sir James Goldsmith and I have no such intention now or in the future.

Hong Kong

8. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met the Governor of Hong Kong to discuss arrangements for transition; and if he will make a statement. [690]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary and I met the Governor of Hong Kong on 21 October. We noted that there had been useful progress this year in our exchanges with the Chinese on transitional issues.

Mr. Tredinnick: Does my right hon. Friend agree that five years ago few would have predicted the phenomenal success of the economy of Hong Kong? Does not that success and the stability that Governor Patten has created mean that we shall be handing over the colony in very good shape next July? Is not one outstanding issue the 4,000 stateless British nationals? Does my right hon. Friend have any plans to review their position, given that some of them have served the British Crown for 30 years or more?

Mr. Hanley: I agree entirely with the first part of my hon. Friend's question. Five years ago, when the Hang Seng stood at about 4,000, few would have envisaged that it would now be 300 per cent. higher—in the 12,000s. That is a great sign of confidence among the international business community in Hong Kong—present and future. We should be grateful to the Governor for his work in helping to create the Hong Kong that we wish to continue. As for ethnic minorities, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced in Hong Kong that we shall guarantee to British nationals admission and settlement in Britain in the unlikely event that they are under pressure to leave Hong Kong after the transfer of sovereignty.

I should make it clear to my hon. Friend that no member of that community will be stateless after the transfer of sovereignty. They can apply for British national overseas passports before 1 July 1997. If they do not, and would otherwise be stateless, they will automatically become British overseas citizens. Moreover, their position in Hong Kong is secure. The Joint Declaration and the Basic Law guarantee them the right of abode in the special administrative region after handover.

Mr. Faulds: Why have the Government allowed the Governor to wreck the through-train arrangements that had been earlier agreed?

Mr. Hanley: The Governor has helped to create modern Hong Kong. His popularity there is quite remarkable. He continues to do an outstanding job and he enjoys enviable support in Hong Kong. His approval rating is now more than two thirds. That is pretty high by any standards in any country in the world. We have made substantial advances with the Chinese over the past two years on a wide range of transitional issues against a background of an improving Sino-British relationship and intensified ministerial contact. Therefore, I do not believe that the effect that the hon. Gentleman gives to the so-called through train is valid.

Sir Patrick Cormack: May I revert to the matter of the 4,000 people to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) referred? Does my right hon. Friend accept that no gesture that the British Government can make between now and 30 June will be more greatly appreciated in Hong Kong? Therefore, will he think again?

Mr. Hanley: There is no change in the Government's position. I have mentioned that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister clarified the Government's commitment to the group. I believe that his statement has removed doubts about whether members of the group would be admitted to the United Kingdom in the unlikely event of their coming under pressure to leave Hong Kong. We are not, therefore, planning primary legislation for that purpose.

United States of America

9. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on United Kingdom relations with the United States of America. [691]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Relations between the United Kingdom and the United States are excellent.

Mr. MacShane: After the Prime Minister's disastrous intervention four years ago in the United States election campaign and the phalanx of Tory officials sent from central office to help the Conservative candidate, Robert Dole, to his great election result next week, is it not a fact that on key economic issues, whether raising the

minimum wage or ensuring that child labour and social questions are discussed at the World Trade Organisation, we are right out of line with the US, and that the American Administration cannot wait for a change of government here in the United Kingdom, for an Administration that will speak a modern language?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: No. The United States and the United Kingdom are in line on almost every aspect of international affairs. We work closely together in, for example, Bosnia and in the United Nations in trying to secure reform of that organisation. We are trying to move forwards towards the liberalisation of world trade. We think alike in all major areas of international policy. The point that the hon. Gentleman has made for the second time in Question Time about support given by certain members of the Conservative party to opposition to President Clinton at the last election is fatuous. The relationship between the United States, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Government are extremely good.

Mr. Dykes: Bearing in mind the fact that the career of the present American Secretary of State has been tangibly underwhelming, to put it mildly, will my hon. Friend promise that on Wednesday 6 November Foreign Office Ministers will contact President Clinton's staff to insist that the United States accepts European participation in the middle east peace process, and that it will put necessary pressure on some of the few extremists in Israel to ensure that a proper middle east peace process emerges from Israeli co-operation, as is desired by millions of moderate citizens?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Certainly not.

Indonesia

10. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met (i) the Indonesian ambassador and (ii) Indonesian Government representatives to discuss human rights.[693]

11. **Mrs. Bridget Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on United Kingdom–Indonesia relations. [694]

Mr. Hanley: With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to answer Questions 10 and 11 together.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary last discussed human rights issues with the Indonesian Foreign Minister in New York in September 1996, as I did with him in July this year in Jakarta. We meet the Indonesian ambassador and his staff regularly to discuss a wide range of issues, including human rights.

Mr. Ainger: Can the Minister explain to the House why he continues to believe one word or any assurance given to the Government by the Indonesian regime, which is clearly responsible for the deaths of up to 200,000 East Timorese? Why will he not believe the words of José Ramos Horta, the 1996 Nobel peace prize winner, who said in the course of a Liverpool trial in July that British Hawk aircraft fly low over East Timor and attack unprotected peasant people? If the Minister does not believe Mr. Ramos Horta, why does he not believe Bishop Carlos Belo, who said—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not make a speech. We are not on an Adjournment debate. We need brief questions. We are not making the progress that we normally make with Foreign Office questions. Let us get on quickly.

Mr. Ainger: Why does the Minister not believe the words of Bishop Carlos Belo, who in relation to arms supplies to the Indonesian regime that such supplies were in the interests only of industrialised countries? Why does he not accept—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister has got the message.

Mr. Hanley: We do not take the assurances of Indonesians alone. We take evidence also from a number of other sources. As for arms to Indonesia, or any defence equipment, under article 51 of the United Nations charter all sovereign states enjoy the right to self-defence. All applications to export defence equipment are examined case by case in the light of established criteria and internationally agreed guidelines.

We do not allow the export of arms and equipment likely to be used for internal repression in Indonesia or East Timor. I discussed these issues with Mr. Ramos Horta when I met him on 24 April. I believe, therefore, that we are taking our responsibilities extremely seriously.

Mrs. Prentice: Even if we accept the Minister's guarantees about meetings with the Indonesian Government, how can he convince us that there are regular and rigorous checks on whether that Government are telling the truth? What assurance can he give us that the Government's commitment is genuine and has not abated since the cheque has been banked?

Mr. Hanley: As I have said, we use the diplomatic staff at our post in Jakarta to check on actions in a wide-ranging way, throughout their normal working year. Indonesia, after all, is not subject to international sanctions, and the key point when selling arms is human rights. We raise that point directly with the Indonesians and we do not sell them weapons that are likely to be used for internal repression.

Mr. Fatchett: What about water cannon?

Mr. Hanley: If water cannon is used to try to stop peaceful demonstrators, that is of course totally unacceptable; if it is used to stop rioters, that may be acceptable. It is totally unacceptable to use chemicals or dyes with the water cannon. The only admission that the Indonesians have been made about equipment that they have used concerned armoured vehicles which I believe were supplied by the United Kingdom in the 1960s—I cannot say which Government supplied them—and were used to counter student demonstrations in April; the Indonesians have arrested, tried and sentenced those responsible.

Mr. John Marshall: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if we were to ban arms exports to Indonesia, the Indonesians would get their arms from someone else and the only sufferers would be those employed in defence industries in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hanley: While I am sure that my hon. Friend is right, I can assure him that we would not sell arms to any country merely because it could get them from somebody else. We use very special criteria to ensure that the arms are not used for repressive purposes. We approve the export of equipment on the ground that we do not believe that it is likely to be used for internal repression. We stick carefully to that extremely important principle.

Mr. Jacques Arnold: Does my right hon. Friend nevertheless appreciate that there are severe human rights problems in East Timor, and will he discuss those issues with our Portuguese friends, who have a long-standing insight into that territory and into what is happening there?

Mr. Hanley: We regularly discuss East Timor with the Indonesians and they are well aware of our views. As I have said, my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the matter with the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mr. Alatas, at their meeting in New York in September. I accept that there have been human rights violations in East Timor, but the EU common position, published in late June, called for a significant improvement in that situation, and we would be delighted if the award of the Nobel peace prize helped in the realisation of a comprehensive settlement that is acceptable to all parties, including the East Timorese.

Mrs. Clwyd: The Minister will know, because we have discussed the matter, that in September last year—14 months ago—I submitted a detailed report to the National Audit Office on British aid to Indonesia linked with human rights abuses. Can he assure us that his Department is not deliberately blocking the publication of the NAO report for fear of political embarrassment?

Mr. Hanley: I can give the hon. Lady exactly that assurance. We are not holding up the report, and I believe that the NAO review of aspects of the aid programme to Indonesia will be available soon. I do not know the report's contents, but I hope that the hon. Lady will stick by its findings, because the Government certainly will.

Mr. Hawkins: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Opposition are seeking to destroy the jobs of many people who work for British Aerospace? Before making their case, should not the Opposition first discuss with the leader of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union at British Aerospace Warton how much damage he believes their proposals would cause British workers and jobs, instead of flying in the face of the facts and suggesting that aircraft are carrying out actions that they do not have the capacity to carry out?

Mr. Hanley: Yes, we have received assurances from the Indonesian Government that Hawk aircraft will not be used in Indonesia and East Timor, and there is no evidence to suggest that those assurances have not been respected. In fact, we have investigated thoroughly reports that Hawk aircraft may have been used in East Timor but found absolutely no evidence from any source to support them. However, our standard licensing procedures apply to all defence exports. Hawk export licence applications are considered carefully in the light of established criteria—that is not only to protect jobs but to protect lives honourably.

Mr. Fatchett: As the Minister has been less than fulsome, I take this opportunity on behalf of the House to congratulate Bishop Belo and José Ramos Horta on being awarded the Nobel peace prize and on their work on behalf of the people of East Timor, which is certainly appreciated by the Opposition. Is not Indonesia yet another example of the Government saying one thing about human rights but acting differently?

Is the Minister not aware of recent authoritative reports which show that pro-democracy demonstrations in Indonesia this summer were suppressed by the use of electric shock batons and water cannons, all of which were supplied by British companies? Will he explain how such instruments of torture and repression can possibly be used to promote democracy and human rights? Is it not about time that the Government came clean on their record in Indonesia and their support for a regime which stands for the violation of human rights?

Mr. Hanley: We certainly recognise the work done by Bishop Belo in defending the rights of the people of East Timor and I congratulate him and José Ramos Horta. They meet the Government regularly and I congratulate them most sincerely. As for the hon. Gentleman's comments about certain pieces of equipment being used in Jakarta earlier this year, I should be grateful if he could give me evidence, chapter and verse. Is the Labour party saying that it would break off diplomatic relations with Indonesia?

European Union Decision Making

12. **Mr. Gallie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he will take to ensure that proposals to have the veto removed from European Union decision making are rejected; and if he will make a statement. [695]

Mr. David Davis: I crave your indulgence for 30 seconds, Madam Speaker. I hear that my hon. Friend has had a happy event in the past day or two and the words, "We are a grandfather" are probably in order. I offer my best wishes to him, his daughter and his grand-daughter Naomi.

With regard to my hon. Friend's question, the case for extending the use of qualified majority voting has not been made and we shall continue to oppose such proposals at the intergovernmental conference.

Mr. Gallie: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks of a personal nature and also for his response to my question, as it was the response for which I had hoped. Does not the Government's approach contrast with the policies offered by the Lib-Lab Opposition? Does not their white-flag policy on the issue pose a great threat to the people of the United Kingdom in the years ahead?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Liberal party is willing to give up our sovereignty in the form of the veto on many matters, including foreign affairs. It is willing to subordinate the Western European Union to the European Union and to do almost anything to advance the cause of federalism. The Labour party, in a rather more concealed way, is aiming in the same direction.

As for qualified majority voting and vetoes, we have heard many arguments about the unanimity requirement holding up Europe, but on Monday this week we witnessed a demonstration of how it works, and works well, when the way in which the European Union should deal with the Helms-Burton proposal came before the Foreign Affairs Council. Denmark had serious constitutional, political and judicial problems with that proposal. Because it was a matter of unanimity, Denmark was not overridden—as it might have been with qualified majority voting—and we found a perfectly good and effective policy which met all its requirements. That happened because Denmark had the veto, and the same should apply to us.

Mr. Shore: I welcome the Minister's assurance, but will he go beyond sticking by the veto where it now exists and turn his mind to persuading our European partners that in relation to qualified majority the votes should be re-weighted, so that Britain and other larger and more populous European states have a much larger share of the votes?

Mr. Davis: I find myself mildly embarrassed, as I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. A country such as Luxembourg has one vote for 400,000 people while we have one vote per 6 million people. That should be put right, and that is one of our objectives at the next intergovernmental conference.

Century Date Change (Computers)

13. **Mr. David Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will study the consequences for his Department of the effect of the century date change on computer systems; and if he will make a statement. [696]

Mr. Hanley: While we are in congratulatory mode, I should congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the Under-Secretary of State, as this is his first Question Time for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I regret that he has had no questions to answer and I should be grateful if hon. Members would give him plenty of work next month.

In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), the FCO diplomatic wing has completed an initial study which shows that 60 per cent. of FCO software applications will be affected in some way. Further study is taking place to determine the risks and costs. Remedial action will then be taken. The Overseas Development Administration is taking similar action.

Mr. Atkinson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that our future security, and that of our allies, relies on all our computer systems being millennium compliant? Will he confirm that this country is well ahead of many other countries in responding to the 2000 virus and can he say what discussions he is having with our allies to ensure that they are doing the same?

Mr. Hanley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the subject. It is important that not only the FCO but all Government Departments should heed his warnings. I can confirm that the Foreign Office is well ahead in its programme to try to ensure that we are fully resilient to the 2000 problem by no later than 31 March 1999. We are also working closely with other countries on that issue.

Queen's Speech

14. **Mr. Thurnham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received about the measures announced in the Queen's Speech. [697]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: None.

Mr. Thurnham: Will the Government bear in mind the important work done by the BBC World Service and ensure that its work is properly funded? Is it not the most successful service of its kind in the world and should we not invest in its success?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: As the hon. Gentleman should be well aware, given where he sat in the House until recently, the Government give great support to the World Service, which does a magnificent job worldwide. We will continue to support it.

Mr. Wilkinson: Can my hon. Friend reassure the House that the Government will be consistent with the commitment in the Queen's Speech to the pursuit of the liberal economy by the European Union? In particular, will he bear in mind the potentially disastrous consequences to our economy of the imposition of a working time directive by the European Union through the mechanism of the health and safety procedures? Were that to happen, could the Government exercise their veto and just ignore what the European Court of Justice would try to impose?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: As my hon. Friend knows, it is likely that the European Court of Justice will report later in November on the working time directive. The Government will have to review that report closely and consult industry to see what action needs to be taken. Should the working time directive give us difficulty, we shall work hard in the IGC to obtain an amendment of the European Union rules.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Queen's Speech makes mention of the need to deal with human suffering at the international level. The tragedy that is unfolding on our television screens here, but in real life in Zaire, is one on which the attention of the whole House should be fixed. Does the Minister agree with the proposition put forward for many months by the aid agencies and by those on the ground that the answer to the situation involves not just humanitarian aid but political action by the international community? If he agrees with that proposition, will he tell the House why the Government, with other members of the Security Council, have done very little in that time to

bring the warring parties together? Will he ensure that Britain plays a leading role in bringing all the parties in Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi to the conference table to find a political solution, without which hundreds of thousands of lives will be lost?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I agree that political as well as humanitarian aid and effort is required from the international community. I do not accept that this tragedy is unfolding because of the failure of the international community. There is a limit to what the international community can do to help those who will not help themselves. We will continue to strive extremely hard to try to bring this tragedy to a close.

BILL PRESENTED

EDUCATION

Mrs. Secretary Shephard, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Howard, Mr. Secretary Gummer, Mr. Secretary Hague, Mr. Forth and Mrs. Gillan, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to education in schools and further education in England and Wales; to make provision for the supervision of the awarding of external academic and vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 8.]

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 13 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'ten' in line 43; in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'seventh' in line 45;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'seventh' in line 23; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 13th December, 17th, 24th and 31st January, 7th, 14th and 28th February and 18th April.—[*Mr. Wells.*]

3.31 pm

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing).

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke–on–Trent, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In yesterday's *Hansard* at column 468, in response to my question, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is on record as saying that she had in her possession a letter from the chief education officer of Staffordshire county council stating that the council was extremely pleased with this year's education settlement in Staffordshire. The chief education officer has no knowledge of any such letter, despite a detailed examination and search. I have asked the Secretary of State to produce the letter, but as yet no such letter has appeared.

That information was, therefore, inaccurate and misleading. Is it in order, Madam Speaker, to ask you to request the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to return to the Dispatch Box and either produce the letter or apologise to the House?

Madam Speaker: The matter that the hon. Member has raised is not a point of order. It is a question for argument and debate. I am afraid that he must use the Order Paper to get the answer from the Secretary of State that he seeks.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: The motion has been moved formally. I call Mr. Spearing to move the amendment.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): I beg to move, as an amendment to the motion, after paragraph (3), to add,

(4) Private Members' Notices of Motions shall have precedence over Government business until Seven o'clock on Monday 18th November, Monday 16th December, Monday 27th January and Monday 24th February, and ballots for these Notices shall be held after Questions on Thursdays 7th November, 5th December, 16th January and 13th February.

(5) No Notice of Motion shall be handed in for any of the days on which Private Members' Notices have precedence under this Order in anticipation of the ballot for that day.

The fact that my amendment has been selected has caused some astonishment, particularly in view of the important debate on the economy that is to follow. I shall deal with the amendment almost as if it were a ten-minute Bill to follow later in the Session.

The debate to follow this one will be about taxation, and possibly about what may be included in the Budget. This issue is about the future of Parliament. Those who are astonished at the selection of my amendment convey their ignorance of the basis of Parliament. The rules of the House, what individual Members can do and the power that they have to move motions should concern all of us. It is not a matter of prerogative of the Crown in the form of the Government of the day. The ability to move motions—this amendment, in my case—on only four Mondays for three hours each Monday between now and next summer or the general election is crucial. For two years, we have not had that ability, because of a misunderstanding by the Government, and perhaps others, of the role of the Back Bencher. We are here as individuals.

The Leader of the House may take an opposite view, but I think that he is under a misapprehension. This is an all-party issue that concerns all hon. Members. It is not a matter only for Parliament; it concerns the voters whom we represent. If the voice and vote of Back Benchers are restricted, so are the rights of the voters whom we represent.

A private Member's motion is different from an Adjournment debate. We may have time on a Wednesday to discuss the Adjournment, but as hon. Members know, the Adjournment debate is no substitute for the ability to bite in a vote if required. The leverage available to Back Benchers is being taken away.

I think that we can apply the Hacker test. Both hon. Members and those outside are amused by Jim Hacker. Let us suppose that Jim Hacker has just produced a form for benefit claimants—nothing to do with party politics. Let us suppose that he has run amok and gone wrong, and that lots of ladies who fill up the form cannot get the benefits that they want. There are letters all over the place. "Oh," says the official, "there's going to be a debate." "It's all right," says Jim. "On the Adjournment, I can get away with it. It will be late at night; I shall say I'm sorry, and they will not be able to do anything." "No," says the official. "A private Member's motion has been accepted, and they are going to reduce your income by £5,000." That is another matter.

"Moreover," says the official, "there is Question Time. Next week you must deal with Question Time, and this issue will come up. Who do you think is No. 3 on the list? Tam Dalyell." "Is that the worst?" asks the Prime Minister. "No," replies the official. "No. 6 is Tony Banks." The ability to provide enlightenment when a debate is going on makes questions very important.

Those who are Ministers now will not be Ministers for much longer. They will soon be candidates. Are they going to go back to the electors of Huntingdon, for instance—the Roundhead electors of Huntingdon—and say, "We took away the rights of Back Benchers"? Will they go to Braintree, with its Huguenot traditions, and say, "We shall not allow you to do this"—or, indeed, to the constituency of the Government Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. Goodlad)?

[Mr. Nigel Spearing]

In a tennis club, or indeed any club, people should not be denied the right to table motions; but here, even early-day motions—which are treasured by people who think that they are important—cannot be debated. It used to be possible, although it involved a ballot and a queue. Have we really been reduced to not even having the ability to do what is possible in the national lottery? Can we not even "put in for" a motion? That ends all the history of the House, and prevents voters from having their say through Members of Parliament.

Whatever may have happened in the past, let me ask hon. Members on both sides of the House what reply they will give if, when they go before the electorate as candidates in the election, a member of Charter 88, or any other organisation, says, "You voted to deny the rights of Back Benchers, and thence the voice and votes of the electorate." "Oh, we have Wednesdays and a few Adjournment debates," cannot be a good reply. If the Chief Whip or the Lord President is advising his friends to vote down our amendment, he must think again. Most of us will be candidates in the next election.

The relationship between the electorate and the House is now a national issue. There is a lack of confidence in our ability to deal with issues of the day, which may not be party issues, but which the electorate think that we should be able to discuss. Clearly, if we have no ballot for motions, we shall not be able to discuss them. I suggest that we diminish our democracy thereby. We diminish parliamentary procedures, and we diminish the quality of democracy of which this country has so far been proud.

The power of Back Benchers has diminished. It is diminishing. It ought to be increased.

3.38 pm

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) has courteously and reasonably acknowledged that the House is anxious to proceed with the important economic debate that will follow, and I am sure that his view is widely shared in the House. I shall therefore speak briefly, making just three main points.

First, I personally have no doubt that the new arrangements give private Members—Back Benchers—a better deal than the old ones. Private Members will have more time: about twice as many opportunities to raise subjects. That time is better structured, and does not give rise to the occasions that, as we all know, used to occur, when an issue was discussed endlessly to prevent the next subject from being reached. That was not a very sensible use of parliamentary time. Private Members' time now comes at more convenient hours than was the case with many previous opportunities, including the Consolidated Fund debate, which used to come at a time when all normal citizens were in bed.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I am intervening now because I do not want to speak later and detain the House. The essential point made by the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) is that with the old motions we could hold the Executive to account by having a vote. A series of Adjournment debates on a Wednesday morning, welcome and helpful as they may be—and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all that he has done as Leader of the House—are not an effective substitute.

Mr. Newton: I think that my hon. Friend's point will be covered by my next point.

Secondly, the changes were made following a very carefully considered report of a Select Committee of this House—the Jopling report. It was seen as a balanced package and was accepted by the House by a very large majority. That is not to say that it is immutable and that no changes can be made. However, if there are to be changes, they should not be made piecemeal, but should be made as part of a properly considered review. They should not be made in haste at this late stage in this particular Parliament.

Thirdly, the House may recall that in last November's debate, when we turned Sessional Orders into Standing Orders, the hon. Member for Newham, South moved an amendment in precisely the same terms, although not with the same dates, as the amendment that he moved today. That amendment was defeated by 116 votes to 19. In my view, the considerations that led to that outcome on that occasion are exactly the same today. If the hon. Gentleman pushes his amendment to a vote, I hope that the House will reject it again.

3.41 pm

Mr. Spearing: With the leave of the House, Madam Speaker—just three sentences. First, just one Opposition Member voted against my previous amendment. Secondly, the Consolidated Fund debate is now on the Adjournment, but that was not the case previously as it used to be the Second Reading of a Bill. That procedure has been diminished. Thirdly, I am advocating only another 12 hours for private Members. Cannot we afford that between now and next summer? It is more power, not less.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 87, Noes 274.

Division No. 2] **[3.41 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ashton, Joseph
Austin-Walker, John
Beggs, Roy
Bilfen, John
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, D N
Canavan, Dennis
Clapham, Michael
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try SE)*
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dixon, Don
Donohoe, Brian H
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faulds, Andrew
Flynn, Paul
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Fyfe, Mrs Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Hardy, Peter
Hendron, Dr Joe
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Hood, Jimmy
Hughes, Robert *(Ab'd'n N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian D *(SE Staffs)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Dr L *(B'ham Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Gerald

Lewis, Terry
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
McAllion, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Madden, Max
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Molyneaux, Sir James
Morris, Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Pickthall, Colin
Powell, Sir Raymond *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Randall, Stuart
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Salmond, Alex
Sheldon, Robert
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Spearing, Nigel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Taylor, John D *(Strangf'd)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Trimble, David
Walley, Ms Joan
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Wray, Jimmy
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Harry Barnes and
Mr. David Winnick.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Ashdown, Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Beith, A J
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Brown, Nicholas *(Newcastle E)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Cash, William
Channon, Paul
Chidgey, David
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Coe, Sebastian
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Cummings, John
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C)*
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dewar, Donald
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel-Jones, Tristan
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Gryffs, Sir Michael
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawksley, Warren
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Horam, John
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guildf'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Jopling, Michael
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Kirkhope, Timothy
Kirkwood, Archy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lord, Michael
Lynne, Ms Liz
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mandelson, Peter
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Meale, Alan
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Mudie, George
Murphy, Paul
Nelson, Anthony
Newton, Tony
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Pope, Greg
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Prentice, Mrs B *(Lewisham E)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, John
Reid, Dr John
Renton, Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rooker, Jeff
Rowe, Andrew
Sainsbury, Sir Timothy
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hersf'd)*
Sims, Sir Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsf'ld)*
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steel, Sir David
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Tipping, Paddy
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Dennis
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard

Waldegrave, William
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wheeler, Sir John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mr. Gyles Brandreth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 13 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'ten' in line 43; in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'seventh' in line 45;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'seventh' in line 23; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 13th December, 17th, 24th and 31st January, 7th, 14th and 28th February and 18th April.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 11A (House not to sit on certain Fridays) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (1) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'ten'; and

(2) the House shall not sit on the following Fridays:

8th and 22nd November, 21st February, 7th, 14th and 21st March and 4th and 11th April.—[*Mr. Wood.*]

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SIXTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 October],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—[*Sir Norman Fowler.*]

Question again proposed.

The Economy

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. The amendment standing in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) will be called at the end of the debate for Division. Speeches between 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock will be restricted to 10 minutes.

3.54 pm

Mr. Gordon Brown (Dunfermline, East): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at the end of the Question to add:

"but note that since 1979 the Government has broken each one of its central promises: to reverse national economic decline, to cut unemployment which stood at one million when it took office, to raise investment in the United Kingdom's manufacturing industries, to cut tax, spending and debt and to build a cohesive society; regret the absence from the Gracious Speech of measures that will strengthen the supply side of the economy, expand the United Kingdom's long term capacity, ensure high levels of sustainable growth and heal social division; call for a new employment policy which moves people from welfare to work, a new education policy which equips people for the future, a new industry policy for investment that will increase small business and high technology investment in all regions of Britain; and note that these measures are the only sure way of ensuring opportunity for all and a durable recovery that will keep inflation and interest rates low, and bring long term prosperity for all."

As we begin the last day of the debate on the Queen's Speech, let us be clear about the reasons for the interest rate rise this morning. That rise was an inevitable result of the Government's policies, and it is happening in no other country. The Government are pushing interest rates up not because of international pressures but because of a problem in Britain.

That cannot be justified or explained by saying that we have lower interest rates than our competitors, and that Britain is merely catching up. We do not have the lowest rate in Europe or even the second, third or fourth lowest. Interest rates are already higher in Britain than in 10 other European countries. We are 11th out of 15 for interest rates in Europe. Only Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy have higher rates.

The rise, which is from a higher base than that of other European countries, comes from domestically created problems which are internal to the British economy, and which the Government must explain in the debate. The rise cannot be justified by the huge strength of the economy. The Chancellor has already downgraded his

growth forecast for this year from 3 to 2.5 per cent., and in his Budget it may have to be admitted that growth is even lower. The Government are not putting up interest rates because of what is happening elsewhere or because of their success. They have been forced to push up rates because they do not believe that they can meet their inflation targets.

The rise has occurred because, as we have been saying for the past four years, unless a recovery is based on solid foundations, a country cannot sustain anything other than sluggish growth without rising inflationary pressures. As we know, it is the same old British disease returning under the Government.

The rise was inevitable, because the recovery has not produced the investment-led and industry-led growth that the Government predicted. It is the inevitable result of the policy of a Government who have failed to tackle the fundamental weaknesses of the economy. As a result, inflationary pressures are ready to undermine it. That is why the Government should have implemented before now the policies set out in our amendment. We have proposed those policies on many occasions, and they are right for the British economy.

What is the nature of the economic recovery that has led to these higher inflationary pressures? It is not the industry-led recovery that we were led to expect in 1992. Industry has failed to expand in the way that it should if we are to have a sustainable recovery. Industrial production fell in the past three months. It is only 0.6 per cent. up on a year ago. Despite all the successes of individual companies, industrial output in the economy at this stage of the cycle is still weak.

It is not a manufacturing-led recovery, either. Output has fallen over the past three quarters, and is less than 0.5 per cent. lower than a year ago. Despite some great individual success stories by many of our companies because of their efforts, manufacturing output is weak. At this stage, the recovery is not showing massive export growth, despite the devaluation of the pound. The summer economic forecast predicts that imports will grow faster than exports, and we still have the second worst trade deficit in the European Union.

Most of all, the recovery is not investment led. We have been warning throughout about the failure of investment to rise throughout the last years of recovery. Private sector investment has been growing more slowly since the recession than in any recovery this century. At a similar stage of the cycle in the recovery of the late 1970s, investment had risen by 20 per cent. In the recovery of the early 1980s, it had risen by 30 per cent. In this recovery, it has risen by just 6 per cent., and manufacturing investment is falling. It is lower than it was a year ago. Small wonder that the Bank of England reported this year that investment growth has been weak in the recovery.

Look at the complacency of the Chancellor of the Exchequer on investment. Every time, he and his predecessor predicted that there would be an investment recovery that would allow the economy's capacity to be strong enough to sustain growth. We were told that, in 1993, business investment would rise, and it fell by 2.5 per cent. Business investment was to rise by 7 per cent. in 1994, and it rose by only 2 per cent. It was to rise in 1995 by 10 per cent., and it rose by only 1.5 per cent. It is to rise this year by 7.5 per cent., and we wait to hear what the figures are.

This summer, we had the spectacle of the Deputy Prime Minister, faced with all those figures, publishing his competitiveness report and trying to tell us that, in a modern economy, because the record was so poor, investment levels were of no great significance.

I tell the Chancellor of the Exchequer: prudence is absolutely critical to the economy, which is why the interest rate rise was necessary—the one that he has been forced to make—but prudent economic management depends for its success on the firm foundation of a strong economy that is investment rich, and which he has failed to achieve. Without investment-led growth and the export-led and industry-led recovery that was promised, we get to the problems that the Chancellor faces today.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): When a 10-year-old child can close a school in Labour Nottinghamshire and all the Labour party can do nothing to reopen that school, why should we believe that the right hon. Gentleman has any answers to our economic problems?

Mr. Brown: We must be fair to the right hon. Gentleman. Like the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, he is speaking in a personal capacity. He was the man who coined the slogan, "No change, no chance". What does he think about what is happening to the economy today?

Let us be absolutely clear that the economic fundamentals that a modern economy needs, in addition to the platform of stability that we support, are high investment in industry and in skill, and high productivity through creating employment opportunity. That is why our amendment contains exactly the proposals that the Government should be implementing.

First, the Government should be implementing a policy for investment.

Mr. Rod Richards (Clwyd, North-West): The right hon. Gentleman has said that it is his ambition to have a starting income tax rate of 10p in the pound. He has not specified any parameters such as time scale, band width or whatever, but, in the most general sense, it is his ambition. Will he also say whether it is his ambition, again in the most general sense, without specifying any parameters, to have a single European currency?

Mr. Brown: I ask the hon. Gentleman which he supports: the abolition of capital gains tax and inheritance tax, which is the priority of the Conservative party, or a lower starting rate of tax that would help everyone throughout the community. The sooner he realises that, when he goes to the electorate next year—or whenever the Prime Minister dares to call the election—he will have to defend a Conservative party that will be committed to abolishing capital gains tax and inheritance tax to benefit the few, instead of introducing a lower starting tax rate to benefit the many, the more modest he will be in what he says to the House.

Despite everything that the Government say about low taxation, we have discovered in a publication of the Secretary of State for Social Security that, under this Government, people in Britain are paying marginal tax and benefit rates, not just of 80 per cent. or 90 per cent., but of as much as 150 per cent. For every pound they

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earn, £1.50 is taken back. I therefore ask the hon. Member for Clwyd, North–West (Mr. Richards): what is his priority? I know what Britain's is.

Let us examine what measures are absolutely essential.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): As always, the right hon. Gentleman complains about manufacturing investment and growth. As all hon. Members know, the right hon. Gentleman wants to go, helter-skelter, into a European single currency, which means that he would have to meet the convergence criteria. What does he think would happen to growth and industrial investment if he attempted—helter-skelter—to meet the convergence criteria?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman might like to ask the Chancellor that question during this debate.

Mr. Marlow: What is the right hon. Gentleman's answer?

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening to what I was saying, he would know that I was about to set out the measures necessary to achieve sustainable economic growth without increasing inflationary pressures.

The Budget should contain three measures. First, we need an investment policy in which we build on a more consistent platform of stability, and tackle the investment shortfall in the economy. Even now, I believe that the Chancellor should adopt our proposals to introduce new incentives to increase long-term investment levels in science, technology, industry and small businesses—thereby increasing the economy's capacity—and our proposals to reform the loan guarantee system and the regional agencies across the country that can help to boost investment for small businesses. He should also adopt our new savings policies, which will channel investment.

Time after time, in his complacent manner, the Chancellor has rejected our proposals, and predicted that investment will rise. Time after time, he has had to report that investment is not rising—which is one of the fundamental, underlying problems preventing growth in economic capacity without increasing inflationary pressures.

Secondly, the Chancellor should examine a new national education and training policy that will strengthen the economy's supply side, in which we tackle the skills shortages that act as an inflationary pressure and economic bottleneck. Only a few days ago, Mary Chapman—chief executive of Investors in People—said:

"It is notable that, as soon as we move out of recession, skills shortages start to re-emerge."

That is why our proposals for a university for industry, individual learning accounts and school and college reform—which provide opportunity for all—will raise the economy's sustainable growth rate.

Thirdly, the Chancellor should examine a new national employment policy—in fact, we need a national employment policy. The policy should tackle the fact that 20 per cent. of non-pensioner households in Britain have no one bringing home a wage. That figure is an indictment of the Government, who ran posters during the 1979 general election stating, "Labour isn't working", and that they would sort out the dole queues. In 1979, 8 per cent. of households had no one in work. Today, the figure is nearly 20 per cent.—which is as high as the level in Spain.

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: If the Chancellor took action on employment, long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, and adopted our proposals for a windfall levy on the privatised utilities, he would not only cut social security costs but help the economy to run more efficiently.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that a £3 billion windfall profits tax would be equivalent to a 20 per cent. value added tax rate on electricity and gas?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should consider what has been happening in the utility sector. Today, for example, the water regulator said that there were excess profits in the water industry. Further, we know that four water companies have been privatised, and have never paid a penny in mainstream corporation tax. Moreover, ordinary people around the country pay a tax rate of 24p in the pound, whereas, since privatisation, water companies pay only 2p in the pound. I believe that the hon. Gentleman will have a hard job convincing the electors of Dover that we should not impose a windfall tax on the utilities.

I should tell the hon. Gentleman what he will have to answer for at the general election. He will have to answer for his manifesto, which stated that there are two vital messages to remember. We shall remind him of those messages throughout the campaign, the first of which is: "David lives locally." The second message is:

"David Shaw supports lower tax."

Tell the electors that, after 22 tax rises.

Mr. Riddick: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why unemployment in France and Germany is so much higher than in this country?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman gives me a chance to point out a fact that Conservative central office statistics do not often tell him—that male unemployment in Britain is as high as in France and Germany. He cannot deny that one non-pensioner household in five has no one in work and earning a wage. That pathetic situation, after 17 years of Conservative government, stems from the under-registration of female employment, the fact that large numbers of women are not registered or given the opportunity to work, and the concentration of unemployment in no-income households.

Hon. Members may wish to look at their personal manifestos before the election. In his personal manifesto in 1992, the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Mr. Riddick) said:

"The state has a duty to protect the most vulnerable people in society."

So why does he not support action on unemployment?

Action on investment, skills and employment opportunity are fundamental to building the underlying strength of the economy. They were the policies that were

missing in the 1980s, when, in the absence of investment to expand capacity, boom inevitably led to bust. They are the essential components of success—policies that recognise that the crude free market economics practised by the Conservatives is not enough, and require the Government to assume their responsibilities to act on industrial, employment and education and training policies. But those policies are still absent in the 1990s. Without them, there are real worries about the durability of any recovery and about the threat of a return to stop-go.

The Government's failure to address those issues has brought us to the problems we have today. The remarkable thing about the Chancellor and the whole Government is that, instead of addressing those problems, they continue to make extraordinary and extravagant claims about their record on the economy, as the Chancellor did in his lunchtime interview today. It is a record that they cannot justify.

Nobody who listened to the claims made at the Conservative party conference about a fundamental transformation of the economy and a low inflation environment would ever have believed that an interest rate rise would come within two weeks. Inflationary pressures forced the Government to act. One would think that, after today, the Chancellor's claims about the economy would be more modest, but the Treasury press release just put out about the interest rate rise says:

"The economy is performing exceptionally well."

It describes the Government's record on growth as "unseen for a generation".

Let me explain the troubling paradox for Conservative Members, because they will have to answer on it to their constituents. Everything that the Chancellor or the Prime Minister says should point to a feel-good factor in the economy, but when Conservative Members return to their constituencies, they find that people do not feel good; they feel insecure about their prospects.

Let us look carefully at the difference between what Conservative Members say is happening to the economy and what is actually happening. For months, the Chancellor has been boasting of low inflation. For months, he has been saying that we should compare his record with that of previous Governments.

When we examine the figures, we find that our inflation is not the lowest in Europe; it is almost the highest in Europe. Inflation is not below the European average; it is above the European average. Our inflation rate is 11th in the European league, and rising. That is how the Government's good news machine works—they compare only with their own record of a few years ago. They do not tell us that, in comparison with Europe, they are near the bottom of the league on inflation.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that inflation is now at less than one third of the best level achieved at any time by the last Labour Government, and that interest rates are now lower than at any time during that period?

Mr. Brown: What I am pointing out—[HON. MEMBERS: "Just say yes."] Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that, when we left government, inflation was below the European average and falling. Let me also point out that interest rates in Europe are as follows: Holland 3 per cent., Germany 3 per cent., Belgium 3.3 per cent., Luxembourg 3.3 per cent., Austria 3.5 per cent. and Britain 6 per cent. Is that a record of which to be proud? Are the Conservatives going to go around boasting that the Government have achieved everything they set out to achieve, and that we are 11th out of 15 in the European league? Are they going to fight the election on that? I do not think so.

When one examines them, a pattern emerges in the statistics that come from Conservative central office. On interest rates and inflation, the Conservatives compare their record with that of the past. On growth and employment, they cannot use the record of the past, so they try to compare themselves with recession-hit Europe. At no point do they advance a case showing that they have a record on growth, employment, interest rates and inflation of which they can be proud.

In other words, the Government always use comparisons carefully chosen for their own advantage. Through such a selective use of statistics, they suggest that Britain has been fundamentally transformed. If the Government were to choose to compare Britain's inflation and interest rates with European rates this year, and Britain's growth and employment rates with those of either Britain or Europe in previous years, they would find the truth—that they are near the bottom of every one of those leagues.

Look at growth over the past 17 years. We should judge the Government on the growth rate, which is 1.9 per cent.—almost half what it was in the 30 years after the war. If oil is excluded, the rate is only 1.7 per cent. That is not the long-term improvement in our prospects claimed by the Government, but one of the lowest growth rates in Europe—11th out of 15 over the past 17 years, and bottom of the Group of Seven table. Once again, we can see the gap between Government rhetoric and reality.

The essence of the Conservatives' campaign is to make comparisons with Europe only when Europe is in a period of recession, and, even then, only as and when it suits them to do so. The truth about the economy is that the Conservatives are economical with the truth. All their claims—

Mr. Jonathan Aitken (South Thanet): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: No, I am not giving way.

All the Conservatives' claims are set out in today's briefing document, which tells us less about the underlying strength of the economy than about our temporary position in the economic cycle. The document barely mentions manufacturing, because the record since 1979 is that we lie 10th out of the 15 European countries. We are 11th in respect of job growth and 15th in respect of export growth—bottom or near the bottom of all those European leagues. Of course, the Government barely mention the matters I spoke about earlier—the actions that are necessary to build for the future: investment in people and industry.

It is rather like an up-beat report from a football manager, desperately trying to avoid the sack by declaring that his team has been ahead at half-time in home games more often than not in the past 20 seasons and that it has won more corners away from home than other teams in the second half of the league. The Government omit to mention that, after they have been managers of the team for 17 years, no transformation of economic prospects has occurred, and that they hover on the verge of relegation.

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If proof were needed that the figures are only about temporary stages in the economic cycle and not about the underlying position of the economy, we have only to look at what the Prime Minister let slip at the weekend. When interviewed on Sky Television, did he say that the economic successes that he was trumpeting were the result of a hard-won economic turnaround that would last? No, he called them

"a benevolent phase in the economic cycle."

That is a devastating insight—that just about every statistic used by the Government only reflects a phase in the economic cycle, and tells us little about fundamental underlying strength.

How do we know that that is true? Because we have heard it all before. In 1986, before the election, the Government put up interest rates and then put them down again—they had a little flutter. What did the Chancellor, then a Minister in another Department, say in 1986? He said then what he has said today:

"The real economy is doing better than it has for a generation."

Where have we heard that before? He said then:

"The outlook for managers is better than most managers can remember in their lifetime."

The Government are making the same claims that they made then: that they had solved the problem of inflation; that they had got interest rates and mortgage rates down; that a fundamental transformation of the economy had occurred; and that prospects were brighter than for a generation.

I can only say that the Government are at it again: the same deceit for the second time. There is legislation in the Queen's Speech to deal with second-time offenders. For these second-time offenders, we would certainly support a minimum sentence: a minimum of life in opposition, and life should mean life. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) will regret his facetious remarks when he faces the electorate and is defeated.

From his Conservative conference performance, it seems that the Chancellor is familiar with at least one school of economics—the Dolly Parton school of economics. Let me remind him of another sizeable body of economic opinion, which we might call the Nigel Lawson school of economics. That dictates that the bloated claims, the inflated figures, the exaggerated and grandiose pretensions of today will, with the passage of time and when the Chancellor has gone from office, shrink and shrivel to become remarkably slender and insubstantial—a shadow of that former vaunted glory. Now the Chancellor should know the fate that lies in wait for the overblown figures of the Government.

This time, the Government have tried it once too often, and the British people will never trust the Tories on the economy again. The end result after 17 years is that we have moved not just from 13th to 18th in the world economic league, but to the bottom half of the European division as well.

In one of his pamphlets, the Chancellor said that the test of whether an economy was doing well should be national income per head. National income per head in the richest country of Europe is £20,000; in Britain, it is less then £12,000. In France, it is 8 per cent. more; in Germany 11 per cent. more; in Denmark 16 per cent. more. The Chancellor cannot dispute those figures, because they come not from European sources, but from the Government's own published competitiveness review.

When the Conservatives came to power in 1979, Britain was above the European average for prosperity. Today, like it or not, we are unfortunately below average. We had double the prosperity of the poorest country; now we are only one third better off. We were 30 per cent. behind the richest country; now we are 60 per cent. behind. While the Government say that we are the enterprise centre of Europe, in reality we are in the bottom half—the poorer half—of Europe: not first for prosperity in Europe, not in the first five, but ninth out of 15 countries.

In their 17 years, the Government have made the problems we face worse by failing to prepare for the future. A report out today from the European Commission analyses regions in Europe, and contains figures that were in the Government's regional trends survey this summer. In the main industrial regions of the UK, income per head is half that in regions such as Hamburg. Even in the most prosperous part of the country, the south-east, we are 30 per cent. behind Hamburg. Is it the Government's aspiration to boast, when we are ninth out of 15 in the European league?

The watchword for British policy in the 1950s and 1960s was "managed decline". Now, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Government preside over mismanaged decline. Remember the slogan of 1983: "Britain great again—don't let Labour ruin it". As we now all know, the slogan was coined just as Britain's prosperity fell below that of Hong Kong and Singapore.

Remember the false promise of 1987: "The next move forward"—just as we were making the next move backward, falling behind Italy. Now the slogan is "The enterprise capital of Europe". If anything sums up the hollowness of that claim, it is the Government's statement in the Queen's Speech a few days ago: not that we are the enterprise centre of Europe, but that they aim for Britain to be the leading European industrial power "in the medium term".

It is an aim. It is not a statement of achievement or a promise of what we will have at the next election or just after it and it is not something for the present. The Government are admitting that we are not the enterprise capital of Europe, and that the only chance we have of catching up with France and Germany is in the medium term. If the Government had made that claim 17 years ago, when they first took office, it would have been a perfectly understandable undertaking. However, after 17 years, nobody will believe their claim that they will sort things out in the medium term.

It is precisely because the Government have failed to sort out the fundamental and underlying problems of the economy that they have broken every election promise they made on tax, spending and borrowing. They promised to cut public spending, but, under their rule, it averages 42.5 per cent. higher than in 1979. They promised to cut taxes, but there is a higher tax burden now than in 1979. They said that they would eliminate borrowing and achieve a balanced budget, but the public sector borrowing requirement is £27 billion. National debt has doubled since 1990 under the Prime Minister's rule.

What are the Government going to say in their next manifesto?

Mr. Barry Legg (Milton Keynes, South–West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I will not give way again.

Let me tell the House what was said in a pamphlet written by Mrs. Tessa Keswick, the Chancellor's closest confidant and special adviser until a few months ago. It is entitled "A Conservative agenda, proposals for a fifth term." She says:

"The Government has made determined efforts to reduce public spending but has not succeeded . . . The Government's spending is a similar proportion of national income as it was in 1979."

That is true, but the Chancellor cannot agree. She goes on to say:

"Unfortunately, the overall tax burden has failed to fall. The relentless upward rise of public spending in Britain has forced up both tax and borrowing."

Is that not a damning indictment of everything the Government said in 1979 when they took office? Is that what they will be honest enough to put in their election manifesto when the time comes?

In addition to the 22 tax rises that we have had—the largest peacetime rises in history—including the rise in national insurance, VAT on fuel and everything else, Mrs. Tessa Keswick proposes that the Government should go into the next election with a manifesto promise to remove the zero VAT rating on food, water, books and magazines and domestic passenger transport. She says that it should be put in the manifesto. I suppose that means that they should tell the truth rather than leave it on the hidden agenda.

How can the Chancellor deny that he supports those proposals when he is on the record, year after year, supporting the extension of VAT to food, water, books and magazines and domestic passenger transport? In fact, he wants to extend VAT to children's clothes as well. *[Interruption.]* If Conservative Members do not think that that is true, I can tell them what the Chancellor said. On Radio Nottingham in 1993—during this Parliament—he said:

"I was in the House of Commons when we introduced VAT. If we could start again, we could have VAT on everything, which is the way they live quite comfortably on the continent and nobody complains about it."

Hon. Members should know that there are more quotations from the Chancellor on this from just about every year. VAT, particularly VAT on fuel, will be a central issue at the next election. We hate VAT on fuel and will try to reduce it. The Chancellor likes VAT on fuel, and he wants to extend it. He would like to double it to 17.5 per cent., the highest level possible. We will cut it to the lowest level possible. Is that not an example of how we will deal with the problems of an unfair Britain?

Let us remember all the central economic pledges of 1979. The Government promised to reverse national decline, but Britain has fallen from 13th to 18th in the world prosperity league and to ninth out of 15 in Europe. They claimed that industry would benefit with higher investment, but we now have the lowest share of investment of any of the major industrialised countries.

The Government promised to lead in education. The Chancellor should explain why we have the lowest participation rate in higher education in the European Union. They promised to cut unemployment. They said that Labour was not working. They should explain why unemployment, which was 1 million in 1979, is still more than 2 million. They should explain why they failed to meet their central promises to cut taxes, spending and borrowing.

The Government's central promise in 1979 was that, somehow, they would rebuild British society. We heard the words of St. Francis of Assisi on the steps of Downing street—that where there had been discord, there would be harmony. When the Prime Minister came to power in 1990, he stood on the steps of Downing street and spoke of a nation at ease with itself, and of a classless society with opportunity for all. Last week, however, he had to agree with a courageous widow, Mrs. Frances Lawrence, that we now have a fractured society.

After 17 years, the Government must accept their responsibility. There is no opportunity for all when executives of utility companies are paid telephone number salaries without any criticism from the Government, yet the same utilities leave pensioners unable to pay their fuel bills in the winter months. There is no opportunity for all when the Government divert resources to the assisted places scheme for a tiny minority of the population, when they could use the same resources to extend opportunity to every schoolchild in the country. There is no opportunity for all when the Chancellor agrees with the Prime Minister to make it a priority to abolish inheritance tax and capital gains tax, with half the benefit going to the richest 5,000 people in Britain, when a lower starting rate of tax would be fairer, and would encourage employment and opportunity.

How can the Conservatives ever be the party of opportunity for all when they are responsible for the privilege and the sleaze, and they have done nothing to deal with the problems of the social fund and homeless teenagers? They were responsible for the poll tax as well as for VAT on fuel.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: No, I am not giving way.

Today is the last day of the debate on the Queen's Speech. Two weeks ago, at the Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister told his party and the nation that henceforth the Conservative party would display unity and single-mindedness, and that divisions and U-turns were all in the past. Last Wednesday, his policy on law and order lasted from 11 am to 4 pm. Yesterday, the new education policy lasted from 8.15 am until 10.21 am—the swiftest U-turn was made possible by the invention of the mobile telephone. As he faces the House this afternoon, the Chancellor must be relieved that Madam Speaker has banned the use of mobile telephones in the Chamber, and he cannot receive a telephone call from the Prime Minister.

The Queen's Speech shows that, whether it is education, law and order or the economy, none of the problems that the country faces can be solved by the Government. Problems will be camouflaged, disguised, made the subject of U-turns, and exploited for narrow party political ends. The Government may even try to throw money at them, but they will never solve the fundamental problems. No amount of propaganda, no

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Saatchi and Saatchi billboard campaigns, no selective use of statistics and no U-turns could disguise the fact that the Government offer the country only drift, which is damaging our national interest. They no longer have any purpose or direction in solving the problems we face.

Nothing now can be sorted out by these men and women. Their 18th Queen's Speech cannot undo the damage caused by the previous 17. They should do now what they should have done long ago: they should put their record of failure before the British people, and face a general election which they will lose.

4.35 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Kenneth Clarke): It is always painful for the Opposition to have to talk about the economy. They do it only rarely in the House, on the ritual two or three occasions a year. We have an economy day in the debate on the Loyal Address and a debate on the Budget. Months go by and there is then another debate in the summer. The Opposition always refuse the offer of the business managers to have a debate on the economy in the spring. They never select the economy for debate. That is because it is painful for the Opposition to talk about the real economy.

When we have the rare pleasure of listening to the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) make a speech about the economy, the terrible thing is that it is always the same speech. Over and over again, we have a meaningless strategy for investment. We hear also a meaningless strategy for employment. We have league tables, about which he becomes extremely muddled. The right hon. Gentleman produces more and more league tables, which he claims support his arguments. His speech, his gloom and his claims of disaster are entirely unchanging, but the real world is changing and the British economy is doing better and improving. We are producing the strongest recovery in western Europe, and the right hon. Gentleman and his party do not know what to say about it.

Let us consider the news that is the background to the right hon. Gentleman's speech. Over the past few weeks, we know that activity, with the third quarter figures, is moving up again. It is obvious that growth is set to rise faster than in Germany and France for the fourth successive year. Trading figures for August reflected the best trading performance for nine years. Exports were referred to by the right hon. Gentleman; they are up by nearly 20 per cent. over the past two years.

Unemployment fell by a marked amount and it is down to its lowest level for five and a half years. Consumer confidence is at its highest levels for eight years. The Labour party is finding all this good news hard to take, but there is more of it. There is more of it to come. It will come month by month all the way through to May 1997 and beyond.

Labour Members are doing themselves no credit by seeking to deny all the obvious good news. The right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, said last week, to my absolute amazement, that the forecast recovery would be modest, short-lived and possibly jobless. I cannot think of a better description than that of the right hon. Lady's career as leader of the Labour party. On the economy, her comment is wrong, wrong and wrong again.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East tries to produce—against a background that every member of the public knows is one of a strong and growing economy—a picture of gloom. He concentrates, as on his lecture tours, on investment. Since 1979, overall investment has grown faster in this country than in any other major European Union country. Whole economy investment has grown at about double the average rate of the 1970s. Business investment has risen by a third. Investment in plant and machinery has increased by about 50 per cent. Productivity has improved, because the quality of investment is good.

Business investment is 7½ per cent. higher than it was 12 months ago. The Confederation of British Industry survey of investment in manufacturing plant and machinery reveals that the expectations of business are plus 18 per cent. The chambers of commerce survey produces a figure of plus 22 per cent. That is for good reason. Selective league table figures are nonsensical.

The climate for investment is excellent because profitability is high, company finances are strong, company tax and interest rates are low by all historical standards, the economy is growing and there is demand.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East does not believe his own gloomy picture. He produced an extraordinary picture of investment intentions and said that that was why he was so gloomy. Faced with the news of the day, however—the increase in interest rates—the right hon. Gentleman said that he agreed with me that an increase in interest rates was called for. What kind of a shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer do we have? He describes an economy that, on his own account, is in decline and in crisis. Is he tightening monetary policy in the face of the dreadful picture that he describes? How is he proposing to set interest rates if he ever becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer? Will he look up a league table and see what Luxembourg is doing? That is a preposterous position, and he poses a serious threat to the economic recovery that is under way.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: The only people who could doubt the health, strength and breadth of the recovery are either mad, dead or sitting on the Opposition Benches. On that note, I give way to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce).

Mr. Bruce: The Chancellor will remember that the Liberal Democrats warned him when he cut the rate on 6 June that he was wrong and that he would have to reverse the cut. Does he acknowledge that he was wrong, and does he accept that, if the Bank of England inflation report to be published next week says that it still believes that he will not hit his inflation target, he may have to increase interest rates again?

Mr. Clarke: I shall come back to interest rates in a moment. I remain confident about our inflation forecast and I have set policy to achieve it. I have said and done that consistently, and I have delivered low inflation.

We have been hearing about U-turns and changes of policy, but the hon. Member for Gordon has changed his position even today: early this morning on the "Today" programme, he gave a confident prediction to the world that I would not raise interest rates; that was his expert

forecast. He said that I ought to raise them, but by lunchtime he was on the air criticising me for doing so. Half an hour later, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East was on the air, giving the Labour party's first solid promise to reduce VAT on domestic fuel. That has lasted until half-past 4, and now he says only that he will "try to".

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Michael Jack): It will be gone by 10 o'clock.

Mr. Clarke: Indeed, it will be gone by 10 o'clock and the windfall tax will be back. Economic policy does not require that approach; it requires decisions. The Labour party does not take decisions; it would be incapable of taking decisions on any of the great economic issues of the day—inflation, tax, public borrowing or public spending.

Mr. Salmond: On interest rate policy, in the past 15 months, since the current Secretary of State for Scotland took office, Scottish unemployment has had the worst trend in the United Kingdom. Does the Chancellor believe that the Scottish economy is overheating; if not, why is he tightening monetary policy in Scotland?

Mr. Clarke: Figures about the trend in unemployment in Scotland over the past 15 months are so blatantly selective as to be utterly meaningless. I am glad to say that the Scottish economy has done extremely well in the course of the recovery. Scotland is one of the strongest regions in the United Kingdom in terms of expansion, and the steps that I have taken will ensure continuing growth for Scotland for many years to come, and that is the sole aim of policy.

I want to move on to a little policy and to bring us back to the real world of a successful economy that will strengthen for many years to come. So far, we are into the fifth year of recovery. As I have said, I have taken and will continue to take every step that is necessary to avoid all those economic pitfalls that, as all hon. Members will remember only too well, have brought to an end every previous recovery for 30 years.

What I said in 1986 was cited at me; it was right. In 1986, we were performing better than we had for a generation and better than the rest of western Europe; we were on course for a healthy recovery, but monetary policy went wrong and we went into a recession that was deeper than elsewhere. I take the decisions that I do to ensure that that does not happen again. We are back with all the benefits of our supply-side changes, and this time they will last—as long as we have a Conservative Government.

I shall sustain the brightest economic prospects for a generation by keeping inflation down to levels that will allow us to compete and to grow for years to come. So far, I have delivered the best inflation record for nearly 50 years, but I am determined to go on seeking to establish new records.

We are on course to deliver our inflation target of 2½ per cent. or less next year, but I am not simply aiming to deliver the target next year: decisions that I take today are aimed at the position of a Conservative Government in 18 months' or two years' time. We have to go on delivering year after year. That is why I decided to put up interest rates by a quarter per cent. this morning.

Let us cut through the waffle that we hear from the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East and decide why it was right to move rates now—because, as far as I can see, most people agree that it was. The economy is extremely healthy. It is growing as I predicted it would and that growth is strengthening as the year goes on. The immediate inflationary pressures remain subdued. Producer price inflation remains very low—producer input price inflation is still negative—and earnings growth remains modest. The economy is clearly set to grow by more than 3 per cent. next year, as I think everyone will agree, and it will go on growing rapidly.

My decisions have to be based on judgments on how we keep growth going for 18 months or two years ahead, when we will still have a Conservative Government in power. At that time, I want growth to be motoring steadily, more new jobs to have been created and Britain still to be competing, and that is why I have decided to make a small increase in interest rates now—neither of my major critics has the nerve to offer a squeak of disagreement—to ensure that we continue to deliver healthy, sustainable growth and to meet our inflation target.

I have done what I have always done when I have changed interest rates and made monetary decisions. I intend to look ahead and to stay ahead of the game. If I had waited for the recovery to show signs of inflationary pressures, it would have been too late to act. We would have missed the opportunity, and that is what we have done in the past. Because I move in advance, I am able to change interest rates by only a quarter of 1 per cent. and that is why we can be confident that rollercoaster interest rates are a relic of the past unless we return to a Government where the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East takes the approach to monetary policy and the state of the economy that, to my total alarm, he described only a few moments ago.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is not one rollercoaster that has gone up and up the national debt, which has doubled since 1990, so much so that British citizens are paying £25 billion a year to the Chancellor for his economic incompetence? That is a tax of £1,000 on every taxpayer, which we are paying for his flippant, clownish mismanagement of the economy.

Mr. Clarke: We have one of the lowest levels of debt in relation to gross domestic product in western Europe. I shall come later to the tight fiscal policy that I am running to ensure that we control that level of debt and get back towards a balanced budget. Moreover, the level of debt in relation to our gross domestic product now is far lower than it was at any time when we had a Labour Government in the 1970s. It is nonsense to produce those preposterous figures, as the hon. Gentleman did in an earlier debate a few days ago. Proper fiscal policy and control over debt, combined with monetary policy, are the key to the sustained recovery of our economy.

Mr. Gordon Brown: First, the reduction of VAT on fuel will be in our manifesto. Will it be in the Chancellor's? Will he do that in the Budget? Secondly, can he explain why he predicted 3 per cent. growth this year? Now that growth is not even 2.5 per cent., but perhaps less, he has an inflationary problem which has

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

forced him to act. Will he accept that the slowness of the recovery of investment since the recession is a big problem that he must face and take action on?

Mr. Clarke: The promise on VAT on fuel is back again by 4.47 pm. Until today, the right hon. Gentleman has said that he cannot say anything specific about tax, because he wants to look at the books. At last he has got around to reading the books. If he wants to tell us about tax, can he tell us who will pay the 50 per cent. higher rate and at what level they will start paying it? How will he introduce his 10p standard rate of income tax? Who will pay the windfall tax, be it £3 billion or £10 billion, and what effect will that have on electricity, gas, telephone and water bills? If he is in a mood between now and, say, 10 o'clock this evening to produce some policies on tax, let him start answering some serious questions. He is trying to change the subject from the real economy and inflation.

Mr. Brown: No. Our manifesto will contain proposals for the windfall tax and proposals to cut VAT on fuel. Will he tell us whether he still agrees, as he said he did in 1993, with the extension of VAT to books and newspapers, travel and children's clothes—yes or no?

Mr. Clarke: I produce Budgets so everybody can see my tax proposals, but we have only an inkling of the right hon. Gentleman's proposals. He might have made those points in his speech, but I am delighted that he is volunteering them now. Will he say to which industries the windfall tax will apply? Will it apply to gas, electricity and water in Scotland and England? Will it apply to telecommunications? How much does he intend to raise—£3 billion or £10 billion?

Will the right hon. Gentleman answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw), who referred to equivalence in terms of VAT? I have not heard about that figure before—a 20 per cent. rate of VAT—but it sounds about right. The right hon. Gentleman's patent refusal to answer that question shows that he also feels that the figure is about right. My hon. Friend was right. I compare the windfall tax with income tax, and it equates to about 2p on income tax.

If the right hon. Gentleman does not answer questions on the windfall tax, how does he expect us to take him seriously? He proposes to raise all this revenue, and we hear about the spending promises of his colleagues, but he will not answer a solitary question about the windfall tax that drifts in and out of his speeches on the economy. He usually calls it a windfall levy to avoid being too direct.

Mr. Brown: The Conservative party has now become the "defence of the utilities" party. People in the country will understand exactly what is happening. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree with me that the privatised utilities have made excess profits, especially during the recession, and that the case for a windfall tax on the utilities is supported overwhelmingly throughout the country?

Mr. Clarke: We defend the people who work in those utilities. We defend the small shareholders in successful companies. Above all, we defend the customers of the companies that supply electricity, gas, water and telephone services. They will notice that the right hon. *Gentleman* never answers any questions about a tax that will increase costs and result in losses for many people. The cost will fall on all those people whom the Labour party used to call the stakeholders in the utility companies, and whom he now wants to tax.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall not give way. I want to get back to the point from which the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East is trying to distract us—what is happening out there in the real economy and how policy is being pursued. I have already dealt with the fact that, above all, we seek to ensure that we hit an inflation target. The right hon. Gentleman does not even have an inflation target. He has the nerve to attack me because he is not sure that I will hit the 2½ per cent. inflation target. This country has never combined such low inflation with a recovery.

The right hon. Gentleman must watch me taking decisions with which he reluctantly agrees and which are keeping us on course. I have achieved such a low inflation climate that I am able to move interest rates by small amounts. I bet that no hon. Member can remember when we last saw an increase in interest rates of only a quarter of 1 per cent. Past Chancellors would have given their eye teeth to live in a world where they moved interest rates by only 25 basis points, or a quarter of 1 per cent. We can all remember rates going up by 1 per cent., half a per cent. or 2 per cent.

My approach to monetary policy of keeping ahead of the game has enabled me to keep interest rate movements within a narrow range, and it has produced the healthiest and strongest economic recovery in western Europe.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that, in the past couple of weeks, the European Commission has introduced radical proposals for a uniform rate of VAT throughout the European Community? Does he agree that we would veto such proposals, and that it is perfectly clear from what the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) has said that the Labour party would not?

Mr. Clarke: I am not in favour of a uniform rate of VAT. I am sure that we would be against that, as I am sure would most other member states. No one will go to a uniform level of VAT throughout western Europe. I am in favour of minimum levels; otherwise, attempts are made on either side of a border to win markets in particular goods by attracting customers.

I am in favour of some approximation of taxes that bear on sales, such as excise duty, because that would help many industries in this country. I firmly believe that taxation should rest in the hands of member states. It always will, and any British or German Minister, and most of the other Ministers in western Europe, would veto any proposals to the contrary.

As I said, our recovery is stronger than that of any of our major western European competitors. It is becoming balanced and sustainable. The whole point of our policy is to keep it that way.

We are generating growth without inflation. We are generating growth without a balance of payments crisis—something which damaged this country so much in the past. We are generating growth while keeping relatively low interest rates. Too often in the past, we have allowed recoveries to run out of control. We will not allow that to happen again.

One of the guidelines which I have laid down throughout my chancellorship is no return to boom and bust. The public can see that that is what we are delivering. They can also see that the Opposition can offer only the threat of boom and bust, in equal proportions, if they run the economy in the way indicated by the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): If the Chancellor wants to know about the real economy, he should talk to some of our manufacturing sector which, since 1992, has suffered a massive recession. Now, after just one year of good times, manufacturing is falling back; it is heading back to another recession. Is that the sort of management of the economy of which the right hon. and learned Gentleman is so proud?

Mr. Clarke: We have had five years of recovery. Manufacturing was strong at the beginning of the recovery. Of course, there has been a slowdown, just as there has been a slowdown in continental Europe. Now, manufacturing is picking up again as the stocks that built up earlier in the year are reduced. There is no point in the hon. Gentleman and me exchanging tales about different manufacturers, although I meet manufacturers who certainly do not share his views. If he looks at the surveys done by the Confederation of British Industry and talks to the Federation of Engineering Employers, he will find that the climate among manufacturers is one of considerable optimism for the foreseeable future. That optimism is based on what we have already achieved and what we will preserve.

Not only will we not throw away the best prospects for economic growth that we have seen for a generation by not letting inflation destroy it, but we will not throw away those prospects by letting public borrowing get out of control. Public borrowing is coming down and I shall keep it coming down towards balance over the medium term. Again, that is a clear policy objective that is not matched by the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East, who has no such objective in this key field of economic policy.

The public sector borrowing requirement is now half what it was three years ago. Throughout the period of the last Labour Government, it averaged almost twice as much as it is now. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) intervened earlier about the national debt. National debt, as a share of national income, has been lower every single year under this Government than it was for any single year under the last Labour Government. At the beginning of the debate, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East spoke about national debt. If our average deficit since 1979 had been as bad as it was under the last Labour Government, our national debt would now be twice as high as it is—£650 billion, or more than 90 per cent. of gross domestic product. That is what has happened in many continental countries, which are now trying to recover from that.

It is obvious that, if there had been a Labour Government in the late 1970s and the 1980s, Britain would be in the same public debt mess that half of continental Europe is in now. Instead, our debt is among the very lowest in the European Union; under Labour, it was among the highest. The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East spreads scare stories about public finances. He tries to prepare people, in the most alarmist way, for the Budget. He has spread a scare story about a shortfall in tax revenues, by looking back at tax forecasts and comparing them with the revenue variants. The fact is that, because of profitability and growth, tax revenues are rising faster than public spending. That is why public sector borrowing is falling. That is the key element to hold on to in looking at the state of the public finances.

Put another way, revenues are rising slower than activity. That has surprised both me and my forecasters. However, although revenues are rising slower than activity, spending is rising even slower than revenues. The Government are committed to sound, sustainable public finances—and we are on course to deliver just that. We will keep Government borrowing coming down.

I do not intend to give away the brightest economic prospects that we have faced for a generation by giving in to the siren calls for higher public spending—calls that will come at me and at the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East from the Opposition Benches over the next few months.

Mr. Thomas Graham (Renfrew, West and Inverclyde): Is the Chancellor telling us that, after 17 years, my constituents are once again going to face potholes in the road, schools falling down and empty hospital beds that could be filled with patients who need health treatment? Is that the type of system and society that you are expecting my constituents to face when you claim that Britain is booming and doing well? Tell that to the unemployed people in my constituency. Tell that to the elderly people who are waiting for a hospital operation. Tell that to the young people in my area who cannot get full education because the Government have not provided the wherewithal. Chancellor, you should be ashamed.

Mr. Clarke: I apologise—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. I remind the hon. Member for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde (Mr. Graham), not for the first time, that he should address me and not the Chancellor direct.

Mr. Clarke: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for the fact that my NHS figures may relate to the English NHS rather than the Scottish NHS, but in England he will find that, throughout the period of our government, we have increased the level of spending on the NHS by about 70 per cent., in real terms over and above inflation. We have committed ourselves to continuing to increase spending on the NHS in real terms, year in year out. As far as I am aware, that is something to which the Labour party will not commit itself, and, anyway, it is something that the Labour party failed to deliver when it was last in office, because it is the only party in office since the war that has ever cut spending in real terms on the NHS in any single year.

[Mr. Clarke]

We have run an enterprise economy that first generated the wealth to provide the finance for key public services. That is what is put at risk by the prospect of a Labour Government and it is that which puts at risk the public services in Renfrew, West and Inverclyde.

I will achieve the target that I have set to get public spending down below 40 per cent. of national income. We will get it down there and we will keep it there. Again, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East has no such target and he is surrounded by people, including the hon. Member for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde (Mr. Graham), who will make it utterly impossible for a Labour Government to control either public spending or public borrowing and, therefore, taxation, and, therefore, the continued growth of the public economy.

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): Before that exchange on the NHS, my right hon. and learned Friend referred to the extremely encouraging signs of a reduction in the deficit and the rise in tax revenues, but he said that the rise in those revenues was somewhat slower than expected. Is it not even more encouraging that, by the end of the fourth quarter this year, the rise in tax revenues will accelerate, so the deficit will come down even faster?

Mr. Clarke: That should happen, but we have to set policy just to ensure that we deliver sound public finances, because that is necessary to ensure the continued growth of the economy and the healthy state of affairs I have described. Of course, if those revenues accelerate the recovery, we will be able to keep our commitments to the great public services—that we Conservatives ensure that the real economy creates the wealth first and then we devote it to those great public services.

The revenues are rising, although our intention is to lower taxation because we believe that that, too, is essential to the growth of the real economy.

Mr. Gordon Brown: Those are exactly the statements that the Chancellor and his colleagues made in the early 1980s. Can he now explain to us why it is that the share of national income for public spending is exactly what it was in 1979, and why people are paying a higher share of their income in tax than in 1979? Why, with all the right hon. and learned Gentleman's great statements, has the action been exactly the opposite of what he and his colleagues have said?

Mr. Clarke: The proportion of GDP is almost exactly the same in both cases, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover has already said, when Labour left office there was a huge unsustainable level of Government borrowing on top of taxation, which we had to tackle. That is why taxation reached its peak in 1981, as we sorted out the mess that Labour had left. Now, the level of taxation and that of public spending is far below those of 1981. We have maintained those levels, whereas they have risen much higher in the rest of western Europe, both as a proportion of spending and as a proportion of taxation taken by the state.

We have a Government who are plainly on course to reduce the burden of spending and the burden of taxation and we have clear, measurable commitments to do so. We are faced with the threat of a return to a Labour Government of high spending, high taxation, high public borrowing and pressures upon them, of which we have just heard from the hon. Member for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde, which will ensure that they will take us right back to the kind of mess we had in the late 1970s.

Mr. Brown: If all the problems were caused in the 1970s, why is it that, since 1992, we have had the biggest peacetime rises in taxation in our history?

Mr. Clarke: What we have had since 1992 is the fastest growth in western Europe, a huge fall in unemployment and a recovery that is combined—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East may wish to wave away the measures that created the current economic conditions. It is true that we have got where we are today with no thanks to the Labour party, which has fought every essential measure that we have taken to take this country from recession to recovery. As far as I can see, the Opposition would fight them still and would take us back to recession again.

We are committed to our 20p standard rate of taxation on income tax and people believe us. We are committed to the abolition of the inheritance tax and capital gains tax. People trust us to deliver that because they see our record. The Labour party, certainly on the strength of the speech we have heard today, is not capable of being trusted with any of those measures.

I keep challenging the Opposition, and I have had some success this afternoon, to come clean and to level with the people. Labour should have a serious debate with us about Labour's tax plans, Labour's inflation targets and Labour's views on interest rates other than just responding to the day's news. How about some openness? How about some honesty from the Labour party about precisely what its approach would be to the real economy if it got into government?

Mr. Terry Lewis (Worsley): Honesty?

Mr. Clarke: Well, it is no good the Leader of the Opposition talking all his empty pious phrases at the Labour party conference. The one memorable thing I can recall from the right hon. Gentleman's conference speech was his amazing phrase about a covenant with the British people. That strikes me as a bit of a crib from Newt Gingrich for a change—the contract with America put into slightly more Scottish language. It is a rather odd time to switch from cribbing from Bill Clinton to cribbing from Newt Gingrich. Instead of tub-thumping sermons from us, one gets decisions today. Instead of messianic waffle, one gets the results that I have described, and that speak for themselves, and they are not challenged by what the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) said.

The threat to our position lies with the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East and his friends. Labour needs to tax more as night follows day. It needs to tax more to pay for the new spending to which it is now committed.

Let me quote from the conference speech of the right hon. Gentleman. In the course of one speech—not one he has repeated here yet—he promised nursery education for all and universal education for all after the age of 16 and he said that he would make available accessible and

affordable child care. He said that the benefit tapers must be addressed. He said that the Labour party would implement the social chapter. He talked about creating regional development agencies and introducing, by law, a statutory minimum wage. They are only some of the things that he promised in his speech in front of his party's supporters.

The right hon. Gentleman would not be tough on public spending—he is a soft touch on public spending faced by lobbies from the Labour party. What chance is there that he will control his colleagues when he cannot even resist the temptation to make expensive promises himself? He is like every other Labour politician: they go into politics to spend more, that is what they do, and it is in their blood.

Today, we have had enough of the Opposition's changing policy on VAT and fuel. What about the 10p starting rate of income tax about which the right hon. Gentleman has not risen to answer any questions? At the time, it struck me as sheer desperation—an attempt to outbid a tax-cutting Government with a totally incredible and wildly expensive commitment of his own—£9 billion-worth of desperate electioneering promise. The right hon. Gentleman may shake his head. I accept that he was helpful a few moments ago, although I do not remember any particular answer to any question we asked about the windfall tax, much as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover and I tried.

Let me try the right hon. Gentleman on the 10p rate. They are straightforward questions, and he might have thought about just some of them already. Will it apply to everyone paying tax at the 20p rate now? That is a quarter of all taxpayers. If not, will it apply to half those who are paying the 20p tax? [HON. MEMBERS: "Come on, answer."] Will it apply to the first £1,000 of income liable to tax? There is no point in the right hon. Gentleman making taxation pledges and then being utterly unable to answer questions about a proposition that would cost billions of pounds.

There is only one 10p tax that we know for certain the people would get from Labour. It is the extra 10p on the top rate of tax that the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues want and which the right hon. Member for Sedgefield will not allow them to talk about. Who will pay the 50p rate and at what level will it start? Who does Labour regard as the wealthy who will make this contribution to its spending plans? The right hon. Gentleman is supposed to be disagreeing with his colleagues on these matters, but I do not understand how they can have disagreements when they have no policies or when no details have been worked out. How have they moved to that elevated state if none of these points can be answered?

We have had a go at the tax on utilities, the so-called windfall levy. *[Interruption.]* There is no point in laughing. What is difficult about a question as to whether it will apply to telecommunications or to Scottish water as well as to English water?

Mr. Gordon Brown: Scottish water?

Mr. Clarke: They are all privatised, but not Scottish water. Scottish electricity generation is privatised. The right hon. Gentleman has said that he will not impose the levy on non-privatised Scottish water. That is good. Let us ask him a difficult one. What about British Telecom? The Opposition are in a shambles. They are committed to £3 billion or £10 billion of spending and there is to be a one-off windfall tax to pay for permanently recurring revenue commitments on policies to which the right hon. Gentleman has signed up. I shall not ask about the tartan tax, about which the Opposition are never able to answer questions and which apparently is to go to a referendum.

What about the London tax? A new Greater London authority is to come back with tax-raising powers. Are the people of London to have a referendum on that? Will they be told how much it might cost? What about the telecommunications tax to pay for the network? The Labour Front-Bench spokesman was careful in describing that because he said that it was not a tax but would be a modest percentage paid by subscribers to the telephone network. If they pay that modest percentage without a choice at the demand of a Labour Government, it will be a tax, and it will be paid on top of whatever amount the windfall levy produces.

Unlike Labour, we say what our policies are. We stick to them and deliver the results and the public can see that we do that. Our policies are designed to sustain the strongest and longest economic recovery in Europe and they are doing that without inflation or overheating. We shall ensure that the recovery is for keeps. We are in our fifth year of recovery and already unemployment is down by almost 1 million and exports have gone up by nearly 20 per cent. in two years. Inflation is at its lowest for a generation and living standards are rising fast.

We have it in our hands to transform the future of our nation for the better and for good, to break out of the cycles of the past and to raise the nation's sights. We can overtake our competitors and make Britain truly the strongest economy in Europe. In the rest of Europe, people know only too well that that is where we are headed. The only thing that stands in the way of that bright prospect for our country is the possibility of a Labour Government. Their future would not work, but ours does. That is why next spring, after further months of healthy recovery, the British people will make their choice and back the party that is consistently delivering British economic success of a kind that has not been seen before.

5.13 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I hesitate to criticise the Chancellor, partly because he is one of the few recognisable paid-up grown-ups in a Government of adolescent amateurs and also because he made some nice remarks about my book, "How to be a Minister", which will be printed on the jacket of the new edition which is to be published in February. It therefore affects me a little to make some remarks that are not entirely complimentary about him, although he is welcome to quote what I say on the back of any book that he publishes.

To a large extent the Chancellor has been speaking about the past, and when he has looked to the future it was only in the short term. He has made an assumption, which for the purposes of his barnstorming speech he had every right to make, about a Conservative victory at the election and he spoke about the first 18 months or two years. The Chancellor's policies and the Gracious Speech are so lacking in substance because they do not deal with the economic and industrial future of our country beyond the next two or three years—beyond the next Parliament and into the next century.

[Mr. Gerald Kaufman]

The Chancellor believes in Europe and believes, by his party's standards, that he is pursuing reasonably sensible economic policies, but he should have looked towards establishing an industrial substructure that will enable Britain, regardless of which party is in power, to sustain growth and prosperity without inflation. At the end of his speech, the Chancellor spoke of his wish to overtake our competitors, but his words rang particularly hollow. Neither in his speech nor in the Gracious Speech was there any planning for the future long-term security and prosperity of this country. That is a Government obligation, regardless of party.

The Chancellor spoke about the real economy, and that is what we ought to be discussing because it is what matters to the people. It certainly matters to my constituents, huge numbers of whom live in deep poverty, and it ought to matter to the electorate as a whole regardless of their economic circumstances.

I strongly support the Opposition amendment because it refers to investment that will increase high technology. It is on such technology that our future and that of any developed industrial country must depend. It is depressing that the Chancellor, who is among the least foolish members of his party and Government, is not looking at the way in which technology is advancing in other countries; in this country it is not advancing sufficiently or being planned for by either the right hon. and learned Gentleman or his colleagues. I am speaking about progress in advancing Britain's future through the information super-highway.

Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of jobs are at stake because, as traditional heavy manufacturing declines, these other industries are taking over. There are billions of pounds' worth of exports on which interest rates and the exchange rate depend and on which the Chancellor's championship, which I share, of keeping the options on economic and monetary union and the single currency open also depend. Investment in high technology and plans to promote it are preferable to the Government's policy of turning the United Kingdom into the low-paid sweatshop of the European Union, for that is what we are becoming. I am sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not like that, but he is doing nothing to stop it.

Dr. Keith Hampson (Leeds, North–West): Some simple statistics seem to be relevant. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry has been considering the cable industry. There has been unprecedented investment. Billions of pounds of investment are coming into Britain from American companies which see a future here. Also, we are spending a higher proportion of gross domestic product on primary, secondary and higher education than France, Germany or Japan. How does he reconcile that dramatic turnaround from what was happening under the Labour Government?

Mr. Kaufman: One of the problems with these debates and, frankly, one of the reasons why I am fastidious not only about taking part in them, but even about attending them, is the stale sort of exchange about what was happening in the 1970s under the Labour Government. We are talking now about the 21st century and I do not want to drag in even what the Labour Government did and what I did as a Minister to expand industry, to create British Telecom, which we prepared for, and to build British Aerospace, which was a dying airframe industry. That is not what I am after, but in response to part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention I will certainly talk about the cable industry because I agree about its primacy. What I am not happy about, however, as the hon. Gentleman will hear if he continues to listen to me, is the reliance on overseas investment to expand an indigenous British industry which should have indigenous British investment.

Developments are taking place as technology advances. Unless there is a specific guiding of policy by Government—I am not talking about public ownership or even state interventionism of the George Brown kind 30 years ago—the developments to which the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Dr. Hampson) has referred will be in the hands of foreign, mainly north American, companies and a huge opportunity will be lost to Britain for ever.

As we debate this year's Queen's Speech, the technology of television is advancing. There is now a seamless link between television, computers, newspapers and telephones. On Friday, BSkyB, an enormously profitable and successful company, will make a decision on the technology accompanying digital television that will decide the future of all digital broadcasting in Britain. Yet the Government are either taking no action or holding back progress which affects the nation's prosperity.

In the past few days, Cable and Wireless Communications has been formed from the Cable and Wireless company and a collection of cable companies that are subsidiaries of United States conglomerates. We now have a £5 billion conglomerate and there is no guarantee that through that company, which will be a major competitor, British-produced material—what we are good at and what can create more jobs—will get a fair chance on Britain's cables.

Despite the commitment in the Queen's Speech to what the Government call getting rid of unnecessary burdens on industry, it is clear that the wholly British telephone company BT will face even stronger unfair competition. Instead of doing something about that and removing the restraints, the Government are deliberately maintaining them so that BT is hampered from competing with vastly wealthy American and Canadian conglomerates.

Cable and Wireless Communications, in which both United States and Canadian telephone companies will be represented, will be able to undercut BT on telephone provision while having a monopoly on cable broadcasting. The Government believe in markets and competition, but because of their foolish decision BT is excluded from broadcasting to two or more homes simultaneously. American telephone companies, however—the companies that have come into Cable and Wireless Communications, including Nynex and Bell Canada, are all American—are able in Britain both to offer telephone services and to broadcast images. BT, however, is hampered from competing in the telephone sector by the fact that it is forbidden by law to broadcast to two or more homes simultaneously.

BT is discussing with BSkyB forming a partnership to supply programmes down BT telephone lines. If that comes about, as it may do—both sides would be sensible

to do so—it will be one of the most powerful partnerships in the world. The News Corporation Ltd. is an incredibly powerful organisation and BT is hugely powerful, wealthy and profitable. BSkyB would also supply programmes for the cable services of Cable and Wireless Communications, so BSkyB would be in a dominant position in supplying television programmes through its satellite programmes, through cable and through whatever arrangement it is able to make with BT.

Where at that point would the British Broadcasting Corporation, Britain's most famous brand name, be internationally? Where would it be in its own country, let alone competing throughout the world, as it should be, with its talent, skills and huge library? It would be a postulant client to BSkyB and to Cable and Wireless Communications. It would be hoping to sell them its programmes, without any commitment on the part of the broadcasters based on the binding arrangements of a partnership.

As for the digital technology on which the BBC places so much reliance, even if Friday's decision by BSkyB generously allows one box to have both terrestrial and satellite digital broadcasting, the BBC will be living on borrowed time because terrestrial digital television is obsolescent. It is dying away, just as terrestrial television is dying. The future is in cable, in optical fibres and in interactive and on-demand services, in addition to services that are supplied free to air. The whole ethos of public service broadcasting is at stake, together with the future of the BBC as a production organisation. Hundreds of thousands of jobs are involved, as are the many more jobs that could be created as the channels multiply next year.

It is ludicrous that we should be facing this huge challenge from the American and Canadian companies in Cable and Wireless Communications and from BSkyB with the BBC looking totally to the past and appearing to believe that it can create a fruitful future for British communications on the basis of an impertinent and unrealistic demand for an above-inflation increase in the licence fee, which in any event would not supply much money. In addition to the BBC's ridiculous demand for an increase in the licence fee, the best that it can do is to find candle ends from internal savings and hope to receive money from the private finance initiative to fund what I repeat is in any case an obsolescent technology.

The BBC has formed links with Flextech in the UK and with Discovery in the United States, which are American subsidiaries. I acknowledge that that is better than nothing, but those deals are paltry compared with the formidable competition that the BBC faces from BSkyB and cable television. The BBC announced yesterday that its planned Flextech channels will create, as a rival to MTV, a television version of Radio 1, but that can scarcely be regarded as the cutting edge of public service broadcasting.

The BBC is an enormous asset to this country, not simply in prestige but in generating employment. Unless it can form a partnership with a major broadcaster, I believe that its days are numbered. The BBC will dwindle into a British version of the American Public Broadcasting Service, and its precious heritage will waste away with a diminishing audience—which will continue to diminish exponentially. A hugely profitable, productive and industrial future—we are talking perhaps about the most important industry that we possess—will be frittered away.

I am glad to say that the Labour party has a constructive policy for the Internet. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) announced one instalment of the policy at the Labour party conference, and he announced another instalment at our party conference at the beginning of this month. But we cannot afford to wait even the six months before a general election. I have spoken to the Prime Minister's office and to successive Secretaries of State for National Heritage about the fact that this is a national issue and not a party issue, and that we should be doing something about it now. We cannot afford to wait six months until, as I am perfectly confident, a Labour Government are elected.

The BBC must be told by the Government to enter into talks with BT, with Cable and Wireless Communications or with both those giants to discover whether, even at this late stage, it can be included in a partnership.

I shall state very clearly that I believe that the current administration of the BBC—Bland and Birt, who have shown themselves to be far from adequately fitted for their vital responsibilities—should be cleared out and replaced by business-minded people who will do the job that must be done and which is currently not being done. When Sir Christopher Bland was appointed chairman of the BBC I said to myself, "That is ideal—a Tory with a background in commercial television; he is the man to take the BBC into the future." In fact, he has gone native so fast that he makes his predecessor seem like a dynamic socialist.

The restrictions on BT must be lifted, and they must be lifted soon. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer knows, it has been some years since I graced my party's Front Bench—for what good that ever did. As Chairman of the National Heritage Select Committee, however, I urge Opposition Front Benchers to facilitate the passage, without opposition, of a Bill to remove the restrictions on BT, should the Government introduce such a Bill during this Session. I believe that most hon. Members would agree with that support. We have a major and crucial opportunity to expand our industry and our economy by assisting and stimulating the expansion of what could be our most important industrial sector as the next century begins and progresses.

Directly and indirectly, satellite television has already created 54,000 jobs, and cable television has created a further 33,000—and the potential for job and wealth creation has scarcely been tapped. Those are the jobs and the technology of the future, and we have the sophisticated workpeople to do those jobs. That is why I am happy that my colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench, whom I praise, have tabled an amendment to the Queen's Speech giving due emphasis to modern technology and I shall have great satisfaction in voting for it.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have just received an answer to a question about lottery funding that I tabled to the Secretary of State for National Heritage. I asked whether details could be provided by constituency, in rank order. The information has been provided on computer disk in the Library. In the answer, however, the Department states that the figures for the most recent quarter cannot be provided in rank order—although the figures have been provided to the hon. Members concerned—because of the disproportionate cost of doing

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

so. I believe that it would be a simple exercise to provide the information. Perhaps I could also suggest to the Secretary of State that her Department should apply for a lottery grant so that my question can be answered.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair. However, the hon. Gentleman will no doubt find other ways in which to express his disappointment.

5.35 pm

Sir Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will not be embarrassed if, in what I hope will be a brief speech, I commend him on his action today on interest rates. I believe that he was absolutely right to do so, although, to some extent, I regret the situation that made such action necessary. I am sure that he realises that we cannot expect to be popular with our fellow citizens by increasing interest rates. From my experience, I know that the great majority of people were hoping that we had reached a point at which there would be no more increases.

I also fear that the increase will create or increase a feeling of insecurity that affects many people, and that they will feel that this is only the first stage. It is commendable that the Chancellor will not hesitate to increase rates further if necessary, if this increase does not solve the situation.

I also regret the fact that the increase is necessary because of high unemployment. I recognise, of course, how much has been accomplished to reduce unemployment, but it is still very high. For many years, some hon. Members, and some Conservative Members, have denied any connection between unemployment and the various social ills from which we suffer. Perhaps those of us with an earlier experience have never accepted that view at all. In a variety of spheres—most recently in our schools, but also in the abuse of drugs and violence on the streets—the malevolent influence of unemployment is increasingly becoming apparent. Therefore, from the social point of view, I think that dealing with unemployment should have the highest priority.

I listened with the greatest interest to what the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said about one industry, and I share his views. He has brought home to us the problems that the Government face in trying to facilitate the creation of new industry and in helping it to develop at a satisfactory speed. The problem is particularly acute if the Government have been brought up on the dogma that they must not do anything to influence our industrial life. That outlook has changed gradually over the past three to four years, but the problem remains the same.

As the right hon. Member for Gorton emphasised, the situation can be helped enormously by our official organisations—such as the BBC—which I hope will be the case. The problems facing the Chancellor and the Government are concerned not only with technology and with people making the necessary decisions, however, but with the lack of knowledge of so many UK executives of what is going on in the rest of the world. The Government try to help. The Deputy Prime Minister visits various parts of the world, including China, but we are just not coping with the rapid development of so much of the rest of the world.

I take the example of China, which has a rapid rate of expansion of between 8.5 per cent. and 12.5 per cent. We are not establishing ourselves in those markets as we should be. Later, we shall have an opportunity to discuss the Hong Kong situation, which I see is on the Government's agenda. When the Governor of Hong Kong said that when Hong Kong returns to China on 1 July next year, we shall still have responsibility for looking after Hong Kong, he could not have chosen a better way of upsetting Beijing and affecting the Chinese Government's future attitude towards Hong Kong and towards us. That undoubtedly affects our trading arrangements with Hong Kong. As I know from my discussions with officials in Beijing and elsewhere in China, such comments affect where they place their orders.

As I have said before in the House, I established full relations with Beijing and one of the three main purposes was to get trade. We are at the bottom of the trade list compared with all those who followed us, such as Japan, America, Germany and France. Whereas the Japanese trade is more than £30 billion, we are trying hard to reach £3 billion. That is the contrast between those who find out what is required and produce the answer, and those who do not. It is all very well to say that we should encourage trade, but it is also a question of spreading knowledge and showing our industries how they can achieve such results. I am, therefore, grateful to the right hon. Member for Gorton for his speech.

I know that we are getting near the Budget, so I do not expect answers from my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor. However, I point out that he has withstood pressures in making his decision about the bank rate and I hope that he will be absolutely firm in withstanding pressures to reduce direct taxation. From the political point of view, that is not a winner for us, for the simple reason that every Labour and Liberal Democrat candidate, and many others, will say in the constituencies, "You said that last time and what happened?" We do not want to get involved in that argument; I hope that I am being realistic.

There has always been a section of the monetarist wing of the Conservative party which believes that if possible, one should abolish direct taxation altogether and that the whole thing should be done through indirect taxation, whereby everyone, whether wealthy or poor, has to pay taxes. That is not acceptable for me or, I believe, for the party or the country.

The Chancellor and his predecessors have got direct taxation down to a reasonably low level. If we are to persuade people to support our policies, we must show them that we care about the things they care about. It is, of course, right for us to point out, as the Chancellor has done, how much expenditure on the health service has increased, but that does not alter the fact that people want a better health service. The cost of medicine in this country and elsewhere is constantly increasing because of the expertise of those involved in medicine. The more that they can find proper treatment for our citizens, the more the cost will be. What our people want to know is whether we shall give them everything possible in modern treatment. When we can say that that is the case, we shall get support.

The same point applies to education. I must be perfectly honest and say that I am not sure what the position on education is at the moment, anywhere. Parents are equally confused, especially after yesterday's debate. I am not one who puts all my trust in parents' decisions. Some parents

know a great deal about education and what is possible, and they can make a choice for their children, but the majority of parents rely on advice from head teachers and other teachers. That is where we need to improve the situation. Teachers have been knocked about for the past 20 years. That has undermined their confidence and schools are suffering as a result. We must restore confidence to them and let them advise parents on what is best.

I look back to the arrangements made during the second world war by Rab Butler and Chuter Ede, who ran the Ministry of Education together. They had an approach that seemed to be the right one at the time and for some time afterwards. There were three different groups: the grammar schools, which were academic, the technical schools, which prepared students for industry and the rest, and the general, co-educational schools, which looked after other children.

There was meant to be no distinction in standing between those three groups. They were meant to provide what was necessary in education for people with particular requirements. Where it went wrong was that under the Government who were in power until 1951, money was not available—or not provided—for the technical schools to develop. The result was that social divisions were created. There were great jealousies about people going to grammar schools and about others not being able to go to technical schools and having to go to the general schools. That system collapsed.

Ever since, the question has been what should be put in place of that system. I do not think that we have been successful in ensuring that our children get the best form of education, which will also produce those who can contribute most to our economy and to our country. That problem remains with us to be worked out. I do not believe that it can be worked out hastily—that also worries me. Plans are produced on the spur of the moment without proper consideration of the effects. Education, like health, is an area in which our fellow citizens want the Government to provide properly. They also want the Government to deal with the immense problem of unemployment.

The Chancellor has had to leave before I could commend him on one other matter, which is the single currency. [*Laughter.*] He has stood absolutely firm on that, and quite rightly so.

Mr. Lewis: He anticipated the right hon. Gentleman's comments.

Sir Edward Heath: He saw into my mind, which is easy for everyone to do.

The Chancellor is absolutely right to stand firm on the single currency. However, my difference with him—it is not really with him, but with the governmental line—is that nothing is being done to explain to the people what the pros and cons of the single currency are. There is complete confusion between a single currency and a common currency. Citizens write to me asking, "What is this all about a common currency and a single currency?" Nothing is being done to carry on proper public discussion about the issue.

All those who oppose the single currency get free coverage in a hostile press, which is largely owned by foreigners. On the other side, nothing is done. I learned only recently that we contributed to the work done by the Commission, which Ministers approved, explaining the pros and cons of the single currency. Like every other country, we have contributed to that work. Every other country has used the results, but our Government are not allowing them to be given to people in this country. That is disgraceful. We have contributed, but we are not allowing the discussion that should be carried on, and the Government must look at that point. *[Interruption.]* The chairman of the Conservative Back-Bench finance committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington (Mr. Townend), could arrange such a discussion if he wanted to instead of sitting there, grinning and laughing the whole time.

Mr. Dykes: Does my right hon. Friend know that in Germany, every passenger on the German railway system receives a bulky pamphlet explaining the pros and cons of the single currency system? Why should we not have something like that here?

Sir Edward Heath: My hon. Friend will have to ask the Prime Minister and the Government; I am no longer responsible. Such discussion should take place. There is so much grumbling about the money that is passed to the European Union, yet we then refuse to accept what is being offered for discussion among people in a free democracy. As I have said, that is deplorable.

There is another point that I want to make about the European Union which is to the Chancellor's good. I had produced for me last night the latest available figures showing the extent to which we are benefiting economically from the European Union. In 1973, when I took Britain into the European Community, it took only 36 per cent. of our exports. In 1995, the last full year, the EU took 58.2 per cent. of our exports. That is the jump which resulted from our joining the European Community. In 1995, the EU accounted for 56 per cent. of UK imports of goods and 48.2 per cent. of invisibles. In 1995, we had a deficit on trade in goods of £11.6 billion. That comprised a deficit of £4.2 billion with the EU and of £7.4 billion with the rest of the world. All that points to the extent to which we benefit economically from the EU.

In 1994, the latest year for which figures are available, 33 per cent. of UK companies' direct investment overseas was in the European Union and 54 per cent. of overseas investment in UK companies was from the 15 countries of the EU. That shows the amount of inward investment that we received. The worrying thing about that is that it means that we no longer continue to run many of our companies, which instead are controlled by overseas countries, particularly the United States.

I have some other interesting facts. In 1994, 80 million Germans bought £17.7 billion-worth of British goods, but 240 million Americans bought only £16.9 billion-worth. The average German spent three times as much as the average American. Holland, with only 15 million people, took £9.7 billion-worth of exports from us—more than the Asian countries, China, Indonesia and the Philippines together. We sold more to Sweden than to the whole of Latin America from Mexico to Cape Horn. The Irish Republic alone, or Belgium and Luxembourg together, were better customers than Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa put together.

[Sir Edward Heath]

That flies in the face of everything that we hear from the Euro-sceptics—one of whom, the right hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Mr. Shore), I see sitting in the corner on the Opposition Benches—and shows exactly how much we are involved with the European Union and how foolish we would be to endanger that relationship in any way.

One other subject on which I want to touch concerns the question that has now become prominent in party politics on both sides of the House—morality. That is now being combined with religious beliefs. That is mistaken. It has not been in the British tradition—although it has been in some European countries—to have parties either named or dominated by a particular religious belief. There is a saying that a Member owes his constituents not only his energy but his judgment. It is up to us to give our judgment about those matters.

To say that one party is the Christian party is, first, not true, but, secondly, Britain now has a mixed population in which there are Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, and I suspect that some of my constituents are atheists. That may also be true elsewhere. Therefore, we should abandon the idea of proclaiming that our policies are the policies because of a particular religious belief. That is really the responsibility of archbishops and cardinals. They not only can but should do it and it is up to the individual citizen, not us, to decide what he believes and which belief he wants to join.

I hope that we may continue our political life on the road that we have always followed and which has always been demonstrated in the House. There are those who want to come to Prayers at the beginning of the day and those who do not. That is a matter for them. It would be a great mistake if we put forward our policies on the basis of a particular faith and its morality.

I commend the Chancellor on what he has done and I hope that he will be successful, but, in addition, I want to point out the need for a much wider approach in the rapid development of modern technology. I say rapid because there are so many examples of where we have missed the bus. We now have the channel tunnel. It always receives unnecessarily bad reports in the press. However, we do not have a fast link. We have been discussing that for eight years.

When I go through the tunnel, there is a fast link on the other side down to Nice or wherever I want to go. I went on it up to Lille a little while ago and one can travel on it to Copenhagen. But in this country there is nothing. One comes through the tunnel and slows down. Having travelled at 175 mph across the French plains with their beautiful agricultural land, one travels on this side at 35 to 45 mph. Moreover, the horrifying stink and rubbish on this side is deplorable and disgusting. Who is responsible for clearing that away under the new system I do not know, but one does not want to see it oneself, let alone allow one's visitors to see it. That is indicative of the times.

We had the same problem when we decided to decimalise our currency. We started discussing that in 1846 and it was carried through by a Labour Government in 1966. By that time, the rest of the world had already done it. When we did do it, we did it the wrong way, because we decimalised the pound with the result that inflation was given a tremendous push. Had we decimalised on 10 shillings, like the Australians and New Zealanders, we would have missed that enormous push.

We refused to go into Europe in 1950, when the European Coal and Steel Community was founded. It took us 22 years to get in and by that time so much had already been decided. Again, we missed the boat. We cannot afford to go on like that in modern history. Above all, we cannot afford it on the single currency. The decision will have to be taken, but we must be ready to take it. There is no point in my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington shaking his head in disagreement. I am sorry that the chairman of one of our major committees should believe that one should be unprepared for one of the most important decisions that we have to make. We must be prepared for it. That involves not only the Bank of England, but the Government. If people in the Treasury are still living in 1945, they must be removed and proper Treasury officials appointed. We do not want to be living in that age. It is time that we took some action and dealt with the matter.

Those are the matters that are vital not only for the future of the Government, but for the future of our country.

5.58 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who has an individual style. Years of experience mean that he is no longer beholden to the Whips or the Government, and what he has to say is all the more refreshing for that. That contrasts sharply with the exchange at the beginning of the debate, when extravagant claims were made about the total wisdom on one side and the total lack of it on the other, when, as always, the truth is always somewhere in between.

As we are debating the economy, it is relevant just to pick out the strands that the Government have highlighted in the Queen's Speech. They are right about the issues, and there is some agreement about the policies, but not necessarily about their delivery. The speech says that firm financial policies are essential to secure sustained economic growth, and continues:

"Fiscal policy will continue to be set to bring the public sector borrowing requirement back towards balance over the medium term."

That is a greatly watered-down version of what used to be the Government's objective, which was to achieve a balance, full stop.

The result is that there can and should be agreement about the need for financial discipline and the need for strict inflation policies—and the need to deliver on those policies. I welcome the Chancellor's announcement of today, not because people like to pay for higher interest rates but because of the recognition that it was necessary to take action.

Just to put the record straight: when the Chancellor announced a reduction of a quarter per cent. on 6 June, we said at the time that we thought the move was misjudged and that it failed correctly to read the pressures building up in the economy. We said that it would have to be reversed. Now the Chancellor has been forced to acknowledge that he was wrong, and he has had to adjust the rate accordingly. The signs are that next week's inflation report from the Bank of England will argue that

the Government are still not on course to hit their inflation targets, so the Chancellor may have to increase rates yet again.

All this reinforces the case for removing day-to-day interest rate decisions from politicians, who are under pressure before elections to do things for electoral advantage in the short term—things that may damage the performance of the economy in the medium to long term. That is the classic way of reaching wrong decisions.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) quoted interest rates from a number of European countries, saying that they were significantly lower than the United Kingdom's. One factor that he did not point out was that all those countries have an independent central bank, which is a significant reason for interest rates being lower there than here. It remains, however, the united view of both main parties that they have no intention of setting up an independent central bank, even though the Maastricht treaty requires one whether or not we join European monetary union. *[Interruption.]*

I hear mutterings from below the Gangway to the effect that the Governor and the Bank of England have been wrong in the past. That misses the point. There will always be differences of opinion on short-term judgments; we cannot say now who is right and who is wrong about what will happen in two years' time. The fact remains that, although bankers can make errors of judgment on the basis of their economic analyses, they remain economic analyses. They are not politically based.

This independence would remove the premium that we all have to pay for political interventions. In other developed countries operating with independent central banks, long-term interest rates are persistently and consistently lower than ours. The costs to our public sector borrowing and to private investors who must pay these premium rates in the United Kingdom are high.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup that one of the chief arguments in favour of monetary union, assuming that the criteria are met both by the core member countries and by the United Kingdom, is that such a union would exert further downward pressure on interest rates, thereby benefiting investment here and reducing the costs of borrowing. That would also assist in the management of the deficit, which this Government have failed to control.

Dr. Hampson: This is all very nice post facto academic analysis, but I remember the hon. Gentleman a year ago saying, as did Labour spokesmen, that the economy was stagnating and needed an injection of growth. He called for a reduction in interest rates then.

Every commentator has applauded the fact that the Chancellor overruled the judgment of the Governor of the Bank of England. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he would have kept interest rates higher over the past two years?

Mr. Bruce: No, but I made it clear in June that I would not have cut interest rates—and said so at the time. We also said that the Chancellor would be forced to reverse his decision, which he has. My point remains that allowing decisions to be taken in this political way requires a premium on long-term interest rates which we all have to pay.

Extraordinarily enough, the Conservative and Labour parties say that, if Britain opts into monetary union, they are willing to hand over the management of monetary policy to a European central bank, but they are not prepared to allow a British central bank the same responsibility inside the UK economy. That is clearly inconsistent.

If we are to manage our economy properly in the long term, we need to remove short-term political opportunist decisions from the equation. There have been many examples in recent years of Governments taking short-term decisions to foster short-term booms for electoral advantage. That has cost the country dear in the long term.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East rightly pointed out the problems of under-investment, which have created the pressures to which the Chancellor is now facing up. We have under-investment partly because of a lack of confidence that inflation and interest rates will stay down and that the exchange rate will remain stable.

The reason why Germany, regardless of its difficulties, has sustained its economic performance year after year for 40 years is that its people knew that inflation and interest rates would stay low, and that the mark would enjoy a stable exchange rate. That enabled the Germans to plan, and it gave them the confidence to invest at lower rates of return, with the result that many more investment opportunities were taken up in Germany than in the United Kingdom, where the risks were simply too high.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that the only factor in Germany's remarkable economic performance in recent decades has been low interest rates? What about German training and skills, not to mention other factors?

Mr. Bruce: Of course other elements are involved. It is disingenuous, merely because I have highlighted one strength of the German economy, to suggest that I do not recognise its other strengths, too. I intend to deal with them later in my speech.

The Prime Minister claims that inflation is in the box. Current low investment, however, suggests that this country's investors do not yet believe that. We shall need to sustain low inflation for rather longer before they do. In fact, inflation in the UK is still the fourth highest in the EU. We welcome the fall in unemployment, but it is still considerably higher than it was when the Conservatives came to power—and it has not improved much under this Prime Minister.

As for growth or stagnation, the United Kingdom's economy is growing at 2.6 per cent. a year—hardly a boom. It is a worthwhile recovery; we want to ensure that it continues, and we expect it to improve slightly. The worry remains that, with a growth rate of 2.6 per cent., we are already hitting inflationary pressures. That is surely a sign of under-capacity and under-investment, both of which the Government have failed to deal with.

When it comes to taxes, the Government are not on strong ground. They cannot even be honest. The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup is not alone in his party or among supporters of business and industry on the issue of taxes. Organisations not previously thought of as sceptical about Government tax policy are now saying

[Mr. Bruce]

strongly that the Government should not go for a tax-cutting Budget. No less a body than the Institute of Directors has said:

"We do not now believe there is scope for further cuts in income tax . . . in the next Budget."

That is astonishing coming from that organisation.

Perhaps less astonishing, but still interesting, is the Confederation of British Industry, which said:

"The CBI believes work force skills are crucial to business success, but . . . our research identifies significant current deficiencies . . . we have called for investment in transport to increase . . . These spending priorities are more important to business than tax cuts."

The Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"To cut taxes now in the expectation of hitting these medium term spending plans would be dangerous."

The Association of British Chambers of Commerce said:

"The Government should not consider tax cuts while the PSBR remains so high . . . The British Chambers of Commerce urge the Chancellor to make education a spending priority."

Perhaps most interesting of all are the comments of the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) at a meeting at St. Stephen's club on 25 September. He said:

"It would be great foolishness for Conservatives . . . to promise that we could cut taxes without cutting public spending. It would be more honest . . . to promise the electorate both extra tax cuts and big reductions in public services which would be required to fund them . . . I do not believe that elections . . . can be won by reducing income tax against a background of sacked teachers or closed hospital wards".

That is the climate in which this debate is being conducted.

I suppose I should hope that the Government and the Cabinet are not listening to the debate, and that they will go ahead regardless with a tax-cutting Budget. I must tell them that, if they do, they will be wrong. The British people will not believe that they can sustain those tax cuts while claiming that the health service will be safe in their hands. The British public will not believe that they have a genuine commitment to the problems of the poor and to investment in education. It does not add up, and it is not honest or credible. The Chancellor has made it clear that he does not believe that the Government are trusted on taxation, and he is soft-pedalling on the issue of tax cuts.

I will take up the point raised by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). We need to ensure that we continue to invest in education and training, so that we have people with the proper basic skills to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing world. We cannot deliver a record comparable to most of our competitors, and we will not be able to do so if we go on cutting investment in local authorities so that they cannot maintain teachers in the classroom or the fabric of our schools, let alone develop nursery education and the use of new technology within schools, which requires a great deal more equipment. Those things require investment at all levels, and that investment must be paid for, as a matter of public policy and public responsibility.

Mr. MacShane: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that sometimes one can get money for nothing? The European Commission is offering £300 million for job creation in Yorkshire under the Resider II steel regeneration programme. It has been blocked by the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Energy, who is insisting that no elected councillor should sit on the programme allocation committee. Such is the anti-European mindset of our Ministers that they are blocking that important Euro-cash for Yorkshire because of an absurd belief that only Whitehall should control the money, and that elected councillors should have no part in it. It is a scandal.

Mr. Bruce: I am sorry that I gave way. The hon. Gentleman has made his constituency point, and I will leave it at that.

I believe that the British public are looking for a more intelligent and honest debate about real resources. The Chancellor has talked about driving the public share of spending down below 40 per cent.—he maintains that in the Queen's Speech. That should happen as a matter of routine over the cycle, so it does not require any additional action and is no big deal. When the Government talk about driving it down further, they mean that they will have to privatise health care, unemployment and social security, and require people to pay more for health, education and services out of their private income. Most people would like to have an intelligent debate about whether that is better done through the existing institutions.

I see heads shaking on the Conservative Benches. There is room for debate, but there is no room for dishonesty which suggests that one can cut taxes and not cut public spending, and that the consequences would not damage existing services and prevent investment in them. It is our contention that the Government should recognise that they need to press down against inflation to try to achieve stability, and ensure that the growth rates are sustainable and that we have the necessary education and skills to provide a long-term basis for the future.

The Government must resist short-term pressures to come up with electoral gimmicks that will not work and which, worse than that, will damage the recovery we have and the possibility of ensuring a genuinely competitive economy in the long term. We need to ensure that people will invest because they believe that inflation and interest rates will stay down. We must be part of a strong monetary union, exchange rate union and European Union in which we are fully participating members, shaping the destiny rather than bobbing around in the wake of decisions made by other people.

6.14 pm

Sir Terence Higgins (Worthing): After participating in debates on the Queen's Speech for 32 years, it feels strange to realise that one is standing up, probably, for the last time.

When I first arrived in the House, I was taught that it was polite to refer to the arguments of other hon. Members, since we are supposed to be debating. I should like to pick up on the point about cable television which was mentioned in the fascinating speech of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman).

As cable television spreads, more and more people will have a continuous feed of events in the Chamber. That is rather worrying. We now have television sets in our rooms with that facility, and more and more hon. Members are staying in their room to get on with their constituency duties and so on, turning up the volume if a speech is

interesting and turning it down if it is not. Consequently, hon. Members are not appearing in the Chamber. In future, that will give a create a bad impression for the public at large. I hope that, as technology improves, it will be possible to have split screen coverage, showing, for example, the work in Select Committees at the same time.

I want to address my initial remarks to the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, who, by tradition, reply to the debate on the final day of the Queen's Speech. I am glad to see the Leader of the House here, and I hope that what I have to say will be conveyed to his shadow.

I believe that we are suffering serious problems as a result of the decision by the former Chancellor—it was announced with virtually no consultation and was contrary to what had been recommended—to introduce a unified Budget in the autumn. I believe that that is unsatisfactory. The Opposition tend to choose the last day of the Queen's Speech debate for discussion of the economy, when we do not have the Chancellor's economic forecast, we have none of the up-to-date information, and the Budget is only a short time ahead.

That is unsatisfactory, and, as the Chancellor pointed out in his opening remarks, it means that we have a long gap in the rest of the year when nothing is happening. One could say that the Chancellor and his colleagues could go on holiday after Christmas for the rest of the year. It also has serious effects on the congestion of our parliamentary programme. There is a little more time this year between the Queen's Speech and the Budget, but it is difficult to cram in Second Reading debates in time to set up Committees.

I strongly advocate the suggestion floated by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and taken up by the Leader of the House in a debate on 11 July, that we should hold the Queen's Speech in the spring. That would be far more satisfactory. We could then have the major Second Readings through, and the Bills would be making progress. When we returned after the summer recess, the Budget would open the second part of the annual programme. That would spread our economic debates and our programme as a whole in a far more efficient and satisfactory way.

I accept that we will not return to the old system, because the Treasury has decided that the current arrangement is rather good, for the reasons I have just mentioned. If we are not to return to the old system, there is a strong case for having the Queen's Speech in the spring and the Budget and autumn statement in the autumn.

That has frequently happened after a general election, when the Queen's Speech has taken place in the spring. So next year will provide an ideal opportunity to carry out that reform. However, we should not then have an 18-month Session. It would be better if we then had a yearly Session such as I have described. As it is not a partisan matter, but one for the House, I very much hope that the usual channels will give the idea serious consideration.

I should also like to commend the suggestion that was picked up in the speech by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the beginning of the debate on the Queen's Speech this year. He said:

"I should like to move towards a position where we can announce in future a two-year legislative programme and, so far as possible, publish draft Bills and consult on the second year's Bills before they are introduced."—[*Official Report*, 23 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 31.]

That happened many years ago when we introduced value added tax. That was the first time draft Bills were published well in advance.

That practice has much to commend it. It would give Select Committees the ability to consider Bills months in advance. Select Committees are a better vehicle for that than Special Standing Committees, and they could work more effectively if they had a longer time scale. I very much hope that we can pursue the idea that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister proposed and that—I hope—has general support in the House.

I should mention in passing, as no doubt we shall debate it later, that that idea seems quite contrary to the hurried introduction of particular measures, such as the proposed legislation on guns. Tragic though the Dunblane experience was, in my opinion it is unlikely that the current proposals will significantly reduce the risk of another such tragedy. Had the existing law been enforced properly, it probably would not have happened.

The danger of driving it underground so that gun maniacs had to obtain weapons illegally is that there would be rather less check than before. I shall not labour the argument, but it is important that the legislation should not be rushed, and that we should carefully consider how to make it as effective as possible.

Turning to the main subject of this afternoon's debate, I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor's view of the economy. The present prospects are extremely good, and I hope that, in his Budget, my right hon. and learned Friend does not react too dramatically to concern about the level of the public sector borrowing requirement. At this stage in the cycle, it is not wholly inappropriate.

None the less, the economy is growing rather faster than anticipated. The latest quarterly figures show growth at 0.8 per cent., and the two previously quarterly figures were revised upwards, so I can understand the concern about that. As the economy recovers, it is important that we slow down the rate of growth in line with the anticipated growth in productive potential. By then, we shall have some idea of the size of the real underlying deficit, but we do not have a clear idea of it at the moment. I do not consider that it will be necessary to take savage steps to cut the PSBR; that would be inappropriate at this stage in the economic cycle.

Development in the United Kingdom economy has to be judged against the background of the world economy and what is happening in Europe. I am concerned by what is virtually organised deflation in almost every European country seeking to meet the Maastricht criteria. They are doing things that they would not do were they not seeking to meet those criteria. That is dangerous.

I hope that we can get away from the expression "single currency". We are now considering the prospect of a core currency, but there is no prospect of a single currency over the now vastly expanded European Union not only within our political lifetime, but possibly within our actual lifetime. Therefore, it is misleading to continue to refer to a single currency.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary was right in his speech in Switzerland a few weeks ago to say that, if a small core of currencies join the so-called

[Sir Terence Higgins]

first wave and others do not join for a long time, the Union will be undermined. There cannot be a Union if some are in and some are out of what is generally regarded as its most important aspect, apart from the single market.

Secondly, the policy that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out very clearly is absolutely right. At this stage, it would be absurd to rule out joining the single currency in the next Parliament. Inevitably, that would mean that we could not play our full part in the negotiations, and we have a responsibility to do that for the sake of the United Kingdom and the future of Europe. My right hon. Friend was right to stress that important point.

The way in which the process is continuing gives me grave cause for concern. Europe is seeking to achieve the Maastricht criteria, but it is quite clear that the degree of convergence that we are likely to achieve on the present timetable is bound to be inadequate. That is a serious consideration.

It would be different had we achieved convergence and a single currency, and there were then particular variations in prices and costs in a particular part of the European Union, because, at that stage, we would have given up for all time the main means of adjusting differential movements in costs and prices. That would have the inevitable effect of causing unemployment to become endemic in certain parts of the Union, or it would involve huge subsidies from one part of the Union to another. That would be unlikely to happen, and we know that such subsidies are frequently ineffective.

That is not the position, however. Britain and the European Union are contemplating going ahead when there is inadequate convergence. The *Herald Tribune* and the *Financial Times* point out today that German economists are saying that Germany is unlikely to meet either of the main criteria. The French are employing an extraordinary method of proceeding, which is reminiscent of Mr. Robert Maxwell and the pension funds. Serious dangers are involved, and there are likely to be enormous problems.

One must give a warning: it will be dangerous for us and for the future of Europe and the single market if we go ahead with a single currency on the present schedule with inadequate convergence. Were I being rhetorical, I would say that some of the more enthusiastic politicians in the EU seem to be acting rather like the Gadarene swine. Perhaps I sound unduly pejorative. I am suggesting not that they are going in the wrong direction, but that they are proceeding at a suicidal pace.

Whether or not we are in the first wave, we have a responsibility to persuade the EU that the present timetable is dangerous. Whatever one's views on the single currency, and whatever decision is made about whether we are in the first wave, there is a danger that the first wave will create a core group on a basis that is not sustainable. If it goes ahead on that basis and on the present schedule without adequate convergence, the system will break down. That will be an enormous setback to the creation of the single market, and will create serious problems. Therefore, we must take part in the negotiations. We must not be excluded from them. If we fail properly to play our part, the real negotiations will take place outside the normal forums. That must be borne in mind.

Sir Edward Heath *rose—*

Sir Terence Higgins: My right hon. Friend may not have agreed with everything that I have said. I note that he wishes to intervene.

Sir Edward Heath: I am trying to find something on which I agree with my right hon. Friend. Will he first agree that we must stop kidding ourselves as to what other major countries in the European Union will do? They are determined to get a single currency, and to do so within the time period of which we are aware. There are powerful politicians who will be in place for a considerable period. The President of France is in that position. He will make sure that the programme is carried through. That is the situation that we must face.

Secondly, why are the other major countries in the European Union so determined? They know that it is not possible to keep a single market unless there is a single currency. All history proves that. Indeed, the present world proves that. That is why they are determined to go ahead.

Lastly, let us consider convergence and the United States of America. How much convergence does the US have? There are enormous differences between California, New York state and the southern states, yet the US is the most successful country in the world.

Sir Terence Higgins: I take up, first, my right hon. Friend's final point. The first question put to me during my third year at Cambridge on economics related precisely to the United States. The reality is that some parts of the United States would probably gain if they did not have a single currency. Some parts of Mississippi, for example, might gain by devaluing. That is not, however, historically the way in which the United States has grown up.

I do not accept my right hon. Friend's premise that there cannot be a single market if there is not a single currency. That is disputable.

I am seeking to put over the case that, if Europe proceeds as some suppose, and in the pejorative terms that I used earlier, the leaders of France and Germany are likely, in pursuing a timetable in the absence of adequate convergence, to bring about the self-destruction of that which they wish to construct.

Ms Abbott: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Terence Higgins: I have little more to say, but if the hon. Lady really wishes to intervene, I shall give way.

Ms Abbott: The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) made the real point, that the political elite of Germany and France are determined to go ahead with economic and monetary union come what may. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, merely because the Gadarene swine are determined to go over the clifftop, that does not mean that sensible porkers should go along with them?

Sir Terence Higgins: There are serious problems. I understand what my right hon. Friend the Member for Old

Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who has perhaps more knowledge than anyone else of European leaders on this issue, is saying. I am saying that those leaders are putting us in a dangerous position. We should seek to persuade them of the dangers that I have described. Indeed, that is the purpose of my speech. As I have said, I have left undebated the question whether we are in or out.

I have a strong feeling that, if the leaders of Europe go ahead with a core currency without adequate convergence, they may well find themselves—the Germans will certainly regret this—with what has been described as a camembert currency, with a soft section in the middle. We may find that that currency weakens, and that the value of sterling increases. The arrangements to prevent the value of sterling declining may have the reverse effect of what is expected. If that happens, there will be serious implications for our competitive position at that stage. It would be rather good, however, for some other sections of the economy.

We face serious dangers. In his peroration at the Conservative party conference, my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary quoted William Pitt in terms of saving Europe by our example. We must bear in mind what the example may be, and what the arguments are at a technical level. I understand very well the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup made about political drive, but at the end of the day—I quote someone whom perhaps neither my right hon. Friend nor I have always agreed with—we cannot buck the market.

6.34 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): It is a pleasure to take up the remarks of a distinguished ex-Chairman of the Select Committee on the Treasury and Civil Service. The decision whether to join the economic and monetary union is the one most important economic decision that faces the British political class. It gives me great pleasure to talk about something of substance such as the economy when over the past few weeks politicians of both major parties have been vying with one another in pontificating on morality and Christianity. I do not believe that the public have much stomach for professional politicians going on about matters of morality. We should concentrate on matters within our competence, such as the decision to join EMU.

It seems, sadly, that the debate on EMU has been hijacked by nationalists. It has been presented all too often in the popular press as a debate between nationalists and internationalists.

My parents came to the United Kingdom nearly 50 years ago from across the Atlantic. I am not a xenophobe and I hold no truck with petty little Englander ideas. I believe that there is a practical case against economic and monetary union on the criteria and timetable that are before us. That is the case that I hope to set out in a modest way.

I am a member of the Treasury Committee. I served under the distinguished chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins). During my membership of the Committee we have conducted two major inquiries into economic and monetary union. When the right hon. Member for Worthing was speaking, a colleague said to me, "I did not know that he was so anti-Europe." I said, "He is not anti-Europe, but as it happens economic and monetary union is one of those matters where the more you know about it, the more sceptical you become."

One of the arguments that the Europhiles like to advance in trying to confuse the issue is to ask, "Why are we talking about economic and monetary union now? The decisions are a long way away. The issue can wait. It is a long way down the track." In fact, 1997, next year, is the key year. It is the reference year. It is the year when the decisions of early 1988 will be taken on board. It is also the year during which Parliament will have to vote on whether to make the Bank of England independent in line with the Maastricht decisions, with a view to us going into an independent European central bank. That being so, the arguments that we should not be discussing these matters now because they are a long way ahead of us are simply tosh.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), the Liberal Democrat spokesman on these matters, produced as Liberals are wont to do, the orthodox view of an independent Bank of England. The hon. Gentleman suggested that it would be a magical elixir that would be the cure for Britain's long-standing economic decline. The orthodoxy relating to an independent Bank of England is not exactly the fact. The issue will have to be debated next year. There is a case for an independent Bank of England, and one that bears more scrutiny than fashionable opinion has bothered to give it.

There are right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who like to talk about a European central bank as if it is nothing to worry about. They say that at the end of the day politicians will have the final say. That is completely untrue. Martin Woolf of the *Financial Times* has said that a European central bank would be the most powerful and politically unaccountable bank in the world. It is the political unaccountability of both an independent Bank of England and a European central bank on which the House should focus tonight and in future debates.

Much of the argument, inasmuch as people argue rather than make assertions in a fashionable way, for an independent Bank of England, rests on the notion that there is a causal relationship between an independent Bank and low inflation. The Treasury Committee considered the issues before the hon. Member for Gordon became a member of it. We found that the factual evidence for a causal relationship was slender. There is a relationship: as fashionable opinion always says, Germany has historically had low inflation since the war and it has an independent central bank, but I always argue—the advisers and the information available to the Select Committee back me up—that to find the roots of Germany's low inflation one has to look at Germany's searing experience of hyper-inflation in the 1930s and immediately after the second world war and at a political consensus between management and labour to take inflation seriously. I challenge any of the fashionable pundits to come up with some academic evidence to show that there is a genuine causal relationship between an independent central bank and low inflation.

Andrew Wood, our specialist assistant to the Select Committee, said:

[Ms Diane Abbott]

"Whilst the relationship between inflation and Central Bank independence is undisputed, it is generally acknowledged that that relationship may not be causal".

Dr. Hampson: The reverse argument is this country's track record since the war. Far too often, politicians—or the Government of the day—have interfered, and devalued. I hate to make a party political point, but it is Labour Governments who have been especially prone to do so. Governments devalued the currency to help British manufacturing industry, which was in a relatively weak position. It is that track record that led to there being little trust in the strength of the British currency—had we had an independent bank, the financial markets around the world might conceivably have had a different perception.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning one of the other shibboleths of fashionable opinion, which is that we do not want politicians interfering with interest rates and that somehow monetary policy is different from any other aspect of economic policy. I would argue that monetary policy is of course very important but no more important than any other aspect of economic policy such as fiscal policy and public expenditure. What is the basis for saying that one aspect of economic policy can be taken separately from the others? My argument is that monetary policy is too important to be left to central bankers.

I pray in aid not some rabid right-wing Euro-sceptics or even some left-wingers but two distinguished ex-Treasury knights, two distinguished ex-permanent secretaries to the Treasury—Sir Bryan Hopkin and Sir Douglas Wass, who said in evidence to our Committee:

"It follows that decisions about the pace and rigour of the fight against inflation ought to be taken with full consideration of the costs involved—unemployment, recession, bankruptcies not to mention the cost to the public purse arising from higher social security payments . . . It seems to us to be fundamentally mischievous for . . . these issues to be removed from the domain of . . . democratically elected . . . Government and handed to an appointed and unaccountable central bank."

I quote a little more as this is the heart of my argument. They continued:

"It is not the job of central bankers to judge how far it is right to go in damaging the standard of living of some members of the community or destroying the jobs of others in order to bring inflation on to some particular path. These are broad matters as much of social welfare as of economics."

My view runs contrary to fashionable opinion: monetary policy is very important but no more so than other aspects of economic policy. The argument for taking it out of democratic control does not stand up. Monetary policy is too important to leave to central bankers, even those as urbane as the great and the good Eddie George.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Is not the hon. Lady explaining exactly why there is some concern? What credibility will one's inflation target or monetary policy have if one is determined to try to vary it as and when political expediency requires? Does not that undermine confidence in the policy-making process and is not that why there is a premium on interest rates?

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman was not listening to what I was saying. I was not talking about political expediency. My point is that monetary policy is not about numbers on a page; it affects unemployment, bankruptcy and people's lives in general. Because it is not just a theoretical accountancy exercise, it should remain under democratic control. Monetary policy is important but the House deals with many important issues. Why should it not be left in the hands of politicians? For too long, monetary policy has been described in the abstract rather than in terms of its effect on the lives of people in Hackney or even those in Milton Keynes.

The distinguished Treasury knights went on to say:

"It is inherently wrong to give such a responsibility to central bankers. Quite simply it is not their job: it is the proper responsibility of the elected representatives of the democracy and should stay with them."

I now leave the question of an independent central bank, but the House will have to return to it. Far from it being a remote debate at the end of the millennium, the matter will be debated on the Floor of the House within 12 months.

Labour Europhiles trying to influence the debate on economic and monetary union sometimes say that we should not worry about a European central bank because when it comes down to it, it will be under the control of ECOFIN, the Economic and Finance Council. I have heard that argument deployed by distinguished colleagues and I have even heard something similar from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. People who use such an argument need to read the treaty, which is very clear. A European central bank will by law not be accountable to any body, especially not ECOFIN. I know many colleagues are genuinely pro-European, but I plead with them to stop using the bogus argument that ECOFIN will be a counterbalance to the central bank.

Members of the Select Committee went to the Bundesbank several times, and the Bundesbank is clear that there is no question of a European central bank being subordinate to any elected authority.

Mr. Legg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, but she did mention the constituents of Milton Keynes. She rightly refers to the unaccountability of a European central bank. Will she confirm that the Maastricht treaty in fact forbids politicians to give any instructions to central bankers about the central bank? If there were a camembert currency, as outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins), would not there be a danger that unelected central bankers would impose even more deflationary policies on the people of Europe?

Ms Abbott: That is so. I am happy to confirm that the Maastricht treaty forbids politicians to give any instructions to the European central bank. As to the possible deflationary consequences of EMU, I intend to deal with them later in my speech. That is a very important point.

Another argument, or non-argument, used by people in both main parties who favour EMU, is deliberately to oversimplify the issue. They say that it will be nice to have one currency as we will not have to change money at the borders; we should just take a deep breath and plunge in. However, having a single currency involves more than simply reprinting our bank notes so that they bear the European symbol. Having a single currency

requires that, to a greater or lesser extent, we lock the economies of the countries involved. The seriousness and difficulty of that project are not properly explained to the public by Europhiles of any party.

I hear people talk glibly about EMU and gloss over the difficulties of locking economies and wonder whether they have learnt nothing from our experience in the exchange rate mechanism. I followed the debate in the press and remember how all fashionable opinion, the Liberals and goodness knows who else were saying that all we had to do was join the ERM, lock our exchange rates and all sorts of magical consequences would flow from it. It was to be the silver bullet to cure this country's long-standing economic problems. We locked exchange rate parities and, as the right hon. Member for Worthing said, the thing imploded.

People who have such confidence in the notion that one can lock the economies of major European countries according to arbitrary political timetables or the lifespan of Chancellor Kohl ought to re-examine the history of the ERM and how it exploded.

I want to move on to what for me is one of the most fundamental problems with the EMU project—I speak as a member of the Labour party—and that is the price, in deflationary economic policies, that ordinary people are paying in Europe and may have to pay in Britain if we go into EMU on the arbitrary political timetable. In Germany—and there is no leader in Europe more committed to EMU than Kohl—they have had strikes and upheaval caused by the price that the German people are paying in cuts in public expenditure to enter EMU on the timetable. Recently, the Institute for Economic Research in Germany said that there will be a rise in unemployment and stunted economic growth if Germany tries to fulfil the entry criteria on time.

In France, they are considering budget cuts of £7.5 billion and the unions were on the streets last year and will have a series of days of action against the cuts in health care, education and public sector pay. That is all because France has to meet the Maastricht criteria. In Spain, 300,000 people demonstrated against the cuts and the deflationary policies caused by entering EMU. In Austria, the two-year austerity programme has resulted in a record growth in the votes for right-wing parties in the recent Euro-elections.

I like to go along with fashionable opinion as much as the next person. It is so much easier and the sunshine of one's leader's smile glows upon you, but if we consider the price that ordinary people in Europe are paying for deflationary EMU-linked policies and the prospect for communities such as Hackney, which already suffers from endemic mass unemployment, anyone who calls himself a socialist or has any concern for the population will be given cause to pause at the necessity for a Gadarene swine-like rush into economic and monetary union on that timetable and according to those criteria. It has been calculated that, to hit the criteria on the borrowing deficit, we would have to cut public expenditure by £18 billion. If my hon. Friends on the Front Bench imagine that having—touch wood—won the next election, they would ever win another one if they implemented public expenditure cuts of that magnitude, they are deluding themselves.

I do not pray in aid left-wingers or Euro-sceptics, but the great and the good Eddie George, the Governor of the Bank of England. He said, with his usual cautious understatement, that if we went into EMU on that timetable and on those criteria, without paying attention to the important and underlying differences in the European economies, particularly in unemployment

"you would have the risk that some parts of the community would be stuck with low activity and high levels of unemployment and would have very few options for addressing them."

That, coming from the Governor of the Bank of England, is an understatement.

Some of my hon. Friends try to pooh-pooh a serious debate on EMU by saying, "Don't you understand, Diane, the criteria are flexible and they will be moved around. Don't worry about the criteria." I urge them to listen to Commissioner de Silguy who has said, about the notion that some Europhiles have that the criteria are flexible,

"We require total and strict appliance of the treaty without anything being added to it. We have always said that we should not add any criteria—for example a criterion on unemployment."

The Treasury Committee has, on several occasions, spoken to the Bundesbank about the issue of the flexibility of the criteria and, whenever we mention it, their faces freeze. The only people who think the criteria are flexible are deluded Europhiles in left-of-centre parties.

I am glad to have the opportunity to address the House on what will be the most serious economic issue facing us in the coming 18 months. I feel that we have had a misleading debate until now. It has concentrated on issues of nationalism and so on and not on the practical and democratic issues that relate to the question of Maastricht. I am weary—so I suspect is the British public—of politicians talking about issues of morality and the family of which some of them know little and which, certainly, we have no power to affect. We do have the power to shape this country's economic future. A serious economic decision faces us within the next 18 months and, although I bow to no one in my internationalism and my wish to see Britain part of Europe, we would be irresponsible and deluded if we imperilled the economic stability and the possibility for growth by simply following fashionable opinion on the question of economic and monetary union.

Madam Speaker: The 10-minutes rule starts operating at 7 o'clock.

6.55 pm

Mr. Nigel Forman (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on a persuasive, entertaining and—I know—well-researched speech which put her strongly held view on the important question of European monetary union. The speech was none the worse for the fact that I have had the honour to hear it before many times in the Treasury Select Committee.

Equally, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) for what turned out to be his valedictory remarks on the Queen's Speech in view of his regrettable decision to retire. We have always listened with the utmost respect to his remarks on anything to do with the economy and I am sorry that on occasions such as this in future we shall not have similar opportunities.

I disagreed significantly with only one point in the right hon. Gentleman's speech. He said that he thought it would be unwise at this stage of the economic cycle to act aggressively—or words to that effect—to reduce the

[Mr. Nigel Forman]

public sector deficit still further. I shall return to the point later, but I believe that we must be somewhere near the peak of the cycle, by anybody's best reckoning; if ever there were a time when we should be acting as effectively as possible to reduce the deficit, it is now, rather than later. I beg to differ with my right hon. Friend on that.

Perhaps the high point of the debate so far, notwithstanding the spirited speech by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, was the brio of the performance by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He put on a magnificent performance, matched only by his bravura speech in Bournemouth a few weeks ago. I commend him for that and it is good to know that the economy is safely in his hands. Long may it remain that way.

I noted a contrast with the speech by the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) which seemed to be based on the woolly and meaningless notion of "addressing" various difficult issues. The verb "to address" seems to be the key to new Labour's policy. It says that it will address long-term unemployment, it will address nursery school places and it will address skill shortages. To address those big questions is not a substitute for a valid and thought-out policy and is certainly not a substitute for a fully costed policy with real numbers and real choices. I remember that Nye Bevan was famous for his much-quoted phrase that socialism has to be the language of priorities. We may be faced with a chameleon-like Labour party, which has apparently changed its ways, but it must still focus on the language of priorities if it is to be taken seriously by the British people.

I also have a small bone to pick with the Liberal Democrats and I am glad to see their Treasury spokesman in his place. I have sat through a few days of this debate recently and I was present on the opening day. I sought to challenge the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), the leader of the party, when he expressed one of his typically pious concerns about the size of the public deficit. When I intervened on him to ask what practical proposals he had for reducing the public debt in the short term, he simply replied, in what I considered a very inadequate way:

"We would not cut taxes."—[*Official Report*, 23 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 37.]

That is one side of the account, of course, but it was a wholly inadequate answer.

In the intervening period, I went away to do a little research on known and recorded Liberal public spending commitments since the autumn of 1995, when the Liberals produced something called an alternative Budget. I do not wish to weary the House; I shall simply say that, if we tot up those commitments—I have a list before me—we find that they come to more than £6 billion. The Liberals have very honestly said—I give them credit for this—that, to finance their education commitment, they would be prepared to put perhaps an extra penny on the standard rate of income tax. Broadly speaking, that could mean £2 billion. But that would still leave them £4 billion adrift, which—at this stage of the economic cycle, and given the size of the current deficit—would add to the problems of the deficit and all the attendant financing problems, rather than solving any problem.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forman: Very briefly.

Mr. Bruce: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, in broad terms, but I must tell him that our alternative Budget and our manifesto have been strictly costed. He must not assume that commitments outside those are commitments other than the difference between what we would spend and what the Government are committed to spending. Our commitments have been not only costed, but audited by Treasury accountants and the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Mr. Forman: I do not think that we should take up too much of the time of the House with that point, but I will send the hon. Gentleman a list of the commitments to which I refer, and he can draw his own conclusions.

Given that monetary policy is at the heart of today's debate, my main purpose is to commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor on the way in which he has exercised both prudence and responsibility in the conduct of monetary policy, with the aim of maintaining non-inflationary economic growth. I stress the word "maintaining". The important thing about this "recovery", as it is rather wrongly called, is that the period of growth has lasted for more than four years. If my right hon. and learned Friend continues with his current prudent policies, with any luck it will last for another four years, and perhaps for a further four years after that.

As my right hon. and learned Friend said himself, the secret is to stay ahead of the game in monetary policy, and to move with small, timely steps. That is true whether we are talking about upward movements or downward movements in interest rates. As can be seen from the way in which my right hon. and learned Friend has conducted monetary policy recently—often in the face of contrary advice from the Governor of the Bank of England—such action has been characteristic of his methods. I suggest that today's small adjustment in an upwards direction will prove just as effective in sustaining a period of sound, non-inflationary growth as my right hon. and learned Friend's policies in the other direction.

In the longer run, I hope that the Government will pay careful attention to the three key objectives mentioned in one of the economic sections of the Queen's Speech. The Government speak of returning the public sector borrowing requirement towards balance in the medium term. We should note that they say only "towards" balance, and refer to the medium term: their phraseology is fairly vague. They also speak of further reductions in public spending as a share of gross domestic product—ostensibly, lowering it to below 40 per cent. of GDP by 1998-99. They also speak, perhaps over-ambitiously, of doubling living standards over the next 25 years—an objective of Rab Butler's in the early 1950s, which implies a compound rate of economic growth of some 3 per cent. a year for quite a long time.

I hope that the Government will not try to pursue incompatible objectives. I hope that they will give priority to reducing the deficit. It is vital not to saddle future

generations with the burden of paying off public debt, which is little more than deferred taxation under another heading. We should try to remove that deficit as soon as we reasonably can. I remind the House that, not long ago, one of my right hon. and learned Friend's predecessors was able to repay some public debt and to reach that stage in the equation.

Within the total of public expenditure that is available, I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend will give priority to assisting the young. That means education and training, the youth service and the voluntary sector. At the other end of life, he should give priority to helping the elderly and the poorest pensioners. From time to time, I have presented proposals designed to do precisely that. I also hope that we can knock on the head the threatening idea of limiting treatment on the national health service to those over 75.

All in all, I commend the Chancellor on his stewardship of the economy. I think that he has been running the ship very prudently and well. I am confident that, if we pursue the same course in future, we shall have not just another four or five years of Conservative government but—more important for the country—another four or five years of sustained non-inflationary economic growth.

7.5 pm

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): We have had an excellent debate, featuring many interesting contributions. I certainly enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who spoke up for the people of the United Kingdom and reasserted the importance of democracy in this country. She said that the ordinary people should control their economic future.

Today's announcement of an increase in interest rates came as no surprise: there were clear signs of increased inflationary pressures. If no action had been taken and then, a month later—at Budget time—the Government had reduced taxation, there would have been a further increase in those inflationary pressures. It was, therefore, an astute move by the Chancellor to act quickly, a month before the Budget, and increase interest rates. It will make it easier for him to consider the option of reducing tax next month.

Having said that, I have to say that this debate takes place at a time when the economy of the United Kingdom is good. The Chancellor and, indeed, his predecessor deserve our congratulations on what has been achieved during the past five years. We have the lowest mortgage rates for 30 years, the lowest basic rate of tax for more than 50 years and lower unemployment than any other major European country. When we look at France and Germany, we realise how well we are doing. We have had the longest period of low inflation for 50 years. Above all—we certainly notice this in Northern Ireland—we are No. 1 in Europe for foreign investment. We in Northern Ireland share that. Companies are coming in from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and, indeed, Indonesia.

As I have said, Northern Ireland is sharing the improvement in the United Kingdom's economy. We have a record of high unemployment, but in recent years, even before the ceasefire, our unemployment had begun to decline. Last year, a record number of new jobs were created in Northern Ireland. Only yesterday—once more, good news—Holiday Inns opened its second new hotel in Northern Ireland in three years. Tesco opened its first metro-store in the city centre of Belfast. Sainsbury made a big announcement of investment in Northern Ireland, and two new factories opened in Strabane. The news from Northern Ireland is very heartening—but there is one black spot, in agriculture, which is one of our main employers and one of the main contributors to the economy of the Province.

The problems of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in the meat industry continually concern us, not only in rural areas but throughout Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland depends on its beef industry more than England: 50 per cent. of our beef is exported. That is why it is important for the Government to continue to give priority to resolving the problems facing Northern Ireland's beef industry.

Interestingly, both the Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor—there was a great battle between the two of them—accused each other of not looking to the future. But, as the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington said, one of the most important questions for the future is whether we should have a single currency in Europe. Both the Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor avoided that issue. Both argue and both deliberately avoid the issue.

I do not want to go into the matter in detail today, other than to say that my party reaffirms that it is against the idea of a single currency—or a core currency, as it has been called—because it would restrict our right to increase interest rates, as happened today, or to reduce them according to the circumstances that apply on a particular day in our country. It would also restrict the right of a future Labour Chancellor—the shadow Chancellor is not in his place at the moment—to reduce interest rates.

The right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) mentioned VAT on domestic fuel. My party voted against the Government on 17.5 per cent. VAT on domestic fuel for heating, and rightly so. I am glad to say that our votes won the day and the Government were defeated. If a future Labour Government introduced a proposal to reduce VAT on domestic fuel from 8 to 5 per cent., we would support them. However, the right hon. Gentleman did not point out that, because of the Labour party's policy on Europe, that VAT rate cannot be reduced below 5 per cent. The Opposition are committed to a position in which they will no longer have the freedom to decide whether they want zero VAT—they cannot reduce it below 5 per cent.

The single currency is creating problems in Europe as countries try to comply with the Maastricht criteria. Look at Germany's current attitude to the Eurofighter—it is stalling because it has to reduce public expenditure. The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) referred to the great TGV trains in France. They have had to be abandoned because the French Government, in an attempt to comply with the Maastricht criteria, can no longer invest capital in their railway system. Britain must avoid the problems now faced in Europe.

I want to mention just one other European issue relating to Northern Ireland—the peace and reconciliation money that the European Community has kindly decided to give to Northern Ireland. Who would refuse money? We

[Mr. John D. Taylor]

welcome that £240 million, but we need to examine more carefully how it is invested. I want the money to be spent on schemes and projects which, in 10 years' time, we can look back upon and say, "Look at what that money achieved for the people of Northern Ireland." Instead, money is spent on, for example, teaching the Catholics how to enjoy Scottish dancing, or teaching the Protestants how to enjoy Irish dancing. Money going into such projects is basically going down the drain. In 10 years, there will be nothing for us to look back on and say, "Look what Europe achieved with its £240 million."

The Government may propose lower taxation in next month's Budget; we shall wait and see. The people of Northern Ireland do not want lower taxation simply for electoral purposes—we want it to be related to the state of the economy and the needs of the people in our country. That involves public expenditure. Northern Ireland has reached the bottom line in that respect. Over a period of two months just before the summer recess, I visited 20 primary schools in my constituency. We have two school systems—the Catholic system and the state system. I visited both. I found that every school had budgetary problems. Teachers were being made redundant and services were being reduced, especially those for children with special problems.

The same applies to Northern Ireland's hospitals. In my constituency, the Ards hospital is slowly being closed through lack of funding. There are also problems in the Ulster hospital. We want public expenditure in Northern Ireland to be maintained at a level—that means direct taxation being maintained at a level—that will ensure good services for the people.

We need more public expenditure on the roads between Northern Ireland and Scotland. I know that the Confederation of British Industry in Northern Ireland wants to spend all the money on the roads to Dublin, but it does not represent the business men of Northern Ireland. I am a business man in Northern Ireland and I can tell the House that only 10 per cent. of businesses that employ 10 or more people belong to the CBI. It is more politically oriented than most of the political parties in this House. The business men of Northern Ireland want improvements to the road to Stranraer—the A75 in Scotland, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) knows—and to the A8, in which respect I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) is present. That is the gateway for Northern Ireland—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. Time is up.

7.15 pm

Dr. Keith Hampson (Leeds, North–West): I have a great deal of sympathy with the attitude of my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) and of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) towards the moralising tone in current political debate. I agree that the public do not want politicians to hector and lecture them. It does no service to the public if politicians knock the country and sow an image of self-doubt in people. We are destroying people's self-image.

Of course there are problems—there are ghettos, there is a cycle of deprivation, there are poor families, there are deprived families, there are single families, there are ignorant parents and there are delinquent children. There are bad schools, but to imagine that all schools are full of young villains tearing the place apart and that everything is of the worst is not only wrong but denies the true perspective that we should be bringing to bear. Those are not just long-standing problems in this country; they are problems faced by every modern society in the western world. It is our duty to find practical solutions, not to take the moralising attitude that some people do.

We must live in the real world. Some people and the popular press go on about the horrors of this country; yet people abroad are desperate to come here. Even *The Independent*, a few weeks ago, said in its leader that this country was now "vibrant" and "exciting". In other words, we have put the buzz back in Britain. We have also put life back into the city of Leeds. When I went there 23 years ago it was a mere shadow of what it is today. It is now one of the most exciting and vibrant cities in the land.

I know that this is a nice middle-class judgment, but when I went to Leeds there were only two restaurants in the *Good Food Guide*, both Chinese. Leeds now has Michelin restaurants. The whole of the inner city centre spreads down to the canal south of the tracks. There is a wonderful pedestrian area—*[Interruption.]* Those on the Labour Front Bench are typically doing what we expect of them. If I say that Leeds now has Harvey Nichols, they will laugh—yet I am talking about the symbols of success. Do not they realise that that is what is important?

That success has come about not because of the Labour-controlled council in Leeds, but because of the climate of success created by the Conservative Government over the past decade. In particular, we established an urban development corporation in the city centre. At the time, it was opposed by the Labour council; indeed, it is still opposed by the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett). That UDC has galvanised the whole city of Leeds. That is why the canal is alive and vibrant when previously it was derelict. That is why the Royal Armoury is there. That is why there are bars, bistros and restaurants. That is why people are in the city centre at night.

None of that has anything to do with Leeds city council. What it is doing now is simply on the back of what we have shown is possible. For example, we have shown that it is possible to have a partnership between the public and private sectors. All credit to the Labour party in Leeds for having learnt that lesson. We did up one side of Boar lane. That was so dramatically successful—it has the best hotel in Leeds—that the Labour council is now doing up the other side. Government policies have shown what a catalyst such things can be. It was not a council-led initiative.

What does the Labour council do, apart from setting up 205 committees and sub-committees, on which it has spent a great deal of money? It has real sickness benefit problems, costing council tax payers millions of pounds. The council needs to get a grip on that. Yet it says that it has no money.

Let us consider nursery provision. In my constituency one in 10 children gets the chance of a nursery place out of Leeds city council. In the Labour wards, however, it is down to almost every single child or children having a one in two chance of obtaining nursery education. Such is the disgraceful disparity of provision by Leeds city Labour-dominated council.

It does not help when the leader of the Labour party also knocks Britain. We have gone from the age of excitement and enthusiasm of the 1980s into the knocking nineties. In his contribution on the Queen's Speech, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) cited two broad, loose, flabby, generalised statistics. He said:

"We have the lowest proportion of 16 to 18 year-olds in full-time education . . . of virtually"—

thankfully he used the word "virtually"—

"all our main competitors."

Of course, we have a much lower ranking than the Germans. That has always been true, but he did not say that when we took office in 1979 just 48 per cent. of 16 to 18-year-olds were staying on in education. That figure now stands at just over 73 per cent. I accept that that is still not good enough, but my God—what a rate of improvement we have seen. It has gone up from 64 per cent. in the past nine years.

We inherited an appalling state of affairs. There is a long lead time in education, but we have started to get on top of the problem. The right hon. Gentleman then said:

"We are 42nd in the education league."—[*Official Report*, 23 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 19.]

What on earth does that mean? I found out where that figure came from. I discovered that according to the International Institute for Management Development we are 42nd out of 46 countries. I asked the Library about the methodology used to create the statistic cited by the Leader of the Opposition. The figure was based on a survey conducted among 3,000 business men from 46 countries, who were asked what they thought about their countries' education system in terms of how it helped their economy. Obviously, business men in the Singapore regime put their country at the top, so top of the league table in which we are 42nd is Singapore. Is it surprising that the same type of survey has Chile ranked 34th in 1994, 25th in 1995 and, this year, suddenly ranked seventh? There is no sound statistical methodology behind that load of rubbish.

The Leader of the Opposition is speaking tosh when he runs down the country by saying that we are 42nd in the education league. That comment is totally and utterly meaningless, but it does a hell of a lot of damage, because that is what other people abroad believe. That is fed through the press and people think that our children are not getting the same opportunities as others. That is ridiculous: they are getting those chances.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) said that Labour wanted to created a wind of change through the education world, but we have done that, and for one particular reason—we have managed to prise away so much of the decision taking from local councils. As I repeatedly ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, why do we call our schools "state" schools when in fact they are "council" schools? The councils decide what education methods should be used and determine whether they want grammar schools or comprehensive schools. It was, of course, a Labour Government who tried to force comprehensives on every council, but councils control schools and it is they who determine how much money those schools receive relative to the council's overall budget.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Hillhead): Rubbish.

Dr. Hampson: I will point out two little—

Mr. Graham *rose*—

Dr. Hampson: I cannot give way because time is running out.

We talk about whittling away the powers of councils, but let me remind hon. Members of two little facts. Until 1957, education was awarded a specific grant, 60 per cent. of which came from central Government. We then introduced a block grant. As a result of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980 we allowed for virement between actual services. We abolished Whitehall's detailed control of housing projects and education. In many ways councils have more powers and they determine how much money goes to their schools.

Those councils also perpetuated the worst dogmas in education. At last we have an instrument, in the guise of the Office for Standards in Education, which is now trying to sort out the problem. Through research it is highlighting the weakness of the nostrums on which primary education in particular was run. Unless we get the base right it does not matter what we say, and quite rightly, about the needs of the new intellectual revolution of information technology. Unless the base education is correct, one will not be able to produce the people of the calibre necessary to meet the requirements of modern-day industry. Frankly, we know how badly we are performing at the primary level. Ofsted also has evidence that shows that 40 per cent. of secondary schools are not performing as well as they should.

Education is at the heart of the modern economy and we will be competitive only if we get our education system right. But what have we got? We have Blair's boys, professors at the Institute of Education in London, a woman in Durham and one or two other members of reputable institutions of higher education who are trying to knock Ofsted. They are gunning for Chris Woodhead, the chief inspector of schools. The right hon. Member for Sedgefield owes it to everyone to say that if he becomes Prime Minister he will keep the chief inspector of schools as a symbol of common sense.

It is not just Mr. Woodhead who talks about the problems. The 1992 Government report also referred to them. When Lord Callaghan was Prime Minister, he said exactly the same in his speech at Ruskin college, when he said that the education system had been running on progressive methods for far too long and that we had to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

7.25 pm

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): Against all expectations, I have quite enjoyed the debate so far. I was particularly amused by the speech of the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Dr. Hampson), who told the House that the Tory Government were at last beginning to come to terms with the problems affecting Leeds, after 17 years

[Mr. John McAllion]

in office. I do not know how long they need to be in office before actually doing something about the problems faced by the people in Leeds.

I was also very impressed by the speech of the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor). It started off badly with his glowing testimony to the economic policies pursued by the Tory Government. He then went on to discuss the European Union. I was not quite sure what to make of his remarks as I am a Catholic who already enjoys Scottish dancing. I do not know whether that hinders or helps the case that he was trying to make.

I was greatly reassured, however, that the right hon. Gentleman was at least prepared to say that the Ulster Unionists will back Labour when we table an amendment to reduce the level of VAT on domestic fuel to 5 per cent. What really amused me was the sight of so many Conservative Members nodding in agreement with him. It seems that they think that Labour is terrible because it will merely reduce the rate to 5 per cent. They all want to put it up to 17.5 per cent., but there they were nodding in agreement and attacking Labour for merely trying to reduce the rate to 5 per cent. That is sheer hypocrisy on the part of those who hold views like that.

A number of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have paid compliments to the Chancellor. I hope that Conservative Members will understand if I choose to criticise his speech, in particular the inconsistency of one of the points that he made when he was in full flow. He claimed that the record of Labour in government was such that we could not possibly match the high levels of public spending which the Government have sustained, particularly on the national health service. In his very next breath, however, he argued that spending more money than the Tories was in Labour's blood and that we could not possibly match the low levels of public investment achieved by the Tory Government. Tory Members must get the line right—it must be one or the other; it cannot be both. If the Chancellor and his hon. Friends continue to make such inconsistent and rubbish arguments in the run-up to the election, they can only expect that the outcome will be as everyone else expects: they will be kicked out of office by the people with short shrift.

The Chancellor argued that the success of what he described as the Government's firm financial policies rested upon the fact that tax revenues were rising faster than public spending and that, as a result, public borrowing was falling. Technically, he is absolutely right, but let us look behind those technicalities at the real significance of that fact. The key point of the scenario is that public spending is being cut at such a rate that tax revenues, even with a 1p cut in the basic rate of income tax, inevitably rise faster than public spending. What does that mean for the economy and the people? Let me cite the example of local government in Scotland, which this year suffered a cut of £395 million in central Government grant that would otherwise sustain the level of public services in our country.

This summer, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) and I visited a number of social work facilities around Dundee. We went to a number of family and child centres run by the local Labour council. Unlike private nurseries, those centres are genuinely committed to transforming the life chances of the children and parents who use those centres.

I met one young single mother with two children who lived on the 11th floor of a 12-storey block in Dundee. She said that she was going out of her mind because she was trapped in isolation with her children. Then she heard about the family and child centres and, as a result of getting a place in one of those council centres, not only were her children given a flying start which will stand them in good stead for the rest of their school careers, but she was given the space and encouragement at the centre to take classes at the local college, where she obtained an HND qualification and greatly improved her chances of finding employment locally.

If the only alternative available to that woman and her family had been private nurseries funded by the nursery voucher scheme, there would have been no possibility whatever of her children getting in or of her getting the kind of life opportunity that was given to her. Public spending by councils sustained a network of those centres across Dundee, thus making it possible for children to get places, but because of Government cuts in public spending this year, one of those family and child centres in Dundee has shut. If there are further public spending cuts, which have been consistently promoted by Conservative Members, more of those family and child centres will close and fewer opportunities will be available for people to get off welfare and back into work to begin the economic recovery.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who warned about the shift in the balance from income tax towards indirect taxation. I welcomed the commitment by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) to reduce VAT on domestic fuel. At school I was taught about the political unrest in Britain at the end of the Napoleonic wars. We learned about the Spa Field riots, the Manchester blanketeers, the Cato street conspiracy and the radical uprising in Scotland in 1920. It was explained to us that the cause of that working-class unrest was the decision by the then Tory Government to abolish income tax for the rich at the end of the Napoleonic wars and pay for it by increasing indirect taxation, which fell most heavily on the poor.

That lesson has always stayed with me and in this debate it has made me understand that some things never change. Nearly 200 years on, a Tory Government are still increasing indirect taxes on the poor. We heard in the debate that VAT is to be extended to water, children's clothes, books and many other items and that Conservatives still want to slash tax liabilities. The Chancellor said that he would abolish capital gains tax and inheritance tax and that he would introduce tax cuts for the rich. He mocked the idea of a top rate tax for the rich. Tory Governments never change. Throughout the centuries the same old Tories have been attacking the poor to help pay for the rich.

This is United Nations international year for the eradication of poverty and it has been marked by the establishment of an all-party group on poverty which intends to raise poverty issues. However, it has yet to be meaningfully recognised by the Government. It was not recognised in the Gracious Speech nor in any of the speeches by Conservative Members. Of course the Gracious Speech has a vision about the kind of economy and society that the Government and the Tory party are trying to create. It will have free and open markets, deregulated markets, as Conservatives always argue. It

will be a market in which those who own and control capital can move it anywhere in the world and in which they will be free to invest where they will get the biggest profit. They will be able to produce goods where labour costs are cheap and where the social costs are at an absolute minimum. In that market the only loyalty of the rich and the powerful will be to self-interest and enrichment.

The greed and avarice of the rich and powerful are dressed up as enterprise and initiative and in that society the poor are discounted and discarded. They do not count or even figure in the speeches or in the thinking of Conservative Members. It is hardly what could be described as high moral ground. It is the kind of economy and society that Conservatives have been shaping for the past 17 years.

I take issue with two of the main pillars on which this selfish Tory society rests. The first is to be found in the Gracious Speech where it states that the role of the Government is to promote what they call flexible and efficient labour markets in Britain. What does that really mean? First, it means that Britain would be the only country in the European Union not to endorse and accept the social chapter and the social protocol. The Government will deliberately place Britain outside mainstream civilised opinion in Europe and British workers will have fewer rights and poorer conditions of work than workers elsewhere in the EU. What kind of vision is that to put to the people?

The Government have an undying opposition to a national minimum wage or, to put it another way, they lend their unequivocal support to making sure that British workers are paid poverty wages in the European markets. The job seekers allowance and the hounding of the unemployed and the slashing of their entitlement to benefit forces people into jobs at £1.50 or £2 an hour. That kind of approach, the legal shackling of trade unions, the rejection of social partnership and decent social standards in the workplace, the use of low pay and mass unemployment to impoverish—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's 10 minutes are up.

7.35 pm

Mr. David Amess (Basildon): I cannot say that it is a great honour to follow the speech by the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion), and I say that as a fellow Catholic. His speech shows how Catholics can differ. There were two splendid speeches from the Opposition parties, one by the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor), the Ulster Unionist spokesman, and the other by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). If such speeches continue to be made, we shall soon make up the three Conservative Members we have lost. I entirely agree with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West (Dr. Hampson).

This is the last time that I shall contribute to the debate on the Loyal Address as the Member for Basildon, a constituency that I have been proud to represent since 1983. I was the first and I shall be the last Member for that constituency. Boundary changes have meant a 68 per cent. change in the character of the constituency and it has altered in such a way that I would have had 1,000 more votes than I obtained in 1992.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) spoke about Christianity. The Labour party in Basildon could never defeat me, so it decided to attack my children. My wife and I believe in single-sex education and chose an all-boys Catholic school eight miles from where we live and outside the constituency. There are no single-sex schools in Basildon.

The campaign against that action by my wife and myself was led by a former Labour Member, Arthur Latham. It was joined by the Liberal party in Havering and supported by the Liberal party and the Labour party in Basildon. That is a disgrace, and as a result, my wife did not want me to stand anywhere in the next general election. Those actions by members of the Labour party and the Liberal party were not Christian in any sense.

I am about the same age as the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown). I was elected on the same day as the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal party. I believe today in the things that I believed in when I was elected in 1983, but the leaders of the two main Opposition parties have completely changed their views, ostensibly for public consumption. The Leader of the Opposition has moved to the right—Opposition Members squirm—and the leader of the Liberal party has ostensibly moved to the left. In their amendment to the Loyal Address, the official Opposition refer to 1979, so presumably that means that Opposition Members can remember 1979. So can Conservative Members, and Britain is far better than it ever was when mismanaged by the Liberal and Labour parties between 1974 and 1979.

It should not be forgotten that the Labour party has never won elections for 22 years and has never won elections with a majority for 30 years. In the amendment, it has the cheek—I say this in the light of the speech of the hon. Member for Dundee, East—to say that it would like to build a cohesive society and to heal social divisions.

What claptrap do we get from the Opposition? The shadow Home Secretary suggests that there should be a curfew for children at night. What a stupid idea. How on earth could such a curfew be enforced? Yesterday, the shadow education spokesman said that he wanted a legal contract that could be enforced through the courts between parents, children and schools. Those are the sort of ridiculous policies that the Labour party comes up with.

I wish to refer to the economy's effects on my constituency. In 1983, the caring Labour party decided to erect above the town hall a huge banner showing the number of people out of work. The caring Labour party wanted every unemployed person to vote Labour. I am pleased to say that electors in Basildon were not fooled in 1983, in 1987 or in 1992. As long as unemployment continued to go up, the Labour party kept the banner up.

Suddenly, the sign disappeared. When I asked the Labour chief executive where it had gone, he wrote to me to say that the screws were rusty. What a coincidence that, once the arrow started to go down, the screws became rusty. That is how much the Labour party cares about unemployed people.

What policies did we hear in the stupid speech of the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East? What suggestions did he make on employment? There is realism on the Conservative Benches. We can never return to full

[Mr. David Amess]

employment. Every day, every week and every month, new technology destroys jobs. It is no good misleading people on the issue and turning it into a political football.

Since the 1992 election, unemployment in my constituency of Basildon has fallen by 2,000. That is a lot of people back into work and I congratulate the Government on that. Obviously, there has been great disquiet about the economic downturn's effects on people's lives. Conservative Members fully recognise those, but no matter which business or local enterprise I speak to, all of them tell me that the economy is far better. They have never been so busy. That is not to say that they are not still angry about some of the things that have happened.

Increasingly, we see on the Opposition Benches a mood of triumphalism. That arrogance came through during the Labour party conference. When I made a speech in 1987, hon. Members used to wave at me and say, "Goodbye." When I stood up in 1992, they used to stand up and wave goodbye. I do not know who runs the Labour party these days—is it old Labour, new Labour or simply the people who were elected in 1992?

Baroness Thatcher transformed Britain for the best. There can be no doubt about it. The fact that the Opposition have changed their views on everything, it seems, is tantamount to agreeing with that. They could never ever be elected on their socialist principles. They are trying to hoodwink the general public and I hope that, when we have the general election campaign and the Opposition try to run the story, "Time for a change," the British people will ask, "Time for a change to what?" It is time for a change from dreadful speeches such as that by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman during today's debate. I hope that the British people will decide to reject the Opposition and re-elect the Conservative Government.

7.44 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I suppose that I should start by wishing the hon. Member for Basildon (Mr. Amess) a fond farewell. His wife's proposal that he should not stand for any seat in the coming election would command much cross-party support in the House. He also misinterpreted the excellent speech of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who warned politicians of the dangers of trying to corner the market in religion.

In recent weeks, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and their spin doctors have been guilty of just that. It is foolish because, first, as the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup said, cardinals, archbishops and even moderators have the right and entitlement to criticise politicians. Secondly, we live in a multicultural society. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in our society might feel irritated that Christianity is viewed as the only religion according to some politicians.

Thirdly, real Christians have a tendency to bite back. The Conservative party south of the border has been embarrassed by the comments of the Catholic bishops. The Labour party north of the border has reacted hysterically to criticisms from Scotland's cardinal. Real Christians are entitled to criticise politicians. When they invite that criticism, politicians leave themselves open and vulnerable. Fourthly, the tenet of Christianity, "By your deeds you are known," is applicable in this case. After all, we are conducting an economic debate on the Queen's Speech and, if morality is to surface anywhere in politics, it should do so at the heart of politics: the economy.

I listened to an exchange between the two Front-Bench spokesmen that did not have much in it of Christian support for the dispossessed, the poor, the marginalised and the excluded in society. It sounded much more like a Dutch auction on personal taxation, so until the Labour and Conservative parties can have a conference season that does not send pensioners away empty-handed from Blackpool, or allow fat cats to be secure in Bournemouth, and until they can match their words with actions, they should heed carefully the words of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup and ca'canny about bringing religion into politics.

I do congratulate the shadow Chancellor, however, on his proposal to reduce VAT on fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent. I welcome his conversion to that cause, particularly because, in the debate on the Finance Bill last year, I proposed exactly that: to reduce VAT on fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent. The amendment was defeated by 283 votes to seven. Seven votes is quite a large total compared with many of the votes that the Scottish National party commands in the House. The Labour party not only abstained on that vote, but the hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling), no fewer than four times in a single contribution, described my proposal as a "cynical ploy".

With all this religious fervour creeping through the Labour Front-Bench team, perhaps I should take the attitude of, "Better one sinner that repenteth." None the less, I should like to know why it was a "cynical ploy" for me to advocate that VAT reduction last year, while this year it is represented as a political masterstroke by the shadow Chancellor. None the fewer, both the SNP and the Labour party seem to be making that proposal in the run-up to the coming election.

I want to direct a remark to the Treasury Front-Bench team in relation to a particular VAT issue. When I was practising as an economist, one of the wisest pieces of advice I received was to remember that, to most people, anything over a million was just a big number. The point that I should like to make involves some detail and has many millions in it, but I hope that Treasury Ministers will take special note of it, because it involves the Government in legal action that could run to many hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of pounds.

Many hon. Members have been contacted by constituents concerned about the impact of the Government's proposed rule changes on reclaiming overpaid VAT. As the position now stands, taxpayers can reclaim for a period of three years, or Customs and Excise can make back-assessments for six years. The policy was introduced, by ministerial diktat, by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) when he was Paymaster General—before he disappeared, earlier this year, into the anti-European never-never land of the Back Benches. We have never debated or passed that policy in the House, but it has been implemented as if it were policy.

I have a copy of the legal opinion of three of Europe's leading tax lawyers, which I shall arrange to be placed in the Library. Their opinion is that the Government's VAT proposals are illegal because they discriminate between

taxpayers, and between taxpayers and the Exchequer. Many tens of thousands of companies across the United Kingdom are involved. The tax position is now retrospective, and it seems to breach the fundamentals of European law.

The Government are facing a series of defeats on VAT in the courts. The first defeat happened last week in the European Court. When I raised the issue at business questions last week and asked whether the Leader of the House was slightly worried by that court reversal, he looked at me and said that he had been informed that the sum involved was only £200 million. What a great relief. Only £200 million was involved last week!

I am informed, however, that a succession of cases can be taken to the courts, because the Government's position is fundamentally unsound. I advise Treasury Ministers to look for a reasonable compromise with representatives of industry, to review the policy and to put it on a firmer footing. Unless they do so, the issue will blow up in Ministers' faces. Perhaps the Chancellor reckons that he will not be Chancellor when it blows up in the face of the Exchequer. None the less, the wise policy would be to do something about the problem now, and I commend to Treasury Ministers the cross-party early-day motion in today's Order Paper.

I know that the Chancellor hates tables. He makes speeches in economic debates that disregard economic statistics. He says that we should not pay too much attention to tables, because they can prove anything. It is a fact, however, that if one examines economic growth in the United Kingdom during the Government's time in office, it is slightly less than 2 per cent. per annum, which is lower than the average rate for the rest of the European Union. Moreover, no other country in the EU had the benefit of £120,000 million of North sea oil revenues. It is the most staggering achievement for that windfall endowment of Scottish resources—£24,000 per head for every man, woman and child in Scotland—to be flowing into the Exchequer and yet for the UK growth rate to be lower than the average for all the other countries in Europe, none of which has had the benefit of those resources. The Government do not have anything to be proud of in their economic record of the past 17 years.

Let us consider the performance of some of the other countries in Europe. We heard about the performance of the Northern Irish economy from the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor), although I did not agree with all the points that he made. Let us consider the performance of the southern Irish economy in recent years. Last year, the UK's economic growth rate was 2.4 per cent., whereas the growth rate in Ireland was 8 per cent. A few weeks ago, while examining economic records of the past few years, I asked the House of Commons Library to perform an exercise and estimate—based on economic forecasts from the Treasury and from the Department of Finance in the Republic of Ireland—when Ireland would overtake the United Kingdom in gross domestic product per capita. The answer was that, based on current forecasts, it would happen in 2000.

In 2000, the Republic of Ireland will be more prosperous than the United Kingdom. It is already more prosperous than Wales and Northern Ireland, and by 2000, it will be more prosperous per capita than England and Scotland.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Salmond: I am caught by the 10-minutes rule. I know that the hon. Gentleman—

Sir Teddy Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Salmond: I know that the hon. Gentleman will say that Ireland is more prosperous because of European subsidies.

Sir Teddy Taylor *rose*—

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Gentleman just listen for a moment, and try to contain his anti-European prejudice? Last year, the subsidies amounted to 1 billion punts of cohesion funding, which is about 2 per cent. of Irish GDP. Last year, growth in Ireland was 8 per cent., which was four times greater than the amount of GDP received in cohesion funding. That is not the explanation for the Irish economic miracle. The *Financial Times* has described Ireland as the "tiger economy of Europe".

The Irish economy does not possess great natural resources, but it is making the most of what it has. When I think of Scotland and our natural resources, and when I consider the fact that the Government are making so little of so much of Scottish resources—greatly under-performing compared with the rest of Europe, and with a growth rate that should bring shame to Treasury Ministers—it is a matter for shame, not congratulation.

7.54 pm

Mr. Barry Legg (Milton Keynes, South-West): I begin by dealing with the latter point made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on the Irish Republic. As the Prime Minister has often confirmed to the House, transfer payments to the Irish Republic from the EU amount to 7 per cent. of Irish GDP. For hon. Members to understand the scale of those transfer payments, the United Kingdom would have to receive £35 billion from the EU for it to receive the same percentage of GDP. There would certainly be an effect on the United Kingdom economy if we were to receive an injection of £35 billion. So I think that the hon. Gentleman's attempt to draw a comparison between the Irish Republic and the UK is nonsense.

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Legg: No; I have only 10 minutes.

I had not intended to speak about the single currency in this debate, but today we have heard two excellent contributions on that subject—from my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) and the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). She argued the dangers of a single currency on economic grounds, and her arguments were very soundly based. The issue will not go away. As she rightly

[Mr. Legg]

said, whether Britain joins a single currency will be the most important issue that the next Parliament must decide. Both sides of the House will continue to debate that question, and it cannot possibly go away. She made her arguments on the basis of the economic dangers, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing.

Conservative Members, however, also feel strongly about the constitutional issues surrounding a single currency, which the Prime Minister referred to at the Dispatch Box on 9 June 1995. To adopt a single currency must mean that one accepts that there will be one state. The intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) on the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing was very interesting, because he said that one cannot have a single market without a single currency, and gave the case of the United States as an example.

Those who support the federal vision of Europe, as my right hon. Friend clearly does, cannot have it both ways. Yes, if we had a single currency, we would have a United States of Europe, and there would be one state: it would be unavoidable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing also mentioned the issue of transfer payments, and said that the consequences of a single currency would inevitably require them.

Even in a free market economy, such as the United States, substantial transfer payments take place between states. There would have to be a similar system in Europe to make the European currency area viable. I do not believe that the peoples of Europe form one nation, or that they are close enough to make such payments. In the United Kingdom, people in Surbiton are happy to make transfer payments to people in Huddersfield, for example, because we accept that we are one nation, the United Kingdom.

I do not believe that the people of Europe are so close that people in Surbiton would be happy for substantial transfer payments to be made to people in Essen, Palermo or Athens, and I do not believe that people in those countries would support transfer payments to other countries in the European Union. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing explained, there are great dangers in pressing ahead with the concept of the single currency.

Today we have also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Mr. Amess). He certainly had good news to report from Basildon; and I can report that there is also good news from Milton Keynes. My hon. Friend said that there had been 2,000 new jobs in Basildon since the recession had ended. In Milton Keynes in the past 12 months, we have had 5,000 new jobs. Milton Keynes is middle England. The economy is doing extremely well. It is based on high-technology businesses, and 5,000 new jobs have been created. That shows the success and achievement of the Government's economic policy.

We have a very good economic background, which is delivering a great deal of success for Britain. However, there is much more to do. I do not know whether many hon. Members have seen the Budget submission from the Institute of Directors, which is cogent and well argued.

One of the issues to which the institute refers is public expenditure. If we are to have a really successful and competitive economy in the United Kingdom, we need to cut public expenditure. We need to reduce it because the most competitive economies in the world have a much lower level of public spending than we have. They are much more vibrant, dynamic and enterprising, and they are getting an increasing share of world trade. We must cut expenditure.

The analysis of the economy by the Institute of Directors looks at what has been happening to public expenditure compared with GDP. Most hon. Members know that the Conservative party has the objective of reducing public expenditure as a proportion of GDP. The Prime Minister has given a target of 35 per cent. and at our party conference, the Chancellor confirmed that the objective was to get public expenditure below 40 per cent. of GDP. That is one of our core policies.

The analysis by the Institute of Directors shows how difficult it is to make progress in achieving that key objective. The institute has looked at what has happened to public spending, as a proportion of GDP, over the past four years. It notes that it has fallen from 43.4 per cent. to 42.3 per cent.—there has been a fall of only 1.1 per cent.

Of that 1.1 per cent. fall, 0.8 per cent. has been due to a lower level of capital spending by the state. The cyclical effects on public expenditure have been positive to the tune of 0.9 per cent. Therefore, total public expenditure has hardly fallen, even though we have been trying to achieve the objective of lowering it as a proportion of GDP.

The reason is that so much of the culture of the public sector is still geared to spending ever-increasing sums of money. One has only to take an interest in our national accounts to see that, towards the end of financial years, we still get a higher level of spending than is normal on a month-by-month basis. There are still too many incentives within the system for spending more. The Red Book shows that, although the Government have had the objective of reducing public spending in real terms, public spending comes in at a higher level in real terms year after year.

There must be structural changes within the public sector to get spending down overall. Those structural changes should be directed towards the civil service and towards bureaucracy. We have been pioneers in privatisation, and we need to carry that forward. We need to have plans to privatise the Benefits Agency; we need a lot more imagination in our delivery of social security.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment has plans for pilot schemes to get the private sector involved with helping people to find jobs. One of our objectives should be to privatise much of the social security delivery system. We should be looking to privatise jobcentres, which are among the most depressing public sector organisations. We need to privatise them and to bring the free market in, so that we can help the economy to be more dynamic and help people to depend less on welfare.

There remains a great deal to be done in our next term in office. I have no doubt that we will have policies that will work with the grain and enable us to build on the tremendous economic success that we have seen over the past four years.

8.4 pm

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, West): On 8 October, coincidentally during the Conservative party conference, the Government announced a U-turn. It did not receive

any publicity, because it was on a rather technical matter, involving companies buying their own shares or paying special dividends. The operation of the imputation tax system and its effect on tax-exempt institutions is not something that the average person in the street is particularly interested in.

The story behind the U-turn, however, is an all too familiar one, of Government dithering, denial and delay, followed by a climbdown and belated action. That would be pretty much par for the course, but what marks this case out is that the Government's negligence has cost the hard-pressed taxpayer an estimated £1.5 billion in lost revenue at the very minimum—probably more.

To put the matter another way, that amount is the equivalent of a penny off the basic rate of tax or about the total given out in grants to good causes since the national lottery began. It is money that could have been spent on improving education and the health service.

Basically, we are talking about an abuse of the tax system or, in other words, a tax loophole—something that the Chancellor always denies exists, but which Labour has pointed out consistently. In this case, a range of smart schemes have been drawn up by corporate financiers which have favoured the big pension funds at the expense of other shareholders, cost the taxpayer millions each time, and distorted competition in takeover situations.

The loophole was becoming known by the time the 1995 Finance Bill was passing through the Commons, and it was glaringly apparent well before the drafting of the 1996 Finance Bill. Selective share buy-backs were increasingly used by large companies throughout 1995, and the use of special dividends was commonplace in the water and electricity industries. Special dividends were also used in other situations, such as Lloyds bank's bid for the TSB and, more recently, Granada's takeover of Forte.

What is more, respected financial commentators, such as Lex in the *Financial Times* and Graham Searjeant in *The Times*, pointed out the abuse. On 10 January this year, the *Financial Times* talked about

"the special dividend wheeze and its close cousin the share buyback",

expressing the view that

"no public interest is served by a loophole that involves taxpayers subsidising corporate raiders."

Labour, both here and in the other place, highlighted the abuse. I tabled a number of parliamentary questions on special dividends, and raised the issue on Second Reading of the Finance Bill last year. I even tabled an amendment to the Bill.

The Government's response was to deny the problem. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, in a parliamentary answer to me, said:

"The payment of a special dividend does not involve a tax loophole."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1996; Vol. 270, c. 862.]

The result of that dithering and denial was that the use of share buy-backs and special dividends escalated. Figures from Kleinwort Benson show that quoted companies cut their equity capital by £3 billion from the start of this calendar year to the end of July through selective buy-backs. The cost to the Exchequer of just that is an estimated £750 million, but it could so easily have been avoided by a half-competent Government. So too could the £50 million or so that the Inland Revenue has had to pay out to subsidise Granada's takeover of Forte, not to mention the money paid out in other special dividends.

Exasperatedly, Graham Searjeant of *The Times* expressed the hope during the summer that

"even at this late stage, the Chancellor might be stirred from his supercilious lethargy to take some action in his autumn Budget."

If the Chancellor read that article while he was on the beach, it took him until the week of the Tory party conference to act, and then, typically, he blustered through the climbdown, conveniently forgetting his culpability.

An Inland Revenue press release quoted the Chancellor as saying:

"We have seen recently companies buying their own shares or paying special dividends in such a way that the proceeds end up almost entirely in the hands of those who are entitled to payment of a tax credit. This has costs for the Exchequer, and if action is not taken soon that cost would escalate."

The Chancellor went on:

"we will not hesitate to take any necessary further action should further evidence of abuse appear."

At least he finally admitted that it was an abuse—a tax loophole being exploited by companies and their advisers—and in so doing he directly contradicted his Financial Secretary, who all along had said that it was not a loophole.

Who will take responsibility for losing £1.5 billion of taxpayers' money? The Chancellor? The Financial Secretary? Nobody, it seems, but there again, that is no great surprise. If a financial director of a public company was so incompetent in managing his business's finances, he would be dismissed as soon as his blunder came to light.

The public have a right to know exactly how much of their money has been thrown away as a result of the Government's ineptitude. If the Government dispute my figures, I challenge them to publish their own figure of the cost to the Exchequer of allowing the loophole to remain open for so long. I also challenge them to justify their rather dodgy figures suggesting that the changes that they have now belatedly made will yield only £200 million in 1997-98 and £400 million from 1998-99 onwards.

The Government's failure to act speedily in the face of the growing scandal of share buy-backs and special dividends exposes as a myth Tory claims to economic competence. In almost any other sphere of Government spending, a Department losing £1.5 billion would be headline news. The fact that knowledge of this is confined mostly to the City of London and the Treasury cannot disguise the unpleasant truth that it is the honest British taxpayer who has had to fork out to pay for Ministers' negligence. We need answers to those questions.

8.11 pm

Mr. John Townend (Bridlington): Listening to the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown), I began to believe that I was living in a different country. To hear the right hon. Gentleman, one would think that we had the worst economy in Europe rather than one of the best. It is not I who says that, but the independent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

[Mr. John Townend]

I cannot believe that someone who holds himself out as a future British Chancellor does not read OECD reports. Whether the figures are for unemployment, inflation, investment, economic growth, the balance of payments, industrial production, competitiveness or industrial disputes, they are satisfactory or going the right way. All those figures are improving.

When the right hon. Gentleman tried to rubbish the fact that we are the enterprise centre of Europe, and compared us with Hamburg on investment, I could not believe my ears. German manufacturers are not investing in Germany, because Germany is no longer competitive. Volkswagen builds factories in Czechoslovakia, not in Germany, Mercedes in the United States, and Siemens and BMW in Britain.

In recent months, the Chancellor's success in running the economy has resulted in increasing confidence in the markets, and that is why the pound has been rising. Unfortunately, there is a black spot. Like most of Europe, we are spending, borrowing and taxing too much, but does anyone believe that a Labour Government would spend, borrow or tax less? Of course they would not. They would spend, tax and borrow more. I trust that the Chancellor, who started to deal with the problems in the previous Budget, will continue to deal with them further in this year's Budget. But all Conservative Members agree that we must have a responsible Budget, so reductions in spending should, ideally, be in excess of tax cuts.

I have been making speeches since 1979, but I regret that not much notice has been taken of them. In 1979, public expenditure was 42.5 per cent. of GDP, and last year it was 42.5 per cent., so I hope that the Chancellor will take a little more notice of me this year.

I suggest that we cut spending by £7 billion. I should like the Chancellor to spend £5 billion in reducing taxes and the rest on the PSBR. I wrote an article in the "Parliamentary Review" saying how we could do that, but I cannot give the details in 10 minutes, so I refer hon. Members to my article. I hope that there will be no new taxes and no tax increases in the Budget, but any impartial person must accept that the Chancellor has run the economy well, and that his judgment on interest rates has proven correct. I support his 0.25 per cent. increase today.

It is worth saying that, if we joined a single currency, the Chancellor would not have that flexibility, and I would trust my Chancellor far more than the European bank. However, we must not ignore the fact that, had we not left the ERM thanks to Mr. Soros, or if we had gone back into the ERM in a matter of weeks, as the Opposition demanded, my right hon. and learned Friend would not have been able to present such a glowing report to the House today.

Supporters of the ERM should now accept that they got it wrong. Hon. Members will recall how they used to claim that, if we left the ERM, interest rates would rise, the pound would fall and, as a result, inflation would rise. The exact opposite happened. Within four months, interest rates had fallen by 4 per cent., and for the last four years, inflation has been the lowest in living memory. That has formed the basis of four years' sustained economic growth.

Those countries still in the ERM have had low growth and rising unemployment. Would the Opposition like us to have the same level of unemployment as France? Those countries have had mounting fiscal problems, and their problems have been compounded by their mad rush to meet the convergence criteria for a single currency. France in particular is in a real mess.

The main economic and political issue facing Britain in the next few years is the single currency. I regret that we do not have more open debate on that subject, but that is because the supporters of a single currency will not come out into the open. When the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East was challenged on a single currency today, he did not mention it in his reply. We all know that he is basically in favour of it, and of a federal Europe.

Some of those in favour of a single currency say that, if the euro comes into being, it must be in Britain's interests to join. But they will not get involved in detailed discussions or debates, because they know that, if the British people knew the full facts, they would never agree to support it.

All agree—supporters and opponents of a single currency—that it will be a disaster unless the economies of the various countries which join converge. Eddie George is rightly worried, because the convergence criteria omit one of the most important economic factors—unemployment. Since unemployment in France is 50 per cent. more than in Germany, and that in Spain is almost double that in France, it is clear that there will be no real convergence.

Another factor which is being ignored is the off-balance sheet liabilities—the contingent liabilities of unfunded state pensions—which in Europe are enormous. The unresolved problem is that, even if the economies converge and we have the euro, there is nothing to stop economies diverging in future. That is likely to happen in a federal state. It happens in America, where the rustbelt states have diverged from the sunbelt states, and the east from the west.

If that happens, a country could be in deep trouble. It could not deal with the imbalances by reducing interest rates or flexibility in the exchange rates. The first of the alternatives that have been mentioned is a massive movement of population. We saw that in America, with the movement of workers from the north to the south and from the east to the west. But that would be much more difficult in Europe, because of different cultures and languages and the much smaller land base. I am sure that most countries would not want to have to accept millions of incomers.

That leaves only one other way of dealing with the imbalances—transfers through the federal budget, as happens in America. That would mean that European taxation would have to rise dramatically. More money would go to Brussels, and European expenditure would rise dramatically as more money went to the poorer states. A federal state would become even more deeply embedded; and, like Washington, Brussels would become dominant.

Britain's problem is that its economy is likely to diverge more than the economy of any other country, because we are different in several important ways. We are the only major oil producer in Europe, so a large rise or fall in the oil price would have one effect on Europe and the opposite effect on our economy. That would probably mean, too, that our economic cycle did not coincide with Europe's.

We also have a large floating interest rate housing debt. Most housing debt on the continent—it is a smaller debt—is fixed rate, so major changes in interest rates affect us correspondingly more. We saw the effect of the ERM on negative equity when we were a part of it. More importantly, most of our pension liabilities are fully funded and in the private sector.

Let us consider the so-called benefits of a single currency. Transaction costs are often overstated. Even the EU says that they amount to no more than 0.1 per cent. of GDP. We trade more with the rest of the world, so we would enjoy less of the benefit. Major commodities such as oil and metals are already priced in dollars, anyway.

The next argument is that the single currency is necessary for the single market. Canada and the USA make up the biggest single market in the world. At the Council of Europe recently, I asked a Canadian Member of Parliament whether, now that the Americans and Canadians have a single market, it would be advantageous to introduce a single currency. He said that it might be in economic terms, but that Canadians would never accept it, because they would lose their independence and be incorporated in the United States.

It is also said that a single currency would lead to low inflation. That is a load of rubbish. Any country that runs its economy properly can have low inflation—we proved that when we left the ERM.

It is said that there will be an interest rate premium for countries that stay outside monetary union. There might, in the first instance, but it will swiftly disappear, provided that we run our economy properly as a low-inflation economy based on sound money. Then the interest rate premium might decline, and even turn into a discount.

As for the disadvantages, the costs will be enormous. In the past week, the Retail Consortium has brought out figures showing that conversion will cost £3.5 billion—that does not include the costs to the banks. Every accounting machine, till and computer will have to be changed, and the costs will surely be passed on to the customer. That will be bad for inflation. We all remember how decimalisation was used as an excuse to put up prices.

What is more, we would have to hand over all our gold and hard currency reserves to the central bank—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

8.21 pm

Mr. Brian David Jenkins (South–East Staffordshire): The hon. Member for Bridlington (Mr. Townend) mentioned exchange rates, and said that the pound has been getting stronger lately. He failed to point out that our exchange rate now is about 50 per cent. of what it was when the Government came to power in 1979.

This evening I want to take a look at the Government's claims of long-term prosperity for all. Their record on the economy is perfectly simple: "Don't blame us for anything that goes wrong, but we want the credit for anything that goes right. If there is a recession, it is all the fault of the world economy—we can't do anything about it. But when there's a boom—aren't we doing well?"

So let us take a look at our position in the world economy relative to other nations. Where do we fit in now? It is not where we were in the 1960s, 1970s or the last century that matters; Parliament should be interested in where we are now and where we will be in the next 10 years. Beyond that it gets a little more difficult to predict with any accuracy.

On any measure, we have been losing ground against our major competitors. I do not want to repeat all the statistics that are thrown back and forth, but under the Government's stewardship we have slipped from 13th to 18th in the international prosperity league since 1979.

Since 1992—this shows the costs of the Government's mismanagement—almost 1 million people have signed on as unemployed in the west midlands at least once; and nearly 10 million countrywide have tasted unemployment in that period.

I find it hard to think of 10 million people, but I can tell the House about one young man who spoke to me a couple of weeks ago. He came up to me at the bar and said, "When are you going to get rid of this lot?" He meant the Government of this country. He went on to tell me that he was 27 years old and that since he left school he had had 19 jobs and not left one of them voluntarily. He had been on short-term contracts or schemes throughout.

I admired the young man's tenacity. I am not sure that I would have kept going after job No. 16—I might have given up. Then I began to think about his future. With no skills, he is condemned to a lifetime of working for low wages and obtaining benefits to top up his income. We pay out nearly £3 billion a year to low-wage people.

Every pay rise this young man manages to gain will be taken away from him in benefits. He will be taxed, in effect, not at the much vaunted 40 per cent. "maximum" rate but at 150 per cent., owing to his loss of benefits.

What is the man's future under this Government? Given their track record, it is possible to forecast his future fairly accurately. If he finds a partner, together they will try for social housing. In some parts of the country they will have a better chance of winning the lottery than of finding social housing. They may find a private rented property and get housing benefit. That will lock them into the poverty trap for years to come. They will not be able to buy because, on a short-term contract, they will find it almost impossible to get a mortgage. They will certainly face higher prices as the Conservative Government pile yet more VAT on all goods.

If the couple have a family, they will send their children to the same school they attended—except that their children will be in larger classes than they were, being taught by some of the most overworked and stressed members of the work force. Many of the most experienced teachers will have been forced out to allow the school to meet its budget.

This couple will have no dreams that their children will be better off than they were. They will be the first generation since the second world war not to believe that their children will be better off than they were. Our work force of the future is being given a worse start in life than the work forces of our major industrial competitors.

If these people fall ill, they will have to go to a privately run hospital, where they will be asked if they are first-class or standard-class customers. They will live in a country where more than half the population pay top-up fees via private health schemes. The former workers, their parents, will be struggling along on ever decreasing

[Mr. Brian David Jenkins]

pensions. It is easy, when talking about how brilliantly low interest rates now are, to forget that many of these people put savings by in building societies all their lives and therefore rely heavily on interest rates. Low rates may be good for some; they are certainly bad for others.

All this couple can look forward to is a place in a privately run nursing home, providing they have a house to sell to pay for it.

We end up with a poorly skilled work force, an education system that is failing our children, declining housing conditions, short-term contracts, job insecurity, fear of unemployment and poverty in old age.

Some firms are realising that they need skilled workers, and there are young men and women who want to work and need training. Indeed, many more firms are waking up to this fact. But over the past 17 years a lost generation has arisen. We owe those people the opportunity to acquire skills and increase their human capital, to the benefit of us all. In my area, there is one training centre catering for nearly 300,000 people. It currently has 18 apprentices. Many local colleges have given up engineering training altogether. The whole training infrastructure will have to be rebuilt, and even then it will take three years to produce the end product—the skilled workers.

We are currently 42nd in the world skills league, but is that any wonder after 17 years under a Government who saw Britain's future as being a tourist attraction, heavily reliant on service industries? If we are doing better now, it is because of the efforts of our people and the many small firms that realise that they will have to succeed despite this Government.

We certainly know that we have had the pain, but have we had any gain? The Government have made millions from North sea oil, billions from the sale of our assets and all the extra taxes and they have had 17 years of unbroken opportunity to govern. Have they produced long-term prosperity for all? They have looked after the privileged few at the expense of the majority. If they want to bring the feel-good factor back to Britain, the Chancellor should say to the Prime Minister tomorrow, "Let's climb into your limousine, go to the palace and tell Her Majesty, we tried, we failed and we're off."

8.30 pm

Sir Michael Marshall (Arundel): Twenty-two years ago today I had the opportunity of taking part in the debate on the Loyal Address in the year in which I was elected. As was customary at that time, I spoke about my constituency. In what must now be my last speech on the Loyal Address, I want to return to that theme. I am glad to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) in the Chamber because we have shared many common causes in our part of the world.

I should like to touch on what I see as the balance sheet of how the country's economic progress has affected my constituency over the past two decades. I make no apology for dealing with this in constituency terms because, I venture to suggest to right hon. and hon. Members, many of the problems faced by my constituency and many of its achievements can be mirrored in many constituencies throughout the country.

For example, the decline of traditional manufacturing industry has been addressed in various ways. In my constituency, I am happy to say, we have seen the emergence of an important element of the information technology industry. However, at the same time, we have seen the decline of smaller seaside resorts, as has happened in many places along our national coastline.

I should like to pay tribute to what I see as one of the more enlightened parts of public expenditure and that is the pump priming and beneficial effect of the single regeneration budget as well as the imagination that produces fresh opportunities through millennium proposals.

In our case, that has brought new partnerships of central and local government together with local businesses and individuals which have yielded positive results. In Bognor Regis, the recently opened SRB-funded business centre and the current millennium proposals for a pier, a pavilion and a lighthouse, are all part of a spirit of new enterprise. In Littlehampton, similar partnerships have emerged from SRB proposals.

Currently, I place the highest importance on the submission put forward in September this year, based on a public and private partnership for the dredging of the harbour entrance. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Science and Technology, who is also responsible for the south coast, is keeping an eye on that proposal following his recent visit. It is only right to remind him that Littlehampton is the only major town on the Sussex coast that has not benefited so far from SRB funding.

In Arundel, the town's natural attractions and its growth in recent years as a major cultural centre, have facilitated the continued growth of tourism. All that is positive, but Arundel immediately reminds us of the other side of the balance sheet and some of the problems that we have to overcome. We are facing major infrastructure problems which can be resolved only by action from the Treasury, together with co-ordinated Government activity. Arundel, like many other places, desperately needs a by-pass—in our case, as one of the last links in the east-west chain. However, the freezing of the present project after a decade of planning and agreement in principle within the national road building programme, threatens the local economy and the local environment.

I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads for visiting Arundel during the summer recess and seeing the situation at first hand. He will be aware of the growing scale of the problem. I believe that the traffic congestion will become appalling because major work will have to be undertaken soon to meet new EU regulations on axle loads, which will affect the railway bridge at Arundel.

That problem has to be seen as one of the effects of economic stringency in the search for a more stable economy during the lifetime of this Parliament. Now that the signs of that stability are increasingly apparent, we look for imagination and, dare I say it, a sense of urgency, to protect and develop our quality of life.

Similar objectives apply on house building. I must raise my voice against the constant pressure for the infilling of the few remaining rural and green belt areas. For example, there is the situation involving the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the former horticultural research institute in Littlehampton. Horticulture remains one of our most important industries. We have the largest glasshouse development in the country along the south coast between Chichester and Worthing. The closure of that institute was a major blow to our local economy.

We now have to guard against the immediate clash of policy and objectives between two Government Departments. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is anxious to protect and preserve farming land such as that on which the institute was based. However, it is required by the Treasury to achieve the maximum sale price on disposal. That means that there is a temptation to sell to those who wish to maximise building for both domestic and industrial use. All that is happening at the same time as MAFF is putting forward its latest consultation initiative on the south downs as an environmentally sensitive area on which the land in question borders. Those are just some of the overall problems and achievements which I urge Ministers to recognise.

Pensioners are a significant group in my constituency and make up one third of my electorate. I have joined that group recently and so have pledged myself to their interests with renewed vigour. I urged a better deal for pensioners in my maiden speech 22 years ago and I have been glad to see progress in the help provided for the most vulnerable as well as the general increase of the value of the state pension above the rate of inflation. That is in sharp contrast to the position in the last days of the Labour Government when pensioners' savings were being halved every two years.

There is still much to do. One bugbear of mine has been the historic growth of ad hoc allowances such as the Christmas bonus, the over-80s supplement and other additions which have quickly become out of date. I urge my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor to look in his Budget at tax and benefit reform for pensioners. I believe that the raising of the capital disallowance should be built on as part of a reform of capital taxation. Above all, I look for continued progress in targeting those most in need to replace the costly and inefficient aspects of universal provision.

I cannot end without a word about the wider world as it relates to my constituents. That means the view that they take about Britain's place in Europe and proposals for a common currency. I mentioned earlier the growth in our part of the world of high technology concerns which support the information technology and aerospace industries. I have found that the interests of those small and medium-sized businesses have provided a valuable input to my work in the House on committees such as the parliamentary information technology committee and the parliamentary space committee. In my part of the world, some larger companies such as Matra Marconi are blazing the trail well ahead of the political process in making Franco-British co-operation a success story within the wider context of the European Space Agency, which has enabled Britain to remain competitive with the United States and Russia.

Looking further afield, we can reflect on the new strength and benefit which we derive from the Government's success in attracting inward capital. In our case, there is the Malaysian ownership of Lec Refrigeration. That is a classic case of a company that has established its base in the United Kingdom as the ideal centre from which to develop its Europewide business.

Although I am sceptical about the economic distortion implicit in the early introduction of a common currency, and believe that the European Union's enlargement to include countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic is a more important political priority, my constituents well understand the major shift in our trading patterns. For example, they reflect on the fact that Britain now exports more to Germany than to the United States and Japan combined and they are rightly critical of those in our political system who would put our involvement and influence in the EU at risk.

With that final endorsement of the Government's policy—as I believe that they have got the balance right—I take the opportunity to extend my best wishes to those who will follow me and to those who will remain in the House, upon whom will remain the continuing and heavy responsibility to steer the British economy in an increasingly challenging and difficult world.

8.40 pm

Mr. Thomas Graham (Renfrew, West and Inverclyde): It is a pleasure to speak in tonight's debate. Last year, as every year previously, I read out a wee poem to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am sure that he is used to my poems, although they have never seemed to make much sense to him.

Recently, on my way to my surgery on a wild and wintry morning in Scotland—the Minister should listen, although I do not think that she will like my story—I was driving along a country road in my constituency when I saw a man walking and decided to stop. When I reached him, I realised that I knew him, so I asked him how he was getting on. "Not so good, Tom," he said, "I am unemployed." He was a builder and a bricklayer and he could not get a job. As we were talking, he told me that another man whom I knew was not very well. "What is the matter with him?" I asked. "He is suffering from serious depression," he said, "He is a carpenter and he cannot get a job." That is a true story. Many people in my constituency want to work. They want the right to a wage and they are suffering from depression created by the Government.

I have here a report on the construction industry which was sent to most hon. Members. The preface is by Martin Laing CBE, chairman of John Laing Construction Ltd. and chairman of the Construction Industry Employers Council. He is not known to be a Labour supporter, but the report refers to the state of the construction industry and we should bear it in mind that we are debating the economy.

The report states:

"The very size of the British construction industry means that when it is in recession, as it is at present, then confidence in the wider economy is also undermined. Construction emerged from recession late—in 1994—and after just one year of modest growth, it fell back into recession in 1995 where it has remained since".

That does not auger well for the unemployed men and women in my constituency who seek work in the construction industry.

The report also tells us how many people work in the construction industry—an enormous number—yet in the Queen's Speech, the Government provided no hope for the building workers and made no provision for them. Earlier today, when I asked the Chancellor about the broken-down schools and the potholes in the roads, he said that he was not prepared to spend any more on public sector borrowing. What does that mean? He is condemning the country to being in a state of disrepair, ill equipped for the next century.

[Mr. Thomas Graham]

The Government have lived on the proceeds of privatisation of oil, gas and much more. They have sold their silver. They have an antiques fair every week selling this and that. Do they put anything back into the nation? No, they make their rich friends richer while the poor get poorer. Unemployment is deep seated. Some 2 million people are unemployed.

The Government continually refer back to the Labour Government in 1979. That is fine. If they continue to do that, their message will be lost. If we fast forward, by the next century I shall talk about that Labour Government and say that, in those days, unemployment was under 1 million and most of my constituents were in work; they could afford holidays, pay their rent and enjoy living. Now they do not enjoy living, because the factories are closed—they have been left empty for so long. However, I am delighted that, last week, a company invested some money in my constituency.

Car boot sales are booming. I joked about the Minister who sat on the green Conservative Benches and used to say to the unemployed, "On your bike." The car boot sales are full of bikes. They are the bikes that went to empty factories. The people of Scotland—and of some parts of England—travelled about on their bikes, but they could not find employment.

Young folk in my constituency work for buttons. The low wage economy is shocking. At Glasgow airport—a booming airport—I spoke to a man whom I knew. When I asked, "What are you doing these days?" he said that he was a cleaner. He was working 12 hours a day for £3.06 an hour. He received no payment for anti-social hours. Does anyone in the Minister's family work for £3.06 an hour for a 12-hour day? I do not think that any Minister's family works for such a pittance.

I have two sons who are both computer buffs. One is an honours graduate who is unemployed. He is into the Internet and the information highway. Both my sons are very computer minded. It is unbelievable that they are unemployed in this day and age. They have applied for hundreds of jobs. They have been to interviews and just missed jobs.

What a state we are in. The Government are talking about the possibility of dropping income tax to 20p in the pound. That is absolutely ludicrous, given that that represents a golden opportunity to invest money in education and ensure that every man and woman is capable of accessing the information highway.

It is mind-boggling, as I am sure the Minister has seen. I have seen my son asking questions and getting answers from America within minutes. He asked questions about dyslexia and the woman who replied was a professor in America who said that she had conducted a study. My son has the power of information and education. It is the power to progress. It is mind-boggling that the Government have not sat down and made a plan to provide access to that information for every school, workplace, library and hospital—the Internet also covers medical matters. The Internet is a highway of information and we are a long way behind. The Minister would have people counting on an abacus.

I am not really computer minded, but I watch my sons. My sons have a bit of backing from their father, but many people in my constituency can hardly afford a hot dinner. Because of Government policy, they cannot afford to pay their rent or their electricity bills. VAT on fuel punishes my constituents, some of whom would do well if they had access to information and education to help them to get a job.

Graduates are unemployed when they could be training and educating our young people. Boys such as my sons could be educating the nation in information technology. We should not squander that opportunity. It is unbelievable that, after 17 years, the Government struggle to put up an argument for why they are in power. After 17 years, they will not take the right step and have a general election.

I see that I have only one minute left to speak, but I shall be able to complete my remarks. I heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer knock Scotland like hell. That is because the people of Scotland will have a Scottish Parliament. They will make such a success of that Parliament that it will blaze a trail for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow.

The young people of Scotland have great talents. The same is to be said of Scottish council employees and civil servants. There is great talent also in the private sector. Scottish politicians of all parties will make an incredible success of a Scottish Government and Parliament that are based in Edinburgh. Take my word for it. We shall blaze a trail and we shall be on the highway of power, information and technology. We shall have well-educated young folk.

8.50 pm

Mr. Bob Dunn (Dartford): I am slightly disappointed because I was hoping that some Labour Back Benchers would take the opportunity to endorse Labour's proposals for a new windfall tax. There has been no endorsement of that policy by Labour Members because they have now realised that a windfall tax on private utilities would be borne by the consumer; in other words, to pay for the tax, companies would be forced either to reduce investment or to charge higher prices. That would be new Labour, higher bills. I gather that the equivalent of a £3 billion increase in windfall tax on the utilities would be a 20 per cent. increase in value added tax.

I am prepared to predict that, about 10 years from now, there will be very few current Members who will be prepared to admit that they were at any time Europhiles. The Maastricht treaty of the European Union is nothing less than a detailed programme and timetable for economic, monetary and, therefore, political union.

Behind monetary union stands an unelected European central bank, which would require and have complete control of the foreign exchange reserves of each European Union member state. It would take away the right of individual member states to determine the level of short-term interest rates, exchange rates, money supply and the extent of public expenditure. As a bank, it would decide the level of taxation, a right which is now exercised by our Government and by us as democratically elected Members.

A European central bank working with the European Commission would secure the total and absolute right to exercise those powers throughout the European Union. It would be able to take punitive action against individual nation states that could not or would not conform. Such a bank, with the Commission, would become the most powerful economic and political institution ever known.

The attempt to ensure that identical economies could be established in each of the very different nation states throughout Europe is both dangerous and unrealistic. It is dangerous because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) said, it would create tensions within individual states, tensions that would erupt into social and economic chaos.

We have only to look at the damage that is being done to France, where every effort to force the country into qualifying for the criteria for monetary union results in public disorder, strikes, disobedience and anarchy. There is a lack of realism, because it will take years to bring the economies of Portugal, Greece and Spain, for example, into line with those of the more advanced nations such as Britain, France and Germany.

Everyone in the House knows that Britain trades across the world. It always has and it always will. Britain is in deficit with every European Union country, with the exception of Italy. Our profitable trade is with the rest of the world. We benefit from massive inward investment from across the globe because of our refusal to impose the social chapter.

Labour is determined to end the Prime Minister's opt-out and to introduce the social chapter. I believe that that would bring back the nightmare of pre-1979 industrial anarchy. It is no secret that Germany, especially, resents the opt-out that has been won by the Prime Minister. That is because the Germans are losing investment and jobs to Britain.

Germany maintains that that gives Britain an unfair advantage and wishes to eliminate it through the imposition of the social chapter. Germany would do so by the introduction of qualified majority voting, a move supported by Labour that would probably result in all reforms introduced since 1979 being eliminated. That, combined with the actions of the European Court of Justice, would see the enforcement of uniform legislation throughout Europe. Our Parliament could do nothing about that. Once protections are swept away never to return, it is all over for those of us who cherish parliamentary democracy and accountability.

There are two significant areas of incompatibility between us and the rest of Europe, the first being pensions and the second interest rates. In the United Kingdom, the state retirement pension is paid for by those currently in work through tax payments and national insurance contributions. All private pensions are funded. It is a system through which individuals have saved money in an earmarked personal fund.

That is not true of the continent, where in Germany, France and Italy, for example, pensions are largely funded by the state: thus a time bomb is being created in Europe where an increasing number of pensioners rely on a decreasing number of workers to provide pensions for those beyond statutory retirement age. Given the increased population of retired people, European countries will reach a point where they are unable to pay for pensions and social benefits unless they tax or raise interest rates to levels that we would consider to be unacceptable and penal.

If we joined a single currency and entered the European monetary union, we would no longer have control over tax and interest rates. We would see our private pension funds being used to subsidise the rest of Europe.

The vast majority of personal borrowing in the United Kingdom is for the purchase of housing, and 90 per cent. of that is entered into at variable interest rates. Home ownership is a markedly British phenomenon. In the rest of Europe, there is little home ownership, and that which exists is on low fixed interest rates. It is clear that any rise in interest rates, for the reasons which I have given, would adversely affect British home owners more severely than their numerically fewer European counterparts.

I am opposed to a single currency and to a federal state of Europe. The Opposition parties hold a different view, with the exception of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who made an intelligent and courageous speech.

The answer to the Labour party's commitment to Europe is simple. In *The Sunday Times* on 9 August 1992, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) said:

"Labour has converted to Europe because Europe has converted to socialism."

That is the reason for the commitment.

I could talk for much longer on my favourite subject of education. There are education black spots in this country, but we must remember where they are and who created them—the Labour party. Labour has condemned all our education reforms. It hates our grammar schools, the city technology colleges, parental choice, the private system and Church schools—but then it always has. Despite the Opposition's best endeavours to cover up that fact, the public are rumbling them. If I were an Opposition Member, I would not be counting my votes before they were cast. There is still a long way to go and the people are ready and willing to back us, because we are backing the people against socialism, against socialism, against socialism.

8.58 pm

Mr. Stephen Timms (Newham, North–East): There is a sense of unreality about today's debate. On the one hand, we have the Chancellor's sunny claims about the wonderful state of the economy and our being the enterprise centre of Europe; and there are statistics that can be called upon to support that version of reality. On the other hand, however, there is the growing fear that what we have today is just another pre-election boom engineered, like Lord Lawson's, for electoral purposes, only to lead to massive economic problems after the general election.

Understandably, but undeservedly, the Government want to claim the credit for the current apparently relatively benign economic conditions, but behind those superficially relatively benign conditions lurks the threat of yet another disastrous bust just beyond the election.

The finance director of a major public limited company told me last week that, were it not for the imminent election, interest rates would have been raised well before today. That is what the real condition of the economy unfortunately requires and that is why the Chancellor has reluctantly had to increase interest rates today by 0.25 per cent. Ten days ago, one of the Chancellor's advisers, Professor Congdon, said that the state of the economy was such that a 1 per cent. rise was needed, given the scale of the problems we face.

The financial director to whom I spoke also told me that a tidal wave of cynicism would engulf any tax cuts in the Budget, because the state of the economy means

[Mr. Stephen Timms]

that they can be neither justified nor sustained. It was no surprise this morning to find the director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research calling not for tax cuts but for tax increases to restrain inflation. That is the basis of the case that I want to develop today.

Like everyone else, I shall enjoy a sunny pre-election boom but, in truth, the condition of the economy demands urgent measures if we are not to slide shortly into a post-boom, post-election slump, just as we have done before. Worry about the state of the economy is spreading, and the most disturbing sign of weakness is the state of the public finances. Indeed, even some Conservative Members acknowledged that fact.

The public sector borrowing requirement remains very high, and the Chancellor's forecasts of it have proved hopelessly over-optimistic. Less than two years ago, he was predicting a PSBR this year of £13 billion, but that figure now looks absurd. Last November, he had revised it up to £22.5 billion. This summer, it was up again—to £27 billion. What he will come up with in the Budget at the end of next month is anyone's guess.

The Chancellor's sunny optimism about the future depends entirely on the same quality of forecast that he made previously. If we are to share his optimism, we have to do so on the basis of forecasts from the same stable, which has been resoundingly discredited in the past. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that next year's total borrowing requirement could well be as high as this year's, so even the slow downward trend will have ground to a halt altogether. The CBI's concerns about Government borrowing are echoed by the Institute of Directors, which describes the state of the public finances as "ever more disturbing". In a succinct and brutal critique, it says:

"There is nothing wrong with the Government's objectives for borrowing . . . The problem is the alarming lack of progress towards"

achieving them. It is absolutely right.

The trend in borrowing is downward only because of the unprecedentedly high PSBR a couple of years ago. In 1993-94, the PSBR stood at £45 billion, or 7 per cent. of gross domestic product. That is high compared with the level under the Labour Government in the late 1970s, despite what the Chancellor said. Judging the current level of borrowing against that benchmark is a thin line of defence, especially given that investment in the economy is so low. That is the Government's central economic failure, the source of the gathering storm clouds beyond the sunshine which the Chancellor exhorts us to bask in today—storm clouds pointed to by the interest rate rise announced today.

Britain is failing on investment. The level of investment has recovered more slowly in the current upturn than in any other this century and, far from being the enterprise centre of Europe, we are investing less per head and less as a proportion of gross domestic product than Portugal or Spain. The welcome investment from outside Europe cannot make up for the disastrously low levels of investment from within the United Kingdom. Our economic problems will not be conquered while that continues.

I have listened to a long succession of Conservative Members denouncing the project for the single currency, but I am doubtful whether we can overcome our investment problems if France, Germany and Benelux—and, in all probability, Ireland—are in a single currency zone with low interest rates and we are outside, inevitably with higher rates. We will not be able to afford to stay outside the Euro-zone. We need that investment and so far we have failed to secure it. The Government have failed after 17 years to secure it. If we are to continue to have significantly higher interest rates than in continental Europe—we heard the figures for a number of countries earlier, not including Italy, and lower rates will be achieved in the Euro-zone—we will continue to fail to secure the investment that we desperately need.

One of the signs that we are heading for a short-term, unsustainable boom is the growth in consumer spending. The Chancellor's statement today announcing the interest rate rise boasts of growth in retail spending of 3.5 per cent. The summer economic forecast projected that consumer spending would grow in 1997 by 4.25 per cent. The last time consumer spending grew by that amount was in 1988: two years later, inflation was at 10 per cent. and we were in the midst of a disastrous slump. In the first part of the 1990s, consumer spending averaged less than 1 per cent. growth annually. Last year, it was 2 per cent., it is now 2.5 per cent. and next year the Treasury says it will be more than 4 per cent. That would be great if it lasted.

I questioned the Governor of the Bank of England when he attended the Treasury Select Committee in July. I asked him whether he thought that a growth in consumer spending of 4.25 per cent. was credible. He said:

"Certainly, I would think a rate of over 4 per cent . . . would not be sustainable."

Just as the Governor was right today on interest rates, I fear that he is also right on that point.

Aside from interest rates, a number of other indicators are lining up to suggest the return of boom and bust. Barclays bank, in its latest quarterly review, points to signs that it finds worrying. House prices are beginning to spiral upwards, which will bring much-needed relief to people trapped in negative equity, but projections for increases of between 10 and 20 per cent. in the next year are alarming and point to overheating in the economy. The current low levels of retail stock relative to sales are picked out by Barclays because they will have a multiplier effect as they are corrected.

Barclays points to windfall gains for individuals from building society mergers which might cause a surge in consumer spending. A surge of approvals is likely, we hope, for private finance initiative projects currently stuck in the bottleneck the Government have created. A significant number of lottery-funded projects are likely to start in the next 12 months. All those factors could lead to an unsustainable, short-term surge in capital spending. Barclays concludes:

"as things stand, the risks appear skewed to a period of demand and output growth significantly above trend."

The bank is right to warn of the risks of returning to boom and bust. If that is the outcome, after the next election we will face the dreadful problems that we had after the last one.

If there are to be tax cuts in next month's Budget, there is no doubt whom those cuts should benefit the most. They should be targeted on the least well-off—the people who have lost out most through the policies of the Government. The bottom tenth of the population is 18

per cent. worse off, after allowing for housing costs, than they were in 1979. Those are the people whom the Chancellor should be targeting long before he turns his attention to more handouts for well-off people by abolishing taxes on capital gains or on inheritance.

I warmly welcome the commitment that my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) gave earlier to reduce VAT on fuel to 5 per cent. The analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in this year's "green budget" shows that that would benefit the least well-off disproportionately. It constitutes a key first step in the right direction, healing some of the wounds.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies also considered the impact of a cut in the basic rate of tax to 20p in the pound. The Chancellor has said that he would like to do that in due course. The institute compared the effect of spending the £7.5 billion that would be needed to achieve the Chancellor's objective with that of spending the same money to introduce a 10p tax band. Such a band could be introduced on the first £4,000 of taxable income for the £7.5 billion that the Chancellor would need. The institute has demonstrated that the 10p lower rate would be more beneficial not only to those on the lowest incomes but to middle-income earners. In fact, only the top 20 per cent. of earners would gain more from the 20p basic rate than from the 10p rate proposed by my right hon. Friend. Putting at least some of that money into an increase in allowances, or a cut in the overall rate of VAT, would further increase benefits for the least well-off. That is the direction in which we should head.

Today's interest rate rise is the Chancellor's acknowledgement of problems ahead—of storm clouds on the horizon. However attractive the figures look on the surface, the Chancellor has acknowledged, in his decision today, the problems that lurk around the corner. What we need is a permanent higher level of investment in the British economy. That alone can move us forward, but, after 17 years, this Government have failed to deliver it. It is time for another Government to take their place.

9.11 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): Today's debate really started outside the House. It started this morning, on Radio 4, when the Chancellor demanded that the shadow Chancellor virtually make a full Budget statement today. Indeed, the Chancellor more or less repeated that request in his speech this afternoon.

I suppose that the Chancellor did that to deflect flak from the interest rate announcement that he made subsequently. Although he told the House—or tried to get the House to believe—that the fact that interest rates were going up was a sign of success, I feel that his statement to that effect carried little conviction.

Having heard the Chancellor's boast that the rise in interest rates was a sign of success, I looked up what he had said when they fell. Lo and behold, the Chancellor believes that when interest rates go down that, too, is a sign of success. He said then:

"Interest rates going down reflects our success in creating a prosperous economy."

The Chancellor's attitude in the House today contrasts markedly with his attitude when interest rates have been cut. Certainly, his attitude in the House is not in line with comments that have been made outside the House, even today.

Interestingly, today's *Evening Standard* says that the rise in interest rates

"awoke Tory fears that it marked a critical upward turning point which could cost the Government dear in the run-up to the General Election."

Of course we expect Tory Chancellors to tell us that all is well in the run-up to the general election. That is one regard in which they are consistent—telling us that all is well before an election. What the Chancellor said today, and what he will doubtless repeat on Budget day, exactly parallels what happened before the 1992 election.

I think that we all recall the last Budget before the 1992 election. In his Budget statement, the then Chancellor said:

"The Government know and have done what is required to build a strong economy."—[*Official Report*, 12 March 1992; Vol. 205, c. 1063.]

The Prime Minister said that the country had steady, sustainable growth.

We also remember the election campaign. We remember the daily press conferences, with the Deputy Prime Minister saying that the election was not about education, but about tax; that it was not about health, but about tax; and that it was not about crime, but about tax. In many ways, he was right. However, what he failed to mention was the list of 22 new taxes that the Government had in their back pocket, but which they simply failed to mention during the general election campaign. During those few days between the Tory election Budget and general election day, the economy boomed; afterwards, the country came back down to reality. Having listened to the Chancellor's equally complacent predictions today, I shudder to think what might be the 22 new taxes that the Tories might find, were they ever to be given the chance again.

I want to say a few words about one tax—value added tax. Before the last election, the Prime Minister said:

"I have made it clear we have no plans and no need to extend the scope of VAT."

Yet the very year after the election, the Prime Minister and his Tory Government introduced VAT on domestic power and fuel. The Opposition take a wholly different approach from the Government on that issue. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) repeated this afternoon, Labour will reduce the rate of VAT on fuel to 5 per cent.—the minimum possible. In contrast, the Tory Government not only introduced that new tax, they tried to double it. Only the actions of the Opposition stopped that. We have been specific about our proposals. We will cut VAT on fuel.

Mr. David Shaw: Earlier today, I asked the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) to confirm that the price of Labour abolishing VAT on fuel is a windfall profits tax. A £3 billion windfall profits tax is equivalent to a 20 per cent. rate of VAT. Will the hon. Lady confirm that Labour wants to hit the pensioners of this country with a 20 per cent. tax where there is only an 8 per cent. tax now?

Mrs. Taylor: I wish that the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I have said or to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East said earlier. We are not able to abolish VAT on fuel because of the way in which the Government introduced it and because of the

[Mrs. Taylor]

European Union rules that apply. My right hon. Friend made it quite clear that we will introduce a windfall tax. The calculations that the hon. Gentleman has pretended to make are wholly irrelevant.

I want to stay with the issue of VAT on fuel. We have made it clear that we will cut the rate to 5 per cent. Will the Government say that they are willing to match that promise? Will the Chancellor do it in the Budget? Or are the Government still harbouring the intention of actually doubling VAT on fuel after the next election? The choice is clear. Labour wants to cut VAT on fuel; the Government want to double it. Ministers should make their position clear this evening.

I hope that the Leader of the House will cast light on some VAT issues. This afternoon, the Chancellor did not deny the quotation used by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East, showing that the right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to extend the range of goods on which VAT is imposed, including food and children's clothes. The right hon. and learned Gentleman said one significant thing this afternoon, that he wants common minimum rates of VAT throughout the EU. In effect, that would mean giving up zero rating. I hope that the Leader of the House will confirm that and tell us when the Chancellor intends to spell out the time scale.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Before any silly hares get running, I have always made it clear in all my discussions at the European Union and here that the right to retain the zero rates must remain a British option. I have always argued in Europe that we retain the right to decide whether or not we keep the zero option.

Hon. Members: Apologise.

Mrs. Taylor: We have got used to U-turns this week, and here is another one from the Chancellor—made between 4 o'clock this afternoon and now. If he agrees on the need to keep zero rating—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. While I have been in the Chair every other Member has had a reasonable hearing. I hope that Conservative Members, not least those on the Front Bench, will give the hon. Lady a fair hearing.

Mrs. Taylor: We welcome that U-turn as far as it goes, but we recall the Government's history on VAT. They denied that they would introduce VAT on fuel, but then did so, so I am not sure that the Chancellor's denial just now is worth a great deal.

Over the years, we have seen that the Government are willing to put up VAT for ordinary families and pensioners. We have also heard today, yet again, exactly what are the Government's priorities—the abolition of capital gains tax and inheritance tax, which will benefit a few. The abolition of capital gains tax will cost £3 billion a year and the abolition of inheritance tax will cost £1.5 billion a year, and yet half of the benefit of that £4.5 billion will go to just 5,000 people. That is an example of Tory priorities and I do not understand how the Chancellor can contemplate that and still refuse to cut VAT on fuel.

We have heard a great deal in this debate about the economy and no doubt it will dominate much of the political discussion in the next few weeks, but other important issues have been mentioned today. We have heard a number of well-informed contributions from Members on both sides of the House. For the most part this has been a serious debate, and for Tory Members an often sombre debate, perhaps because of the announcement of the increases in interest rates.

I should like to comment on many of the well-informed contributions that we have heard, but I will confine my remarks to a few of them. I welcomed very much the speech of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). In the past, his sentiments were often echoed on the Conservative Benches, but not in recent years. I welcomed in particular his clear statement and acknowledgement of the connection between unemployment and social unease. I thought that his contribution on that should have been listened to carefully by all hon. Members, especially those on the Conservative Benches.

I also welcome some, although not all, of the comments of the right hon. Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins). I cannot say that I agreed with his economic analysis, but I appreciate what he said about the difficulties that business managers may have in the future because the Budget debate and the debate on the Queen's Speech are often so close together and cause significant congestion to parliamentary business. He made a measured contribution, as he often does on such occasions. We shall miss him in future debates, and we shall particularly miss his contributions on House of Commons matters, which have been greatly valued. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

The contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, West (Mr. Pearson) revealed how difficult it is and how long it takes to get the Government to close even glaring tax loopholes. I thought his example was pertinent and useful to all of us. My hon. Friends the Members for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion), for South-East Staffordshire (Mr. Jenkins) and for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde (Mr. Graham) made much of a basic fact which cannot be denied: after 17 years in government this Government are running out of excuses. They highlighted extremely well the legacy of a fractured society that will be our inheritance from the Government when the election comes.

I wish that Conservative Members had taken up that theme of the Father of the House. While so many of them ignore it we shall not make real progress in mending some of the fractures and resolving the difficulties that have been caused by those who believe that there is no such thing as society. Over the past few days there have been salutary warnings that every hon. Member should bear in mind.

Many hon. Members may feel, as I do, that it is difficult to believe that this Session is only a week old. We used to be told that a week is a long time in politics. On Wednesday four hours was a long time—long enough for what the *Daily Mail* called a precipitate U-turn. As *The Times* put it, four hours after the Queen outlined the final pre-election parliamentary programme of 13 Bills the Prime Minister, at a stroke, increased it to 15. Since then, the week has hardly got better for the Prime Minister. Following his concessions on the stalking Bill and the paedophile register, concessions and U-turns have come thick and fast.

At the end of the week, the Home Secretary consented to look at the banning of combat knives—a measure that we have been demanding for some years. The Home Secretary was still using the excuse that there were problems of definition. I have a suggestion for the Home Secretary and it is appropriate that the Chancellor is still in his place. If the Home Secretary has a problem trying to define combat knives, he should go to the Chancellor and suggest a tax on them. The Treasury will quickly come up with a definition which could be used to ban the sale of such knives.

Yesterday's U-turn was quicker than the one on Wednesday. On the issue of caning in schools, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment proved that that right hon. Lady was for turning—or perhaps spinning, if the speed of the change is anything to go by. With apologies to some of my hon. Friends and to rugby league supporters, I have to say that in the past week the Government have let in as many goals as Manchester United, although I suspect that the recovery of Ministers will not be so rapid as that of Manchester United. I have heard the bad news this evening and as a Bolton Wanderers supporter I keep a close watch on Manchester United.

The difference between the Government and Manchester United is that the football club's European record is somewhat better than that of the Government. The problems that the Government face over Europe have added to their confusion and difficulties. Last week the Prime Minister showed that he has so little confidence in the Minister of Agriculture that he sent four other Ministers to Europe as minders. One can picture the Minister going into the negotiations complete with his "I am a tough guy" hat and flanked by his four minders. Those minders were there not just as Ministers offering support, but to keep an eye on the Minister of Agriculture and probably also on one another.

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, but her remarks are over the top. She must be aware that the United Kingdom has four Ministers with responsibility for agriculture. It is reasonable that each part of the UK should be represented.

Mrs. Taylor: During the whole fiasco throughout the summer, it has not been Government practice to send five Ministers to all these meetings. Nor has it been practice on all occasions for each of those Ministers to come back and spin a slightly different story. With all that happening, it is perhaps no wonder that no progress is being made in Brussels.

While those Ministers were keeping an eye on one another and trying to outdo one another, in Luxembourg on this occasion, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was saying on the radio in London that the Government

"may have to implement the Florence agreement".

That is a long way from the Prime Minister's statement:

"We aim to be in a position to tell the Commission by October that we have met the necessary conditions for decisions to lift the ban on two of the five stages".—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1996; Vol. 280, c. 21.]

He also said that he expected the ban on the fourth stage to be lifted by November—within two days from now. No progress has been made on that, although we are nearly at the point by which the Prime Minister said that the ban would be lifted.

Confusion still exists in the Government. Consumers lack confidence and farmers face more hardship than ever. What has happened on bovine spongiform encephalopathy is typical of what happens when there is weak leadership and a Government with no sense of direction.

This Queen's Speech was never going to be ordinary, not just because it is the last one before the general election, but because this will be nowhere near a full Session of Parliament. The Prime Minister has gone on record as saying that the election will take place no later than 1 May, which would mean that Parliament would be dissolved close to Easter. Of course, it could be earlier. That means that the Government had to select issues that they felt should be a priority or that were not controversial.

I do not deny that some of the issues chosen should be given priority. I think that virtually all hon. Members agree, although I know that some Conservative Members do not, that there should be stricter controls on guns and that it is right that that should be in the Queen's Speech, but our constituents have many other concerns which have been totally ignored in the Queen's Speech that we have been debating for the past week.

For a start, job insecurity has not been touched on. We should all remember that since the Prime Minister took over—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): Hear, hear.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman says, "Hear, hear," but he may not like it if I tell him that in Britain there are 1 million fewer jobs than when the Prime Minister took over.

Much needs to be done. Last week, on the first day of the debate, my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party gave a list of issues on which the Government should have been taking action. They included a ban on the sale of combat knives, ensuring that we halve the time that it takes for persistent young offenders to come to court, ensuring that we have statutory crime prevention bodies and introducing a statutory minimum wage to tackle the worst abuses of poverty pay and the abuse of taxpayers subsidising poor employers. He said that we should have a Bill to allow capital receipts held by local authorities to be used to build new homes and that we should have a windfall tax. He explained that devolution should be a priority. The Government have had a week to consider those measures, but we still await answers—to discover whether they will make further U-turns.

The simple fact is that 17 years should have been long enough to get more decisions right. The Queen's Speech contained yet another education Bill, correcting some of the mistakes of the past. The Government have produced 19 education Bills. The Queen's Speech contained another criminal justice Bill, correcting some of the mistakes of the past. The Government have produced 33 criminal justice measures. The Government simply will not listen. That is why they get so much of their legislation wrong.

Enough is enough. The Government are drifting, and they are dangerous. They are drifting in a manner that is damaging the country. Thank goodness this is the last Queen's Speech from the Conservative Government.

9.35 pm

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): There is something slightly curious about the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) placing such emphasis on legislation correcting the mistakes of the past, in circumstances in which much of the legislation that she and other Opposition Front Benchers now support was vigorously opposed by them when it was introduced. Each successive piece of legislation was accepted by them only when it had been proved that it was what the public wanted and that it was the right thing to do.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Does the Leader of the House acknowledge that that is not quite correct, and that it is certainly not correct on all occasions? Does he recall that, in June 1988, I moved an amendment banning the sale of knives to juveniles, and that it took some years for the Government to come round and agree that that was the right decision?

Mr. Newton: Given that the hon. Lady had been the shadow education spokesperson for some time, and one of those who had persistently opposed the education measures that the Opposition now squirm and wriggle to accept, her point does not make her case. Moreover, in preparing for the final Queen's Speech of this Parliament, the hon. Lady has not taken the precaution of reading the speech of her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), after the final Queen's Speech of the previous Parliament. I read it, however, because I had much fun with him in the year after the 1992 general election, after I had become the Leader of the House. Like the hon. Member for Dewsbury, he said:

"We look forward to the next Gracious Speech, because we shall write it."—[*Official Report*, 7 November 1991; Vol. 198, c. 662.]

I think that she will find that she is as wrong as her predecessor was five years ago.

As the hon. Member for Dewsbury rightly said—it is one matter that I do not dispute with her—we have had a debate in which many thoughtful and thought-provoking speeches have been made. I have not heard them all, but I heard, in particular, the speech early in today's debate by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who very courteously apologised to me for the fact that he would not be able to be in the Chamber for the reply to the debate. I am sure that his speech, weighty as it was, will be carefully studied by my right hon. Friends the President of the Board of Trade and the Secretary of State for National Heritage.

We also heard a thought-provoking—I suppose that that is the right expression—speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), which I am sure will be widely studied.

I hope that I may be forgiven for adverting, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury did, to one other speech in the debate—that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins), which he prefaced by saying that it was his last speech on a Queen's Speech. He will be very much missed for the contributions that he has made on this and other occasions. His remarks, and his references to issues that are of concern to me as Leader of the House, lead me into observing a tradition for the Leader of the House on such occasions—saying something on matters of interest to the House. It may be of interest not only to the House, however, as the workings and procedures of the House—although they can hardly yet be described as a daily talking point wherever people gather—undoubtedly have attracted growing public interest in recent years.

This is, of course, the last such debate in the present Parliament, so it is perhaps worth spending a moment or two on the very substantial changes that we have seen since it was elected in April 1992—changes which I think have contributed significantly to the further evolution of what, because of its capacity to evolve, is probably the most enduring political institution of its kind in the world.

Although the Jopling report goes back to the previous Parliament—and, as ever, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Jopling) and to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), for the groundwork that they did—it is in this Parliament that we have carried through what I believe has proved a radical improvement in the way in which we conduct our parliamentary business.

There are, I know—there are one or two in sight at the moment—those who hanker for what they regard as the good old days when Members, especially Back-Bench Members, were hardly ever away before midnight and rarely before the small hours. I must frankly say that I do not, and I think that the great majority of Members share my view that the House has gained from more sensible and predictable sitting hours; from the better balance between what we do in the Chamber and what we do in Committee; from the development of voluntary agreements—I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dewsbury and her colleagues for this—between the parties about how business is to be handled; from the greatly increased number of opportunities for individual Members to raise topics of their choice; and from the arrangements for Thursdays and Fridays, which have made it easier for Members to combine their parliamentary duties with their duties elsewhere. I once again express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Dewsbury for her part in that and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery), the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, for the part that he, too, has played.

If I can claim particular credit for anything, it is for the associated move—not carried out without difficulty—to give the House greater notice of forthcoming business and of recesses. I hope that that is now firmly established, and I am glad to confirm tonight that I shall continue to do everything I can to consolidate that. In saying that, I am conscious that in the equivalent debate last year, I was able to announce dates for the Christmas and Easter recesses. The House will realise that our debate this year is taking a place a month earlier than its equivalent last year. It would be a little premature, especially when we have so recently returned from the recess, to attempt to predict those dates with exact precision. There are also, of course, a number of other uncertainties about the position next spring, which will have to be taken into account. However, I assure the House that as soon as I sensibly can, I shall give it details of the proposals for the Christmas recess although they will, of course, have to be subject to the progress of business.

Alongside the Jopling reforms there have been a number of other changes, which deserve at least a mention. Prominent among them is the enhanced role that we have given, or are seeking to give, to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Grand Committees.

The Scottish Grand Committee has met regularly in Scotland, not just in Glasgow and Edinburgh, but in a range of other locations, from Inverness to Dumfries. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor have taken part in the Committee's proceedings and have vigorously defended and explained the Government's policies to Scottish Members before a Scottish audience. That has been widely welcomed.

We have also made it possible for the Second and Third Readings of Scottish Bills to be debated in the Scottish Grand Committee, which in turn, as I hope will be demonstrated again within the next couple of days, makes it easier to find room in the legislative programme for worthwhile but non-contentious Scottish Bills. We have improved the procedures in a number of other ways as well.

We have also introduced improved procedures for the Welsh Grand Committee, with the additional ingredient that Welsh Members will be able to conduct parliamentary proceedings in Wales in the Welsh language. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is anxious to hold Welsh Grand Committee meetings under the Standing Orders agreed in the House earlier this year. Without entering the controversy between the Government and Opposition Front-Bench Members, I can say only that I hope that it will not be too long before it proves possible to secure an agreement that enables that to happen. It is very much what my right hon. Friend wants.

In addition, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told the House at the start of the debate—I look to the Benches towards the back—the Government are consulting on developing the role of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee so as to give Northern Ireland Members better opportunities to scrutinise Government policy and draft legislation and to call Ministers to account, and that, too, will be welcomed.

On another front altogether, on which I touch only briefly for reasons that are perhaps obvious, as the result of the work of the Nolan committee, the Select Committee on Standards in Public Life and now the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, we have put in place in the course of this Parliament a much clearer and stronger framework of rules in relation to Members' interests and to what can properly be expected of those of us elected to serve here.

The matters on which I have touched so far have been primarily for the House itself. But if I might put on what I sometimes think of as the other half of my hat, more strictly in my role as a Minister, the Government, too, can claim credit for a number of steps that they have taken to assist the House in various ways.

For example, five years ago, the document known as "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" and the existence, membership and terms of reference of Cabinet Committees, were either secret or supposed to be secret. Now they are all in the public domain and very much part of the landscape of our debates and of political discussion generally.

Similarly, the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information", introduced in April 1994—I realise that there are always people who want to go further in those areas—set out for the first time clear and detailed commitments to provide information to the public and the House. That has been welcomed by the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey), who concluded that

"the code has been an important and valuable contribution to more open Government."

It has certainly been helpful to the House. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will shortly be submitting a second report to the Committee.

In that context, I should also mention the equally thorough report from the new Select Committee on Public Service, on the subject of ministerial accountability and responsibility. Again, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will be submitting the Government's response to that report shortly. I am obviously not in a position to pre-empt his response today, but I can say that much common ground has been established between the Committee and the Government on those important issues and I hope that the Select Committee will find the response positive.

Of no less importance in strengthening the work of the Executive and the legislature are the steps that we have taken to improve the planning of the legislative programme and the opportunities for scrutiny in the House and among those who will be affected by the measures that we pass.

During the past three years, we have steadily developed the practice of publishing Bills in draft in advance of bringing them before the House, and I think that it is generally accepted that that has contributed materially to the quality of our legislation. In this Queen's Speech, we have carried that a further step forward by including in it not only the Bills that we intend to bring forward in this Session, but a number of those that we intend to publish in draft.

Although it is a matter for them rather than for me—I pick up a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing in his characteristically thoughtful way—I would welcome it if departmental Select Committees decided to contribute to that process by taking evidence on draft Bills within their field of interest, and reporting on them before the policy is set in concrete.

I have no doubt that by exposing draft texts to the widest public consultation in that way, we shall ensure that Bills are in an improved state of readiness when they are eventually introduced and that the legislation that Parliament carries through will, as a result, be of a higher quality.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): On that principle, what has happened to the adoption Bill?

Mr. Newton: There can be no complete commitment to the effect that Bills published in draft in one Session will automatically qualify for inclusion in the next. There has to be some flexibility to take account of developments affecting the content of the legislative programme. In this legislative programme, a number of Bills—including those on firearms and compensation recovery and one or two others—have rightly been brought into a Session that

[Mr. Newton]

is inescapably shorter than a normal one. They have made it necessary to take a judgment on what other legislation we include in the programme. That embraces the point about the adoption Bill. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will think it reasonable—I certainly do.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Talking of orphans, can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Prime Minister has made an orphan of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. and learned Member for Grantham (Mr. Hogg), who has returned to the Back Benches?

Mr. Newton: I have already commented on work that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been doing in Brussels. *[Interruption.]* I see that he is having an earnest conversation—I do not know whether he has picked up on what has just been said—with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler). I have no doubt that it is a most congenial exchange for them both.

As the Prime Minister told the House last week, in the longer term, we want to move towards a two-year legislative programme, consisting of Bills to be enacted in the course of a Session and draft Bills to be published for consultation with a view to their introduction in a later Session. I hope that we shall be able to carry that development forward systematically.

Although I had not intended to originally, I should like to refer to a point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing about the pattern of the parliamentary year. As he rightly said, although it is generally acknowledged that there have been great advantages in bringing public expenditure and taxation decisions together in a unified Budget in the autumn, the combination of that with a long spill-over and a late Queen's Speech in recent years has created additional problems—I am very conscious of them—for the business managers in handling the legislative programme. I think, however, that we have done rather more to tackle that problem this year than my right hon. Friend acknowledged; we had a very short spill-over, creating a space of about a month between the Queen's Speech debate and the Budget. That has eased, if not eliminated, the problem. So I do not think that that in itself would be a cause for a radical change of the kind to which my right hon. Friend referred and to which the Prime Minister referred in a speech earlier this year. I, too, referred to it in a debate on parliamentary procedure in July.

I nevertheless believe that there is a case for looking at the pattern of the parliamentary year and at the possibility of the State Opening being held in the spring rather than the autumn. That is the suggestion that the Prime Minister floated earlier this year, and I am currently examining it on his behalf. We think that it could give the Session a better balance and improve the ability of the House to scrutinise the Finance Bill and other legislation without losing any of the advantages of the unified Budget. I am interested to hear that my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, with his long experience of those matters, sees considerable attraction in the idea.

I come now to the subject of today's debate and, in particular, to the usual litany of gloom from the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown). Like my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor, I had a feeling this afternoon that I had heard exactly the same speech last year, the year before that and the year before that. I was reminded that, at about the time the right hon. Gentleman started making these speeches, he made one of his immortal forecasts. He said:

> "I make one Budget forecast—that, after the Budget, unemployment will rise this month, next month and for months afterwards."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1993; Vol. 221, c. 289.]

Since then, unemployment has fallen steadily in virtually every month.

Having heard the right hon. Gentleman's speech on a number of occasions, this year it finally passed its sell-by date. I got the impression that even his hon. Friends did not really buy it and, certainly, no one else will, because his picture of decay and decline does not correspond with reality.

Let me remind the right hon. Gentleman and the House of some of the straightforward facts. The economy is now in its fifth year of sustained growth, with exports, investment and consumer expenditure all growing. Since 1992, we have had the longest, strongest and steadiest recovery of any major EU economy. As for the gloomy unemployment forecasts, since its December 1992 peak, claimant unemployment has fallen by over 900,000 to its lowest level for over five and a half years and it is still falling. What is more, employment has risen by over 750,000 since the recovery began.

We heard some reference this afternoon to exports, as if that was somehow a story of failure. The volume of exported goods has risen by 7 per cent. over the past year, by 17.5 per cent. over the past two years and by 30 per cent. over the past three years. The current account in the latest quarter was the best for nine years.

We heard a lot about investment, but the climate for investment has seldom been better. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor said this afternoon, business investment is up 7.2 per cent. on a year ago and whole economy investment is up 3.2 per cent. We all know, although Opposition Members rarely refer to it, that the United Kingdom remains the No. 1 destination for inward investment into the European Union. Underlying inflation is 2.9 per cent. and has been below 4 per cent. for four years, the longest for almost half a century. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, we are achieving growth without the rapid overheating that has characterised earlier recoveries.

If the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East does not want to listen to those of us on the Treasury Bench, he might at least acknowledge the views of those who comment on these matters from an international perspective. I am surprised that he did not mention what the International Monetary Fund said earlier this year and what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said about the strengthening of the economy, the good performance, the good prospects and the extent to which the structural reforms had improved the outlook for the British economy.

It may be that that last point is the clue. Of course, the structural reforms that are praised so widely internationally are exactly the changes that the Labour party has fought step by step and to which it remains inherently hostile. There can be no clearer illustration of that than the windfall tax, the detail of which is no less elusive than it was before the right hon. Gentleman's

speech. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman declined to answer any of the questions that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor put to him, but it is clear that the beneficiary will not be the consumer and that the most likely casualty will be the very investment that the right hon. Gentleman claims that he wishes to promote.

The same is true of the Labour party's policies as a whole. We heard all the same windy talk today, but we heard nothing about the policies that will really make a difference. We heard nothing about the new social chapter policy or the minimum wage policy that will raise business costs, undermine competitiveness, reduce the attractions to foreign investment and make it more difficult to sustain the fall in unemployment over which we have been presiding.

The Queen's Speech, on which we are concluding our debate today, makes it clear that we shall not join new Labour in its new policies, because they are no less dangerous than the old ones. We shall continue with the policies that my right hon. and learned Friend set out once again in his speech today—policies to sustain the strongest and longest economic recovery in Europe and to do so without inflation and overheating. Our programme corresponds to the needs of the country and deserves the support of the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 305.

Division No. 3] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Paddy
Ashton, Joseph
Austin–Walker, John
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Mrs Margaret
Beith, A J
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Nicholas *(Newcastle E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, D N
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alex *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try SE)*
Cunningham, Dr John
Dafis, Cynog
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C)*
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Davies, Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Faulds, Andrew
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Mrs Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Ms Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Henderson, Doug
Hendron, Dr Joe
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Miss Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'd–on–A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Ab'd'n N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian D *(SE Staffs)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Dr L *(B'ham Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Kennedy, Mrs Jane *(Broadgreen)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Miss Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stret'd)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian *(Makerf'd)*
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Madden, Max
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Ms Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Oakes, Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Mrs B *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, John
Primarolo, Ms Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robertson, George *(Hamilton)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan

Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Robert
Shore, Peter
Short, Ms Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Squire, Ms R *(Dunfermline W)*
Steel, Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Thurnham, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Sir Harold
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Ms Angela Eagle and
Mr. Jon Owen Jones.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clarke, Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Curry, David
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas–Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Tim
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hat'fd)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel–Jones, Tristan
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson–Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, John
Hague, William
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Sir Edward
Heathcoat–Amory, David
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Higgins, Sir Terence
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guildf'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensb'ne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Jopling, Michael
Kellett–Bowman, Dame Elaine
King, Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox–Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lloyd, Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Rev William
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair–Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Major, John
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Molyneaux, Sir James
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Richard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, John
Renton, Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Sir Timothy
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Heref'd)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*

Shersby, Sir Michael
Sims, Sir Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfld)*
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Jim *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John D *(Strangf'd)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Waldegrave, William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Wheeler, Sir John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'd)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and
Mr. Sebastian Coe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed, at the end of the Question, to add,

"but humbly regret that the Gracious Speech fails to set out adequate proposals to create an excellent education system for all pupils, to reform Britain's discredited system of government or to make the necessary improvements to the NHS to restore it as a first class provider of care; and further regret that measures outlined in the Gracious Speech on crime are designed for political effect rather than practical effectiveness and will do little to strengthen the police and prevent crime."—[*Mr. Beith.*]

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 32 (Calling of amendments at end of debate), That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 38, Noes 300.

Division No. 4] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Alton, David
Ashdown, Paddy
Beith, A J
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Canavan, Dennis
Carlile, Alex *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
McCrea, Rev William
Maclennan, Robert
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Marek, Dr John
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Molyneaux, Sir James
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Salmond, Alex
Steel, Sir David
Taylor, John D *(Strangf'd)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thurnham, Peter
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Archy Kirkwood and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lin'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Cartliss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clarke, Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Curry, David
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Tim
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hat'fd)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel-Jones, Tristan
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Gryffs, Sir Michael
Gummer, John
Hague, William
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Higgins, Sir Terence
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guildf'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensb'ne)*
Hunter, Andrew

Hurd, Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Kellett–Bowman, Dame Elaine
King, Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox–Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lloyd, Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair–Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Major, John
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Richard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, John
Renton, Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Sir Timothy
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Heref'd)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Sims, Sir Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsf'ld)*
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Jim *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Waldegrave, William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Wheeler, Sir John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'ld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and
Mr. Roger Knapman.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

To be presented by Privy Councillors or Members of Her Majesty's Household.

Organophosphate Pesticides

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. Lait]*

10.28 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to note that a Minister from the Department of Health is to reply to the debate. That shows a recognition that there are wider implications for public health generally, rather than just for specific groups of occupations, from organophosphate compounds. I hope that during his preparation for his speech, the Minister managed to see tonight's BBC programme which revealed a close causal connection between OPs and chronic fatigue syndrome—what used to be called ME—as a result of the work of Professor Peter Behan.

The potential danger to human health of exposure to OPs was first identified 45 years ago by the Zuckerman committee. That is scarcely surprising, because these potentially lethal chemicals were originally developed by the Nazis as part of their nerve gas programme. Since then, increasing evidence of the damage to the individual's nervous system, together with some specific research studies, have led to ever more stringent official guidance on the use and misuse of OPs. Tonight's short debate offers an opportunity for the Government—all the Departments involved—to set out their current policies.

I first became concerned some six years ago, when I met a number of sheep farmers and farm workers from the south-west whose lives and livelihoods had been simply ruined by continuing ill health after dipping their sheep. Since they had been virtually forced to use OP dips, while the Government were still making that treatment for scab compulsory twice a year, the responsibility clearly lay with Whitehall.

On re-entering the House in 1992, I gathered together an informal all-party group to investigate the matter further, and we have maintained constant pressure on Ministers. I hope that there may be time this evening for one or two of my colleagues to contribute. I am glad to see here the hon. Members for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson), for Pembroke (Mr. Ainger) and for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), all of whom have been with me throughout the campaign and have met Ministers with me.

Because of those origins, the series of questions that I wish to put to the Minister must necessarily start with the agricultural and horticultural use of OPs. First, a number of farm workers have now succeeded in obtaining industrial injury benefit for serious ill health caused by exposure to OP sheep dips. Is it not unjust that self-employed farmers with similar symptoms cannot obtain similar compensation?

Secondly, the increasing level of precaution and recommended protective clothing for OP sheep dipping, advanced by the Health and Safety Executive in the past 10 years and more, makes it clear that the previous advice was simply inadequate. Do the Government now accept the responsibility for that former failure?

Thirdly, the HSE guidance note, Medical Series 17, entitled "Biological monitoring of workers exposed to organophosphorous pesticides", which was originally prepared in 1980, revised in 1986, and then revised again in 1987, lists a wide range of symptoms, from simple nausea to major effects on the nervous system. The revised version I have with me warns of complications when a victim undergoes simple operations and is subject to a common anaesthetic. Why was that advice not made available to all sheep farmers, their general practitioners, their consultants and all others concerned, as soon as it was available?

Fourthly, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces admitted to me earlier this month, contrary to his previous assurances, that hundreds of service personnel were exposed to OP pesticides during the Gulf war. That was three years after specific warnings were given in MS 17 by the HSE and by the responsible Ministries.

Why were those personnel needlessly contaminated with those extremely dangerous chemicals, and even told not to wear protective clothing in the Gulf because it might be damaged? Why did it take so long for Ministers to admit that mistake, and how quickly can the Government now establish whether OPs could have been the cause of widespread experience of Gulf war syndrome?

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Does the hon. Gentleman share my alarm that highly acclaimed research in 1977 by Korsak and Sato, which proved that brain damage was likely to occur when a person was exposed to those chemicals, was not heeded by the Government? That danger has been known since 1977 at the very least.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who instances yet another example of the availability of information on OPs, which is then not made available to the key people who should know about it.

I have a long list of additional questions from the National Gulf Veterans and Families Association, on which I obviously cannot spend sufficient time this evening, but which I will hand to the Minister after the debate. I hope that we will receive some written responses to questions, if he is unable to comment on all the issues tonight.

Fifthly, which Department is responsible now in Whitehall for ensuring that everyone who may come into contact with OPs, or who may be called upon to treat the victims of OPs, is fully informed of their characteristic effects, the necessary precautions and remedial treatments? I hope that the Minister can assure us that it is his Department.

Sixthly, what steps are being taken to evaluate the risks to children who have been treated with organophosphate head lice preparations, including malathion, the chemical that was used as pesticide in the Gulf war? The Pesticide Trust has issued serious warnings in recent months about these products, describing malathion as

"a cholinesterase inhibitor which has been found to disrupt the immune system."

It states that children are especially susceptible to absorption through the skin, and that some individuals are more sensitive than others. What are Ministers doing to warn parents about those different options and the difference between an organophosphate treatment and other treatments that may be safer?

Seventhly, some organophosphate compounds, even the very dangerous diazanon, are now used extensively to control fleas and other parasites on cats and dogs. I understand that vets are concerned that warnings are

[Mr. Tyler]

inadequate and labels insufficient, and that protective clothing and the dangers of inhalation are not specified. While the amounts used may be small, continuous use and the cumulative effect on especially sensitive pet owners, let alone on the pets, could be devastating. Why are Ministers apparently so relaxed about their use?

Finally, the European Union Commissioner for Agriculture has just acknowledged in response to representations by my Liberal Democrat colleague, the Member of the European Parliament for Somerset and Devon North, that there may be a connection between the impact of OPs on the central nervous system of cattle, their immune and enzyme systems, and therefore their susceptibility to bovine spongiform encephalopathy, because organophosphate warble fly treatment was used extensively in the 1980s. It is a remarkable coincidence that countries, especially the United Kingdom, which used organophosphates for that purpose during that period have had major BSE epidemics, while other countries have escaped. Will Ministers swallow their pride and re-examine that possibility in co-operation with the European Commission?

Dr. Tim Marrs, who is the principal adviser to the Department of Health on organophosphates, has met the members of my group a number of times. He has behind him all the expertise of Porton Down, and is reported to have made a remarkable admission to the joint meeting of the British Medical Association and the National Farmers Union on this subject at the beginning of October. Dr. Marrs said that he now accepted that nerve damage was known to occur from low or medium-level repeated exposure to organophosphates, corresponding to those occurring during sheep dipping. That explicit statement seems to underline previous informal remarks by Dr. Marrs to farmers. Is that the advice that he is now giving to Ministers? If it is, why have we not been told, and will the Minister repeat that advice?

The new warning suggests that all the previous precautions and protective clothing were inadequate, and that concentration on large doses and acute symptoms is not enough. It also suggests that longer-term chronic illnesses may be the worst results of organophosphates. The House will wish to hear that the Government are prepared to adopt the precautionary principle. If we have to wait until the continuing research, some of which will not be available until 1999, proves conclusively that organophosphates are unsafe, we shall have to wait for a long time, and many victims will suffer unnecessarily. Instead, surely we should insist that these chemicals be withdrawn until it can be conclusively proved that they are safe.

10.38 pm

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on securing this most important debate, and I am grateful to him for giving me a few minutes in which to speak.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I became aware of the problem about six or seven years ago, when farmers in my constituency and in the neighbouring constituency of North Devon communicated to me and to the local media the severe effects which they believed, and certainly the south-west group of the NFU believed, were linked to the use of organophosphate dips.

It is fair to say that thousands of farmers throughout the United Kingdom have used organophosphate dips to treat their sheep without suffering adverse consequences. At the same time, whether in the south-west, Wales or elsewhere in the UK, dozens—probably more than dozens—of farmers and others have suffered severe or varying consequences through their use, they and others believe, of OP dips. Some are now unable to work. Others—they include personal friends in my constituency—are able to work capably and effectively most of the time, but if they get a whiff or a scent, that affects them, so there is a consequential effect after the initial OP dip infection.

Some years ago, an all-party group of hon. Members, who are present and who, I am happy to accept, were headed by the hon. Member for North Cornwall, came together; we had a succession of meetings with successive Ministers with responsibility for agriculture, most recently with my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Those have been most useful in exploring these matters.

As the hon. Member for North Cornwall said, we have recently had tragic evidence of the consequences of the use of certain treatments during the Gulf war, which have produced what is known and now recognised as a medical condition: Gulf war syndrome. That is tragic, and it increases the evidence that there is a problem with these substances.

I emphasise to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and to the House that the Department of Health has an important function, not only in dealing with the points that the hon. Member for North Cornwall has raised and in communicating to other sections of the Government machine the long-held view of the National Farmers Union in the south-west that OP dips should be banned, but in communicating to general practitioners that they should be aware of and recognise the symptoms of this disease. All too often—this happens with other diseases—GPs will say only, "You're just suffering from exhaustion, a bad day or depression," and dismiss it. I have taken farmers from my constituency to raise that matter with my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

I hear what the hon. Member for North Cornwall says about the recent role of his colleague the Liberal Member of the European Parliament for Somerset and Devon North in promoting with European institutions the claims of Somerset farmer Mr. Mark Purdey and others that there is a link between OP dips and bovine spongiform encephalopathy. I should be happy to hear a conclusive response from the Government on that, but, in the past six months, BSE and the various scientific speculations on it have caused so much havoc with the farming and rural communities in Britain that I caution the hon. Member for North Cornwall and his colleagues against stirring this up and widening the issue by linking the great OP dip problem with the BSE problem. That will not help our handling of the BSE issue.

10.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Simon Burns): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on having secured this important debate. As he said, he has raised some important issues, and, if I do not have time now, I

will ensure that he is written to as soon as possible with full answers to the questions that I am unable to deal with tonight.

I reassure hon. Members that the Government are determined to ensure, so far as is possible, that no pesticide or veterinary medicine should be approved or licensed for use if such use could be a risk to people's health. That applies both to farmers using pesticides and to people who eat the food that farmers produce.

As the hon. Member for North Cornwall will no doubt also know, the Government take great care to ensure that a pesticide is safe before it is approved for use in the United Kingdom. All pesticides are thoroughly analysed and investigated, and approvals for use are granted only when—on an assessment of all available data by the Advisory Committee on Pesticides, or, if appropriate, by the Veterinary Products Committee—they are considered to be safe. Furthermore, UK regulatory authorities can review the substances at any time.

Ministers in five Departments must approve pesticides before they can be marketed. That includes, under separate regulations, the Department of Health, the Department of the Environment, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and the Northern Ireland Office. For veterinary drugs, the licensing authority is Health and Agriculture Ministers. Clearly, therefore, MAFF is only one of several Departments regulating the substances—an arrangement that is designed to ensure that human health and environmental considerations all play a full role in the process.

The Government and the Veterinary Products Committee are constrained, by section 118 of the Medicines Act 1968, not to divulge information that is commercially sensitive. However, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall will know, the workings of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate and the VPC are fully transparent. In addition to its annual report, the VMD publishes a quarterly bulletin of its work, and a press release is issued after every meeting of the VPC.

The Government also make available detailed explanations of licensing and of the suspected adverse reactions scheme, and Ministers announce the findings of the VPC on certain topics—particularly reviews of the use of OP sheep dips. Furthermore, the working party on pesticide residues and that on veterinary residues oversee the sampling of foods for pesticide and veterinary residues. Each year, the results are published and submitted to the European Commission.

As the hon. Member for North Cornwall is aware, although others may not be, organophosphates are insecticides used on arable crops. They are also used on farm animals, such as sheep, to kill insects in the fleece—in which case they are usually used as sheep dips. They are also used on pets to kill various insects, such as fleas.

Although there have been a few instances of adverse reactions to OPs used in other situations, most of the concerns have centred on sheep dips. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall will be aware, that is a serious problem. Because of the thickness of their fleeces, sheep suffer badly from the attention of parasites, which include sheep scab mite and flies that cause flystrike. Those infestations are major humane and economic problems. They are potentially fatal, and they cannot be left untreated. The issue of control is therefore extremely important.

Until 1984, the most widely used dips were those containing the chemical lindane, although sheep dips using OPs were also available. In that year, lindane dips were withdrawn on grounds of safety, and OPs replaced them in the market. At present, most sheep dips contain OPs.

As the hon. Gentleman will also know, it was compulsory to dip sheep until a few years ago, although that is no longer the case. I am aware that—during an interview with the hon. Member for North Cornwall about OPs, which was broadcast this morning on the Radio 4 programme "Farming Today"—one of my officials was quoted as saying at a recent meeting with the British Medical Association that

"he now accepts that nerve damage can occur from a medium or low level of exposure to sheep dip."

That is entirely untrue. I repeat: that is entirely untrue. It is unfortunate that neither the programme presenter nor the hon. Gentleman was able to check the accuracy of their information beforehand.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I have a copy of the minutes of the meeting in question, and it clearly records that my official said:

"Changes in peripheral and/or central nervous system function had been shown in some studies, while others had not shown such effects."

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Burns: I am sorry; I do not have time.

That statement is clearly quite different from the impression given during the radio interview. I should be happy to let the hon. Member for North Cornwall see the extract from those minutes.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Burns: Very briefly, because I have only another four minutes.

Mr. Meacher: I think that it is rather more than that.

Whatever the truth may be about what was said by the Minister's official, will the Government now undertake an investigation into the 500 farmers who are known to be ill with organophosphate poisoning, which they have hitherto refused to do? Will the Minister accept, in view of his earlier remarks, that the licensing system is over-dependent on manufacturers' toxicity data?

Will the Minister take steps to ensure that the evidence on which the licensing decisions are made is made available to the general public? Will he, in the light of the very effective evidence produced by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), now impose a moratorium on the use of organophosphate dips, while instituting a programme to assist farmers with alternative methods of protecting against sheep scab?

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I would appreciate it if he would let me develop my theme, especially on the last point he raised. As I have said, if I run out of time in what is a short debate, I shall write to

[Mr. Burns]

the hon. Member for North Cornwall and deal with all the issues that have been raised in the debate which I have not covered.

I now turn to the issue of what action the Government are taking. The Government are very concerned about the link which some people have claimed between their ill health and the use of organophosphorus insecticides and sheep dips. In common with many other chemicals in daily use, OPs, if misused, can give rise to adverse effects. Without doubt, some of those effects can be very serious.

However, what is not clear is whether, when used in the approved way, these OPs can cause chronic adverse health effects in the long term to the people who are using them. Much of the evidence for long-term effects has been criticised for being anecdotal and because exposure data have been poor. Also, it is exceedingly difficult to establish cause and effect from individual cases which can be caused by other medical conditions, making diagnosis extremely difficult.

The Government have two very clear objectives. One is to establish scientifically whether a link exists between ill health and chronic exposure to OPs. The other is to ensure that people suffering ill health which they feel may be due to such exposure get the best medical advice and care possible, and that medical practitioners have a better understanding of the symptoms which may be associated with chronic exposure to organophosphate sheep dips.

To those ends, we are doing a great deal. First, we are funding a number of research projects, including studies on the occupational hygiene of sheep dipping and on alternative methods of control of sheep scab. One project is being carried out at a number of research institutes, with the aim of producing a vaccine. The other is aimed at obtaining a better understanding of the factors that influence the spread of sheep scab. The projects, which commenced in January 1996, will run for three years from that date.

Most recently, and on the recommendation of the medical and scientific panel, studies costing approximately half a million pounds are being undertaken at the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh. This study, which commenced in November 1995, will take about three years to complete and is designed to investigate the effects of organophosphate sheep dips on sheep farmers and sheep farm workers.

The Government have also taken a number of measures to ensure that the problem is brought to the attention of the medical profession. Thus, the chief medical officer wrote to all doctors in England in 1991 and again, with the chief executive of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, in June 1993, to alert doctors to the possibility of adverse effects from exposure to pesticides and certain veterinary medicines, and to remind them of the reporting schemes for human adverse reactions to veterinary products operated by the Employment Medical Advisory Service and MAFF's Veterinary Medicines Directorate.

The Government also issued in April this year a revised and expanded edition of the book "Pesticide Poisoning: Notes for the Guidance of Medical Practitioners". This includes guidance on the diagnosis and management of acute OP poisoning and on chronic health effects. The book also includes details of reporting procedures when OP poisoning is suspected.

In the past few days, following discussions between Baroness Cumberlege and the presidents of the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the chief medical officer has written to the presidents of both colleges giving the Department of Health's support to the setting up of a new advisory group to draw up guidance on how to manage patients who may be suffering from adverse effects from exposure to OP sheep dips.

We have also been concerned to ensure that those using OP sheep dips follow the correct procedures, and to alert them to the adverse effects if they are misused. We therefore published a leaflet for farmers on the safe use of OP sheep dips. That discussed the need for sheep dipping, safe handling of sheep dips, the use of protective clothing, and possible adverse effects of OP sheep dips.

OP compounds have been reviewed several times by the independent expert committees which advise Ministers on pesticides and veterinary products. In 1993, the Veterinary Products Committee reviewed the OP sheep dips, and found that there was no evidence to support a ban or suspension on their use when used properly.

Following its review in 1993, the VPC recommended that the licences should continue, and that a certificate of competence should be required for the purchase of OP dips. A scheme under which a certificate of competence is required before OP sheep dips can be purchased became operative in 1995. Furthermore, the VPC set up an expert panel, the medical and scientific committee, in 1994, to examine the effects of OPs and to recommend research that might be carried out.

To sum up, Britain has an excellent system for approving pesticides and for licensing veterinary medicines. Under both systems, the Government are advised by independent statutory committees of acknowledged experts. We listen to those expert committees and, if they tell us that a product is likely to harm people, we do not let it get on the market.

Believe me, if any grounds emerge to think that the use of OP pesticides, or any other pesticide or veterinary drug, poses a serious threat to the health of the public or to those who will use it, we will have no hesitation in withdrawing it. But before contemplating such a step, we must assemble all the evidence and make an assessment based on the facts.

Malathion is the only OP authorised for the treatment of head lice. There is no evidence to suggest that malathion is dangerous when used for that purpose. Like all marketed medicines, products containing malathion are continuously monitored for safety. That is important, and that is what is happening.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall raised a number of issues with which I have not been able to deal, but I assure him once again that, as he requested at the beginning of the debate, I shall write to him as soon as possible giving him full answers on those matters with which time has not allowed me to deal today.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 31 October 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

Tobacco and Alcohol Smuggling

1. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to curb smuggling in tobacco and alcoholic drink. [308]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Phillip Oppenheim): Customs and Excise has almost 300 staff employed directly to prevent the cross-border smuggling of excise goods. They include a further 25 posts recently allocated to Dover. This front-line effort is backed up by specialist intelligence investigation teams whose efforts are being intensified. In addition, new computerised systems are being set up to enhance the co-ordination and analysis of intelligence about excise smuggling. Smugglers run the risk of losing the imported goods and the vehicles used to transport them. They also risk a prison sentence of up to seven years.

Mr. Prentice: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, that news is inadequate, given that £770 million is lost to the Exchequer every year through smuggled drink and tobacco and a further £300 million is lost through cross-channel booze expeditions. Those expeditions are having a huge effect on my constituency, where five pubs have closed in the past 12 months. Yesterday, the Chancellor said that he was

"in favour of some approximation of taxes that bear on sales, such as excise duty".—[*Official Report*, 30 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 674.]

When will there be some approximation of levels of duty across the European Union to damp down on smuggling?

Mr. Oppenheim: On the latter part of the hon. Gentleman's question, he will have to ask Chancellors in other EU countries. We have no control over their excise levels.

Having said that, I do not seek to minimise the problem. The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on an important difficulty, although, to put it in context, the loss represents some 5 per cent. of the £19 billion collected in excise duty. The fundamental problem is that collecting all the missing revenue would involve huge numbers of uniformed officers stopping every vehicle and person. That would result in massive queues at ports and airports, matched only by the queues of people complaining at every hon. Member's constituency surgery. Therefore, we are concentrating our intelligence resources on the large, organised smuggling gangs where the real criminal activity is taking place.

Mr. Carrington: Has my hon. Friend seen the report by Customs and Excise confirming that the figures relating to smuggling published by the tobacco and brewing industry were approximately accurate? Will he confirm that any hope of curbing smuggling can be effective only if the costs of beer and tobacco are approximately equal on either side of the channel? Does he agree that the solution lies with the French putting a sensible level of tax on tobacco to encourage their population to give up smoking?

Mr. Oppenheim: I have little influence on my opposite number in France. However, I understand that the French recently decided to increase tax on tobacco by 9 per cent. later this year.

Private Finance Initiative

2. **Mr. Waller:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to promote private finance projects in the regions. [309]

10. **Mr. Thomason:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are his current priorities for the PFI. [323]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Michael Jack): I have already taken the private finance initiative roadshows to Birmingham, Wigan, Leeds, Southampton and Belfast and plan to visit the north-east, the south-west and East Anglia in the near future.

My priorities are to build on the £7 billion of PFI projects already agreed, so that public and private sectors continue delivering high-quality services at improved value for money.

Mr. Waller: My hon. Friend will be aware of the enthusiasm for the introduction of private sector funding to provide for infrastructure projects. Is he also aware that there is considerable anxiety about the apparently slow speed with which many projects are getting under way? Can he reassure the House that design, build, finance and operate will actually deliver the goods?

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for articulating the concerns that have been expressed on deal flow in the private finance initiative. The best way to sum up how we have responded positively to that criticism is to tell him that the CBI said recently that our new guidance would improve risk allocation and, most important, cut bidding costs and help to speed up the flow of deals. At a recent conference in London on the private finance initiative, my right hon. and learned Friend announced a number of new documents, including those on standard contract clauses, better costs, project appraisal and other guidance, which we are giving those involved in the projects to help to speed up the deal flow and reduce bidding costs.

Mr. Thomason: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the private finance initiative will be fully extended to local government, while at the same time ensuring that the proprieties of public finance are properly observed?

Mr. Jack: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question, since my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local

Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration has been speaking today at the city and financial conference in London, where he has been outlining some of the important steps that will open up private finance for local authorities—indeed, £250 billion-worth of support in private finance—such as introducing the ability to run DBFO-type projects.

My hon. Friend asked an intriguing question on propriety. It is very interesting to consider that Lord Clinton-Davis recently said:

"Labour would look at updating the public sector borrowing requirement regulations"

for the PFI. If Labour is going to fiddle the PFI figures, perhaps it will fiddle them for everything else.

Sir James Molyneaux: Is the Minister aware that his recent visit to Belfast was very much appreciated? Will he and his colleagues consider what further steps can be taken to make the enterprise initiative scheme more effective for, and attractive to, small investors?

Mr. Jack: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his very kind comments about my visit to Belfast. The conference that I attended was extremely good: many people came from all sectors of industry in Northern Ireland, and there was great support for what the PFI can do. I have been lobbied on the enterprise initiative scheme and a number of other matters connected with venture capital as part of the Budget representations that I have personally received.

Mr. Sheerman: Will the Minister take a special roadshow to some of this country's universities? As he will know, the last Budget was a disaster for university finances, and universities are struggling. They are very willing to try the PFI, but cannot make it work for them. Will the Minister pay special attention to the universities' problems and to how they can use the PFI with some success?

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman touches on an important point. I attended a major seminar in London towards the back end of last year. It dealt with how we explain the PFI to all those participating in further and higher education. It is interesting to note that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment recently opened one of the pathfinder projects for universities and the PFI at Greenwich concerning new student accommodation. There is very considerable interest in that area, and we are certainly working with the Department for Education and Employment to make further progress.

Mr. Tracey: Is not encouragement of the extremely useful PFI made so much more difficult by the Labour party's discouragement of the initiative, especially in the national health service? That is surely rather odd, since at least five hospital projects have been brought about through the PFI.

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend is right. Such an attitude is typical of Labour Members. The Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen for health recently tried to mix it on the PFI by suggesting that, in some way, the initiative represented privatisation of the health service—it never has been that, and it never will be. It is about providing better facilities for patients who receive NHS care.

My hon. Friend is right to point to what we have achieved. Already, 40 projects of between £1 million and £10 million have signed up with the PFI and we are working hard on the five major pathfinder projects for significant hospital development.

Mr. Betts: The Chancellor said that £2 billion had been cut out of public expenditure estimates to allow room for PFI projects. Aside from the nonsense of trying to reclassify the channel tunnel link as a PFI scheme, which it never was, will the Minister explain exactly how much has been committed to the PFI this year and how much it is estimated will be committed by the end of the year? Does the Minister accept that there could be a reduction in that £2 billion and that, therefore, the PFI has caused a reduction in public services, because the scheme is substitutional, not additional?

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman attempts to take our eye off the ball. Table 6.5 in the Red Book suggests that—in addition to our target of £2 billion-worth of private finance deals—the Government have £20 billion-worth of publicly sponsored capital. Some £7 billion-worth of deals have been agreed, and we are working hard to take those on to their next stages.

Mr. Nicholls: When does my hon. Friend expect to come to the south-west to talk about the PFI? Before he does so, will he undertake to look at the details of the Dawlish hospital scheme to find out why it has taken so long to finalise the details?

Mr. Jack: I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise date for my visit, but I hope very much that it will be before the end of the year. I am aware that the hospital project to which my hon. Friend refers is high on the agenda of other hon. Friends. We are working hard to unblock some of the problems—in Kent, as well as in the west country—to make certain that these important hospital deals can take place. A great deal of work has been done, particularly with the Department of Health and the private finance panel executive, to turn those projects into reality.

National Debt

3. **Mr. Spellar:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of the net national debt. [310]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. William Waldegrave): The provisional estimate of net public sector debt at end-March 1996 is £323 billion—some 45 per cent. of gross domestic product.

Mr. Spellar: Can the Minister explain how, in spite of having receipts from North sea oil and privatisation, in the five years since the Prime Minister came to office—when the national debt was £155 billion—the Government have managed to double it?

Mr. Waldegrave: There is something rather preposterous about the Labour party complaining about the national debt. The average public sector borrowing requirement under the Conservative Government has been 2¾ per cent. of GDP. Under the previous Labour Government, it was 6¼ per cent.—even with the help of the International Monetary Fund. It is reasonable to say

that, had Labour stayed in power, the Government would have continued to borrow at the same level. That would have produced a national debt of about £650 billion, or 90 per cent. of GDP. That is not an unlikely figure, as a number of countries in Europe that have had the disbenefit of social democratic governments have such debts.

Mr. Redwood: Will the Chief Secretary confirm that Britain is one of only three countries beneath the reference level for the stock of debt necessary to enter the single currency? Will he further confirm that the 12 countries that have already borrowed too much and are outside the terms of the treaty will not be eligible to join, and that Britain will try to prevent them?

Mr. Waldegrave: My right hon. Friend is perfectly right, and Britain is in a strong position on the stock of debt. In addition, all the other major European countries have had large increases in total debt, and most of them have been run for at least part of the time by socialist governments. We have not, and that is a major achievement. The final decision on who is eligible for EMU among those countries that want to join will be for the Heads of Government in due course, but some countries will have some explaining to do.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Does the Minister acknowledge that, in some areas, it is the Government who have some explaining to do—in particular, on the current PSBR forecast and our inflation targets, both of which put us outside the qualification criteria? Will the Government ensure that they maintain their commitment to bringing down the PSBR forecast to meet the criteria? Will both he and his right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor resist the rumours that the Government will announce at the start of the general election campaign that they will not proceed to enter monetary union, and consequently will not be disciplined by the need to meet the Maastricht criteria?

Mr. Waldegrave: My right hon. and learned Friend and I—and all our colleagues—are reducing the public debt for the good of the British economy, and we will continue to do that.

Sir Peter Tapsell: When those member states of the EU that wish to join a single currency come to submit their statistics to show whether they have satisfied the economic criteria of the Maastricht treaty, will those countries with unfunded public sector pension obligations have to attribute that unfunded commitment as part of their national debt? If not, how will it be treated?

Mr. Waldegrave: That is not one of the criteria set out in the Maastricht treaty. Britain has a strong position in the short, medium and long term compared to some other countries that do not have properly funded pensions. Those countries will find that they must either cut pension entitlements—as some are currently trying to do, causing trouble in the streets—or increase taxes. I am happy to say that there is no question of our paying any part of that cost.

Mr. Darling: On the question of putting up taxes, the Chief Secretary will be aware that the Chancellor's former adviser has suggested that value added tax ought to be increased to reduce national debt and borrowing. Is it still the Chancellor's view that in principle the scope of VAT ought to be extended?

Mr. Waldegrave: I know that this is the Labour soundbite for this week. The hon. Gentleman read it out in a rather dreary way. We had it yesterday and my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor answered it. I advise the hon. Gentleman to read *Hansard*.

Industrial Output

4. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what economic factors he expects to improve industrial output over the next 12 months. [311]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Kenneth Clarke): Industry will benefit from the most favourable combination of economic circumstances for decades—living standards are rising, business and consumer confidence are high, United Kingdom firms are highly profitable and are competitive in overseas markets, investment is rising, inflation is low and the public finances are under firm control.

Mr. Amess: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that Britain's strike record last year was the best since records began and that statutory recognition of trade unions, as proposed by the Labour party—a power that unions have never been given in the past—would pose a new danger to Britain's industrial output, particularly in Basildon and Southend, West?

Mr. Clarke: I never fail to point out to our European partners that not only do we not have the social chapter but, because we have adopted more flexible labour market practices at a local level, we have the best industrial relations record we have had this century and a very much better record than anywhere on the continent. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is extraordinary that new Labour has put forward proposals on trade union recognition and the dismissal of strikers which go far beyond anything that old Labour tried to do in the 1970s, and that that poses a great threat in Basildon and elsewhere.

Mr. Sheldon: Is the Chancellor aware that there is widespread disappointment in industry at his decision to increase interest rates? The result has been the greatest degree of uncompetitiveness in the pound sterling with, as a consequence, declining exports and problems for the balance of payments. That is a pure consequence of what happened yesterday.

Mr. Clarke: The decision taken yesterday received a much better reception from most people than it has done from the right hon. Gentleman. Most people in British industry know that the key thing now is to keep in place for the next few years the combination of circumstances that I have just described and not to throw it away by allowing inflationary pressures to build up and threaten our progress.

The right hon. Gentleman should be in a better position than most of us to point out the lessons of the past. When he was a Treasury Minister, we were used to double-figure interest rates and double-figure inflation. We lost control and threw away any advantages that

British industry might have had. That was the result of mismanagement under a former Labour Government, which the Conservative Government do not intend to repeat.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Although I share to an extent the view of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) that a rise in interest rates is not helpful, I appreciate why my right hon. and learned Friend has done that and I hope that he is proved right. Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that one way in which he could ensure that industrial output improved would be to avoid any further cut in infrastructure expenditure, which is so important to industrial efficiency, and that he and his Department should encourage investment in industry further by considering an improvement in capital allowances?

Mr. Clarke: Of course I accept that an increase in interest rates is in itself never welcome news for those in manufacturing industry, with whom my hon. Friend is so concerned. However, people in manufacturing industry all realise that monetary policy has to be adjusted to protect against inflation. They have seen from what happened the last time I increased interest rates that, if one acts in good time on a modest scale, inflationary pressures are snuffed out and interest rates move within a narrow band while inflation generally stays low. That is the best assurance for the future.

I take on board my hon. Friend's representations about the importance of infrastructure investment. That is right. We should sustain the necessary level of investment in infrastructure for our long-term good, and my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary's replies on the private finance initiative show that there are new and better ways of delivering better-quality infrastructure products at better value for money for the country.

Mr. Milburn: Given all the claims that the Chancellor has just made about industrial output and the rosy picture that he painted of the British economy, will he explain why national income per head is higher in Germany and France in a downturn than in Britain today? Will he also explain why, far from being the enterprise centre of Europe, Britain is ninth out of 15 in the European prosperity league? After 17 years of failure, will not the British people rightly conclude that enough is enough?

Mr. Clarke: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position on the Opposition Front Bench. He, too, is making his debut—like my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary. My hon. Friend, unlike the hon. Gentleman, has chosen the right moment in our economic performance to join the Front Bench. I commiserate with the hon. Gentleman—it was bad luck to become a Treasury spokesman for an Opposition party when the economy is doing so well. I hope that a fresh face will produce fresh league tables—that may come later.

Of course, Germany and France are currently showing higher incomes per head than we are—they have done so for years and years. But we are now outperforming them; we have faster growth than they have and our unemployment is falling from a level that was already below theirs. We are catching up and we shall overtake them. We shall double living standards in this country in 25 years, unless the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends have the chance of getting into office and ruining the economy in the next few months.

Sir David Madel: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, with continuing low inflation, three-year wage deals should become the norm in industry and should also be extended where the Government are the employer?

Mr. Clarke: I find that proposition attractive, but each individual case must be addressed on its merits and all cases must be subject to the usual discussions that take place over wage settlements. My hon. Friend highlights one aspect of becoming used to being a low inflation country. People are still getting used to the apparently low levels of their pay settlements. People receive a 3 per cent. pay settlement, which makes them better off, but some still hanker after a 10 per cent. settlement, which actually made them poorer when we were a high-inflation country. The annual wage round, annual bidding and the expectation of an annual pay change go back to the days when we first encountered hyper-inflation and Governments had pay policies—that was when the ritual got under way.

VAT (NHS Hospitals)

5. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what additional revenue he forecasts will be raised in the next two financial years as a result of the recent customs ruling on input VAT reclaims by NHS hospitals. [312]

Mr. Oppenheim: None.

Mr. Cousins: Is the Minister aware that 200 NHS hospitals expect to be cheated of £140 million out of those VAT changes? Have the Government got themselves to the point where they need to sent VAT inspectors into nursing homes to levy VAT on incontinence pads? Are not those Tory tax rises too far?

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand that the hon. Gentleman's concern about the NHS is genuine, but he has got it wrong. There is no change in hospitals' or hospital trusts' ability to reclaim VAT for contracted-out services, which is what the question was about. NHS trusts are treated in exactly the same way as NHS hospitals and other Government Departments. They pay their VAT in the year in which the expenses are incurred. Customs and Excise has given them a little leeway at the end of each year to ensure that they can get their payments in on time. There is no change, and the hon. Gentleman is running a rather unpleasant scare story.

Mr. Richards: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the only time during the past 20 years that the national health service has not received a real increase in resources was under the last Labour Government?

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—not only that, but nurses' pay was cut under the last Labour Government. Under this Government, spending on

the NHS has increased by 70 per cent. in real terms—a record that no Labour Government have ever matched or could match.

Ms Primarolo: May I again ask the Minister to look at the representations that he will have received from NHS organisations confirming that, as a result of this Government's change of policy, £140 million of patient care money will be removed from the NHS? Is that not another example of the Government's addiction to VAT which makes them blind to consequences, the existence of which they continually deny?

Mr. Oppenheim: I had thought that Labour Front Benchers had cleansed themselves of any connection with any lobbying organisations. The fact is that the so-called NHS VAT forum, which has been running this scare story, is run by one organisation—an organisation of VAT and tax avoidance lawyers called VAT Liaison Consultancy Ltd. *[Interruption.]* I suggest that, instead of shouting at me across the Chamber, the hon. Lady should go back and do her homework. If the Labour party is going to allow every VAT loophole to be charged through when—if ever—it is in government, it will find that it has no money at all to put into the health service.

Mr. Wilkinson: What additional revenue does my hon. Friend forecast will have to be raised in the next two financial years to make good the deficiency in VAT caused by the European Court of Justice ruling against Customs and Excise on the sale of discounted goods in this country?

Mr. Oppenheim: The revenue lost in that case was £70 million.

Landfill Tax

6. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue he estimates will accrue from the landfill tax in (a) the current year and (b) the first full year. [313]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Angela Knight): The revenue that will accrue from the landfill tax has been estimated at £110 million in the current year and £450 million in the first full year.

Mr. Bennett: Given that the aim of the tax is to change people's behaviour rather than to raise money for the Government, what steps are the Government taking to encourage people to recycle items such as tin cans, newspapers and bottles so that the burden does not fall on local authorities and local council tax payers?

Mrs. Knight: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Department of the Environment is very active in that area, but I urge him to put his effort behind recycling. No doubt he, like me, collects newspapers, tin cans and bottles at home. I urge him to take them down to local bottle and paper banks and so do his bit for conservation and recycling and to let local authorities do theirs.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Although it would stick in my craw to admit that any tax is a good tax, does my hon. Friend agree that the landfill tax is a good environmental measure? Will she confirm that it will not pose an overall net cost to businesses, because it is balanced by a reduction in the national insurance contributions of employers? In addition, I wish my hon. Friend many happy returns of the day.

Mrs. Knight: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind wishes. I have, unfortunately, reached the age at which I would rather go backwards than forwards.

The substance of my hon. Friend's question related to landfill tax and I can assure him that the tax is a key part of the Government's strategy of reducing reliance on landfill and promoting more sustainable alternatives. My hon. Friend is also right to say that the tax will result in a national insurance contribution reduction for businesses, thereby helping industry to create jobs in this country, an endeavour in which we have been successful and will continue to be successful in future.

VAT (Revenue)

7. **Ms Eagle:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue has been raised by changes to the range of goods on which VAT is charged since 1992. [316]

Mr. Oppenheim: The net revenue effect of various changes to VAT coverage since 1992 is estimated to be £870 million in the current year.

Ms Eagle: Is it not true that, before the last election, the Prime Minister announced that he had no intention of increasing, and no need to increase, the scope of VAT? Yet we have just heard that more than £800 million is to be collected this year from such extensions. Do the Government intend to make a similar pledge ahead of the next election, or are they going to extend VAT to children's clothes, food, books and newspapers?

Mr. Oppenheim: The hon. Lady knows that the money raised from VAT on fuel, which was the largest component of that rise, funded the increase in NHS spending last year. Perhaps the shadow Chancellor will now tell the country where he will find the £450 million from his proposed cut in fuel duty. Which spending programmes will he slash? Will he cut spending on the NHS, will he raise other taxes, or will he do what every other Labour Government in history have done—massively increase borrowing?

Mr. John Greenway: Can my hon. Friend tell the House the original Treasury estimate for VAT on domestic fuel and how that compared with what has been raised? Surely electricity and gas prices have fallen sharply in the past three years, so that, even with VAT, people are paying less for electricity and gas at home.

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend is right, and I should gently remind Opposition Members that for years they have had only one energy policy—to burn more and more expensive and relatively dirty coal. They fought tooth and nail our policy of allowing power stations to burn cheaper and cleaner gas, which has resulted in a fall in energy prices even when one takes into account the rise in VAT, and they are shameless enough to pretend that they care about the pollution of the environment and the cost to poorer people.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Can the Minister confirm that the Chancellor said:

"If we could start again, we would have VAT on everything and I do not think the case for exempting newspapers is all that strong. The real reason we zero-rate newspapers is that politicians are frightened about putting VAT on newspapers."

Is the Chancellor frightened, or will he have the courage of his convictions? Will we see the 23rd Tory tax rise? Enough is enough. Britain needs a new start and a new Labour Government.

Mr. Oppenheim: That was the parliamentary equivalent of a cheap shot. I will confirm that, as long as the hon. Gentleman or the Shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown), will confirm that no Labour Government will under any circumstances increase VAT. I will also confirm it, if the hon. Gentleman will confirm that the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling) described last year's Scottish nationalist proposal to reduce VAT on fuel to 5 per cent. as

"another cynical ploy from an increasingly opportunist and desperate party."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 1995; Vol. 253, c. 49.]

That sums it up pretty adequately.

Mr. Robert G. Hughes: Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Members for Bristol, South (Ms Primarolo) and for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) simply got their statistics in a twist when talking about VAT rises? We are talking not about rises, but about the elimination of fraud and, for the second time this afternoon, we have heard the Labour party being the friend of the tax avoider. Is it not right that the Labour party is simply trying to play politics and does not care about economics at all?

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend is right. When it comes to fraud, of all Labour's phoney figures, those on borrowing, debt and tax are the most fraudulent. Our worst year for public borrowing was better than Labour's best year. If we had continued to borrow at the level that we inherited from the last Labour Government, national debt would have doubled—[HON. MEMBERS: "It has."] No, it has not. Hon. Members should get their facts right. National debt is significantly lower than it was in 1979, and if they have other figures, they should produce them. That is why people are saying, "There are lies, damned lies, and Labour sound bites."

Exchange Rates

8. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the percentage change in the value of the pound (a) against the deutschmark, (b) against the dollar and (c) against the basket of international currencies since September 1992. [318]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Between 1 September 1992 and 24 October 1996, sterling has fallen by 13 per cent. against the deutschmark, 20 per cent. against the dollar and 12 per cent. on an ERI—that is a basket of currencies—basis.

Mr. Williams: Does the Chancellor recognise that, as has been shown again by Labour's 28-point lead in the latest opinion poll, the people of this country realise that the recovery has nothing to do with the Government's policies, but is due to the devaluation that followed black Wednesday?

Mr. Clarke: That peculiar theory is obviously held in more quarters than I had appreciated. The idea that all one has to do to achieve economic success is to devalue one's currency has been disproved over and over again by successive Labour Governments. Of course, in the short term that devaluation gave us a competitive advantage, but it might well have given rise to higher inflation and led to the sort of disasters that we had when Labour was in power.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Thames (Mr. Lamont) acted quickly. He put in place a firm inflation target and a framework for monetary policy, which I have since strengthened to concentrate on delivering that target. We went in for tight fiscal policies to keep the public finances under control and we kept the competitive advantage that came from the devaluation by taking the right economic measures here. We were opposed all the way by the Opposition, who would have turned the devaluation into the sort of fiasco that we saw over and over again when Labour was last in power

Mr. John Townend: Is not the Government's performance in dealing with the devaluation unique? This is the first time that devaluation has been followed by sustained low inflation. Is not the success of the Government's monetary policy borne out by the fact that, in recent months, the pound has been rising?

Mr. Clarke: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is the first time that we have kept the competitive advantages of a devaluation. We took the tough measures that were necessary to do so, despite Labour's opposition. Now the pound is strengthening strongly. It is still not back—but at an acceptable level—because it is just getting back to where it was 18 months to two years ago. That is because of confidence in the international markets about the long-term stability and prosperity of the United Kingdom economy.

Mr. Gordon Brown: Although the Prime Minister told us in 1992 that the pound would replace the deutschmark as the strongest European currency, will the Chancellor confirm that, in an astonishing revelation this afternoon, he had to admit that we are now behind France and Germany in national income, that we have been behind France and Germany for years under his Government, and that our best hope is to catch up with France and Germany not now or next year, but many years from now? What is left of the Government's claim that Britain is the enterprise centre of Europe? Will the Chancellor confirm that we are in the bottom half of the European league, and that that is the result of 17 years of Conservative government?

Mr. Clarke: The right hon. Gentleman aspires to be a Chancellor of the Exchequer who attends meetings of the G7 Finance Ministers. He has been shadowing the job for three years, yet he has just discovered that the Germans and the French have bigger economies than ours. That has been the case for many years under successive Governments. The failure of the United Kingdom compared with other countries, under Labour

Governments in particular, led to our being overtaken in the post-war world. In the 1980s and 1990s we have had faster growth than France or Germany. We are fast catching up with them. The right hon. Gentleman is so out of touch with the real world that he does not realise that his policies would take us back to the comparative decline from which, under a Conservative Government, we have at last escaped.

Economy

9. **Mr. Sweeney:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the International Monetary Fund's recent report on the United Kingdom economy. [322]

Mr. Waldegrave: The IMF recently described the UK's economic performance as "enviable" and said that "the strong overall performance is a product of sound economic policies."

Mr. Sweeney: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that extremely complimentary report contrasts starkly with the performance of the last Labour Government, which was so bad that the International Monetary Fund had to come in and run our economy? Does he further agree that Labour's plans to introduce the provisions of the social chapter on a minimum income are likely to destroy jobs and damage our economy?

Mr. Waldegrave: The contrast between the situation in, I believe, 1976 when Lord Healey, the then Chancellor, could not attend the IMF meeting because of the financial crisis in Britain, followed by the arrival of the IMF to run the British economy, and the fact that the IMF this year congratulated my right hon. and learned Friend, could hardly be more marked. That contrast provides a summary of the difference between Labour and Conservative economic government.

Mr. Winnick: If it is all so rosy in the garden, will the Chief Secretary explain why there is such an overwhelming wish in the country to get rid of the Government, and why *The Times* today publishes an opinion poll showing a 28 per cent. Labour lead? Does that not demonstrate that what the British people want, first and foremost, is a general election now?

Mr. Waldegrave: I remember hearing remarks like that from the hon. Gentleman many times over the past 17 years. I shall hear them from the Opposition benches over the coming years too.

Mr. Duncan Smith: In fairness to the Opposition, when my right hon. Friend and the Chancellor study the IMF report, will they ask themselves whether, over the entire period when the IMF has reported on this country, the shadow Chancellor has ever agreed with us, or got it right, on any single major decision affecting taxation, interest rates or anything else?

Mr. Waldegrave: One certainly wants to be fair in these matters, and the answer is that my hon. Friend is perfectly right. In the past, the Opposition have always got interest rate judgments wrong. They now have a policy which precision-bombs all the strengths of our economy—the social chapter, the minimum wage and so on. They want to destroy all the labour market liberalisation which is giving us more and better jobs than our European competitors.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [338]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning, I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is the Government's intention first to cut and then to abolish both inheritance tax and capital gains tax—moves that would be extremely popular with all who work hard to provide for themselves and their children? Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is strange that the electorate hears a great deal about taxes that the Opposition would cut and precisely nothing about taxes that they would raise?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We hear very little about the windfall tax. Instead, we hear about promised reductions in value added tax—reductions that were called "cynical" by a shadow Treasury spokesman last year. But we hear little about what the rate of the windfall tax would be, on whom it would be levied, or what it would mean for the people who use gas, electricity and the other utilities.

As for our tax plans, I can confirm that our first priority, when it is affordable, is to move towards a 20p basic rate of tax; and then to deal with the other taxes that my hon. Friend mentions.

Mr. Blair: I think that what most people remember about cynicism and tax is that the Government promised not to raise VAT before the election and raised it straight afterwards.

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister said that he could not be precise about lifting the beef ban now because there were continuing discussions in Luxembourg. That meeting ended last night. Is it correct that, although a compensation package for all European farmers was agreed, there was no agreed progress on lifting the ban? If so, given that the Prime Minister's timetable for lifting that ban expires tomorrow, what is his new timetable?

The Prime Minister: No, the right hon. Gentleman has misunderstood something—but I shall happily explain it in greater detail to him. The discussions yesterday in the Agriculture Committee were not the discussions to which I specifically referred. The discussions are going on with officials and with the Commission in order to deal with the science—that was not a matter for general discussion in the agriculture debate yesterday.

What was agreed was more resources for farmers. The determination of precisely where the extra £50 million will go is to be discussed in this country and decided later.

Mr. Blair: Actually, the right hon. Gentleman said on Tuesday that the discussions on lifting the ban were continuing now. My understanding is that lifting the beef ban was not even put on the agenda by the British Government at Luxembourg—an extraordinary state of affairs.

The Prime Minister gave us the November timetable; it has now expired. Is it his position that the Florence agreement is still valid, or is his position that that agreement should be changed? In the latter case, what change is he seeking; and in either case, given that he gave us a timetable before, precisely what is his new timetable now? I think we should be told.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman needs to do a little more research before he asks ill-advised questions on this subject. The discussions on the scientific evidence are continuing with the Commission. Those discussions were not especially appropriate for the Agriculture Committee. Many of them are technical discussions and they are continuing. As I said to the House very clearly earlier this week, scientific issues that arose after the Florence agreement remain to be determined

As I told the House on Tuesday, of course the Florence agreement is still in being. Much of that agreement has already been met, and, as I set out to the House on Tuesday, a determination on the rest of it depends substantially on the points still under discussion. I shall explain again gently to the right hon. Gentleman that those points arose after the Florence agreement in the light of changed science that is still being discussed. I hope that that is now clear enough for the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Blair: I do not think that it will be clear to the farming industry, to Europe or to anyone else. What is clear is that the Prime Minister said that the beef ban would be lifted by November. The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. We all remember when he stood at the Dispatch Box and said that the ban would be lifted by November. Is it the position now that it will not be lifted by November, and that he cannot tell when it will be lifted? I think that is true. He simply cannot tell us what the position will be.

Is not that weak and ineffectual leadership—precisely what means that his Government can no longer advance Britain's interests abroad, nor look after them properly at home? That is why people in this country say, "Enough is enough". *[Interruption.]* Yes, they say that. If we are to get leadership, direction and purpose back in Britain, let the British people decide, and let this weak and vacillating Government go.

The Prime Minister: That really was one of the most trivial series of comments—utterly trivial. This is a matter of great interest to British agriculture. Scientific changes are important to that industry, but the right hon. Gentleman does not understand them, does not enter into any research on them, deliberately distorts what little he does know, ignores the reality of what is happening to the British beef industry, and moves—as he does on his third question every Tuesday and Thursday—into a carefully pre-packaged, pre-prepared piece of irrelevant, juvenile sloganising. *[Interruption.]* I hear applause for the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who is undoubtedly the author of much of this sloganising. The right hon. Gentleman should give up this matinee performance, and start dealing with the realities of the beef crisis and other matters that we deal with daily.

Mrs. Peacock: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the county of Yorkshire has an economy that is bigger and better than those of many small nations? Is he also aware that 140 companies from Yorkshire are quoted on the London stock exchange, which is more than many other regions in this country? Will he send congratulations to all those in the county who have worked extremely hard to achieve the present state?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly happy to congratulate the successful innovators who have produced a successful economy in Yorkshire, and undoubtedly many of them have been successful. That is also true in other parts of the country. At the moment, we have the most innovative and the most competitive economy in western Europe.

Mr. Ashdown: The national debt has been going for 300 years. Will the Prime Minister confirm that he has doubled it in the past six?

The Prime Minister: Can the right hon. Gentleman name a single expenditure cut that he has supported?

Mr. Bill Walker: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Union that he wishes to protect is the Union of the United Kingdom, and that his Government will have no truck with proposals that put the Union at risk, and would not give people living in England the same opportunities as the people living in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I confirm the importance of the Union not only to Scotland but to England and the rest of the United Kingdom. I have never advanced the argument that devolution, or the separation that the Scottish National party wants, would be bad for Scotland alone, although I believe that it would be bad for Scotland—because I believe that it would be bad for the rest of the United Kingdom too.

Q2. **Mr. Austin-Walker:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [339]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Austin-Walker: Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) reminded the Chancellor of the Exchequer of a BBC radio interview in which the right hon. and learned Gentleman, recalling the introduction of VAT, said that if we could start again we could have VAT on everything. Does the Prime Minister share the Chancellor's desire to extend VAT to children's clothes,

water, public transport and food, or does he share the view of Opposition Members and of the mass of the British people—that enough is enough?

The Prime Minister: I certainly think that enough is enough of absurd sloganising of that sort. I am delighted that the Opposition have decided to spend so much of the money that they have apparently accumulated on the sort of trashy advertising campaign that they are trying to conduct this afternoon. If the hon. Gentleman wants to know about VAT, I shall tell him what the hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling) said about a Scottish nationalist proposal to reduce VAT to 5 per cent. He described it as

"another cynical ploy from an increasingly opportunistic and desperate party".—[*Official Report*, 23 January 1995; Vol. 253, c. 49.]

Now the Labour party is doing the same.

Mr. Garel-Jones: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, following yesterday's rise in interest rates, mortgage rates in this country remain at their lowest level for a generation? Can he recall any Government-announced interest rate move, whether upwards or downwards, that was not opposed by the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: No. One part of the shadow Chancellor's litany is absolutely consistent: if interest rates go down he claims that that shows weakness in the economy, but if they go up he claims the same thing. It is a consistent litany. My right hon. Friend is right about the present level of interest rates. He is also right to say that the British economy is exceedingly strong, and that we shall keep it strong and keep inflation low.

Q3. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [340]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Hutton: Does the Prime Minister accept that, after 22 Tory tax rises since 1992, which have left the typical British family with an extra tax bill of £2,000, the British people are entitled to say that they have had enough both of him and of his party's broken promises on tax?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the level of tax, I look forward to finding out which tax reductions he has supported in recent years. Will he say now that he will not support the windfall tax, the tartan tax, the health tax proposed by his Front-Bench spokesmen, or the teenage tax that will result from child benefit being taken away? Which of those, all of which have been proposed by the occupants of the Opposition Front Bench, will the hon. Gentleman oppose?

Mr. Riddick: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the European Commission has disgracefully suppressed new evidence showing a clear link between rigid labour laws and high unemployment? Is not that a huge embarrassment for the Commission and for Opposition Members who support the job-destroying social chapter and a minimum wage? Does it not show that the Labour party's approach would lead to massively increased unemployment?

The Prime Minister: I have not seen the report, but like my hon. Friend I have heard that the report exists and that there has been some difficulty in getting it into the public gaze. I shall certainly ask whether the report will be published, so people can have a sensible debate on the policies that underlie it and see whether they are, as we believe, costing jobs; if they are, we shall consider whether we can take action to prevent that from occurring in the future and to reverse those expensive, job-costing policies, which are so much the flavour of the month with Opposition Front-Benchers.

Q4. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [341]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. O'Hara: Two days ago in the House, I repeated to the Prime Minister our invitation to co-operate in the introduction of legislation to regulate the advertising and sale of certain dangerous knives and weapons that are obvious to Opposition Members and to the British public and that ought to be obvious to the Government. The Prime Minister once again retreated.

—[HON. MEMBERS: "Question."] Madam Speaker: Order. Those who are calling out for a question are often the first to be guilty. I am asking the hon. Gentleman to carry out the regulations and put his question, but he does not need any guidance from Conservative Members.

Mr. O'Hara: Certainly, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister once again retreated behind the need for a definition. We have now produced a definition and—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must now put a question; otherwise, he must resume his seat.

Mr. O'Hara: Has the Prime Minister seen the definition, does he agree with it, and will he now sit down with us and discuss it?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will examine very carefully any constructive proposal. I understand that the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) has written to my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and that there will be a meeting with the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) in the near future. I must say, however, that it seems that the Labour Front-Bench team has been forced to accept what my right hon. and learned Friend has said all along: that it is not easy to define knives to be banned, despite the fact that the hon. Member for Blackburn said that it was. I believe that he has had to change his position. Of course we will consider any constructive suggestion from the hon. Member for Blackburn or from the hon. Gentleman.

Business of the House

3.32 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): May I ask the Leader of the House for details of future business?

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Crime (Sentences) Bill.

TUESDAY 5 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Second Reading of the Local Government and Rating Bill.

THURSDAY 7 NOVEMBER—Motion on the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations.

Motions on the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order and the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order.

FRIDAY 8 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

MONDAY 11 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Education Bill.

Madam Speaker, I cannot yet be definite about Tuesday 12 and Wednesday 13 November, but I hope to provide Opposition time on one of those days and to take Government business on the other. It will be proposed that on Wednesday 13 November there will be a debate on the identification of cattle and labelling of beef and beef products in European Standing Committee A.

On Thursday 14 November there will be a debate on Hong Kong on a motion for the Adjournment of the House and on Friday 15 November a debate on a motion for the Adjournment of the House on a subject that will be announced.

[*Wednesday 13 November: European Standing Committee A—European Community Document: 10495/96; Identification of Cattle and Labelling of Beef and Beef Products. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report HC 36-i (1996-97).*]

Mrs. Taylor: I thank the Leader of the House for that information.

In view of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's misleading remark yesterday that the Opposition always refuse the offer of a spring economy debate, will the Leader of the House guarantee that there will be such a debate early next spring so that the House will have an opportunity before the general election is called to examine the real facts and the Government's appalling record on the economy? If the Chancellor is offering such a debate, we will be happy to accept that offer.

After yesterday's debate winding up the Queen's Speech, can the Leader of the House shed any light on the rumours still circulating that a leasehold reform Bill may yet be introduced? Such a measure was originally pinpointed as due to be in the Queen's Speech but seems subsequently to have been dropped.

The Leader of the House heard the exchanges at Question Time on combat knives and will therefore know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) have made constructive suggestions to the Home Secretary. We have detailed proposals for legal controls to ban the sale of combat knives and to prevent the aggressive marketing of such knives.

Will he ensure that the Home Secretary considers those proposals in a less churlish manner than that which the Prime Minister displayed a few minutes ago when he was almost looking for problems rather than solutions to deal with the issue? Will he ensure that, when decisions are made following those discussions, a statement is made to the House so that the Home Secretary can be questioned further on the details of his proposals.

Finally, the Leader of the House is aware of the long-standing and widespread despair at the Government's handling of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis, which has been made evident on many occasions by both Government and Opposition Members. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) pointed out at Question Time, the Prime Minister told us in June that the beef ban would be lifted by November—and November starts tomorrow. There was some confusion in what the Prime Minister said about whether the lifting of the ban was discussed at the Council meeting that finished last night.

It is an important matter and I should think that all hon. Members would like to know when the House will be given the opportunity to discuss the Government's failure to deliver on the lifting of the beef ban. If the Prime Minister cannot give us a date for its lifting, can the Leader of the House give us a date for a full-scale debate?

Mr. Newton: On the first question, I shall consider, as I always do, requests for debates, whether on economic matters or anything else. I hope that the hon. Lady will bear it in mind the opportunities provided by Opposition days. In view of what she said, she may want to explain the fact that, as far as I can recall, the last time that the Opposition chose anything that could be called an economic debate in their time is as far back as July 1995. Given the terms in which she described the economy, I find that odd.

Secondly, on leasehold reform, I think that the hon. Lady may be referring to the proposals that were published in draft some time ago in respect of commonhold rather than leasehold. She may be confusing those two distinct issues. I am not yet in a position to say more on that.

On combat knives, I did not think that the Prime Minister's remarks were in any way churlish. He made it clear that he was aware that the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) had written to the Home Secretary, and said that he expected that a meeting would take place. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary's approach to that meeting will certainly be constructive because it has always been clear that there is no dispute about the desirability of banning offensive weapons but that the matter depends on being able effectively to define them. To anyone who doubts our willingness to do so, I should say that we have banned 14 such weapons over the past few years and given the police powers to stop and search for them—powers which the Labour party argued against.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made the position on BSE entirely clear at Prime Minister's questions, and I shall not add to what he said.

Sir John Cope (Northavon): When will the Government publish the report by Lord Lloyd of Berwick on anti-terrorist legislation? When it is published, will we have a chance to debate it?

Mr. Newton: I can be clear about publication. My right hon. and learned Friends the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have published the report today and have placed a copy in the Library. The Government will obviously want to study the recommendations and respond formally in due course. That would be the appropriate time to consider whether a debate is necessary.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): As the Leader of the House has left some time spare in the second week of business that he announced today, will he give hon. Members on both sides an early idea of when the Second Reading of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill, which is about to be published, will be? Will he say a word about the representations that have been made to him through the usual channels about the possibility of a day in Committee of the whole House on the Bill shortly after the Second Reading?

Mr. Newton: I hope that I am always as helpful to the House as I can be. I certainly take note of the hon. Gentleman's request. As he knows, the Bill has not yet been published. He will also know that it is not usual practice to go into detail about discussions held through the usual channels, but I am sure that the representations that he mentioned will be taken into account.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): May we have a debate on offensive weapons and knives? Sadly, a young man in my constituency was killed with a knife recently, but it was a kitchen knife, which would not be covered by the term "combat knife". Does that not show that easy definitions are not easy to come by and that the Opposition's opportunism is to be despised?

Mr. Newton: That shows not only the difficulty of definition, but that all sorts of knives would not be banned under any definition. Nobody would argue in favour of banning kitchen knives, but they can, nevertheless, be used to inflict considerable damage.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Leader of the House aware that, since April this year, the Secretary of State for Social Security has failed to report to the House on the recommendations of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to change the rules relating to chronic bronchitis, which currently result in only 11 per cent. of applicants obtaining benefit? I have told the House before that, as a result of all the representations that have been made, we fully expected the Secretary of State for Social Security to come to the House before now and, we hope, accept the new proposals from that important advisory council. What is going on? Does the Secretary of State for Social Security not care about the miners who are coughing their lungs up? Is he waiting for them to die? Let us have a statement.

Mr. Newton: As I well know from my ministerial experience, such matters are complicated and they require detailed examination. My right hon. Friend will announce his decision as soon as he can.

Mr. Bob Dunn (Dartford): Is there any chance of an early, urgent debate on the link between home ownership and mortgage interest relief? Conservative Members want to demonstrate their support for that relief and to argue in favour of adjusting it upwards, whereas the Labour party, in particular the hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford), wants mortgage interest relief abolished.

Mr. Newton: The debates that will follow my right hon. and learned Friend's Budget in just under a month may well provide an opportunity for such points to be aired.

Mr. Greville Janner (Leicester, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman find time for an urgent debate on the work of the tripartite gold commission? After it has handed out money and gold to the Albanians, the commission will be left with a residue, much of which should go to individuals—Jewish and non-Jewish—who suffered from Nazism. Will he ensure, as far as he can, that Her Majesty's Government will not agree to any distribution of the residue without a debate in the House and without consulting the United States?

Mr. Newton: I shall certainly bring those representations to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): If there is to be a debate or discussions between the parties about dangerous knives, would my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that since it would be a criminal offence to be in a public place with any of those combat knives without reasonable excuse, subject to imprisonment of two years, one temporary solution to the problem might be to require all shops to display prominently a notice to that effect?

Mr. Newton: I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will consider carefully the suggestion that my hon. and learned Friend has made in the same constructive way as he will consider all other points raised by any hon. Member.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus, East): While the BSE crisis bites ever deeper, all we have had from the Government is confusion, contradiction and vagueness. The industry deserves better than that. I would like a full statement to clarify the issues, because, while the right hon. Gentleman may be satisfied with the situation, very few other folk are.

Mr. Newton: There is a fairly widespread misunderstanding of one aspect of the problem. Everybody knows that, over the past few months, there

[Mr. Newton]

have been changes in the nature of the scientific advice. That advice plainly needs to be properly and carefully considered when deciding on courses of action.

Mr. John Marshall (Hendon, South): Will my right hon. Friend arrange for an early debate on industrial relations in the Post Office? Did he hear the interview on the radio this lunchtime with a Post Office leader who said that the phrase "Post early for Christmas" would have a new meaning this year and that Christmas cards should be posted in November to arrive in time, while Christmas cards posted in December would arrive in January or February? Is that not quite intolerable? Does it not demonstrate that the monopoly must be lifted, and for ever?

Mr. Newton: It is certainly true that people not only in the House but outside will not look kindly at disruptions to the mail service in the run-up to Christmas. Now that further talks have been agreed, I hope that the union will reflect on the damage that would be done to its members, quite apart from anything else, if the strike goes ahead. We have, of course, made it clear that, if the postal service is disrupted by further strikes, we would be prepared to suspend the monopoly for a further three months.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Last night, evidence was submitted to the Home Affairs Select Committee by representatives of the Prison Governors Association and Prison Officers Association that the current rate of overcrowding is rising at a rate of 800 per month and at roughly an annual cost of £224 million, and that we need to build one prison a month just to cope with increasing numbers. They said that the current situation is almost one of warehousing prisoners rather than rehabilitating them. In the light of that evidence, and given those appalling and dangerous circumstances, does the right hon. Gentleman think that the time has come for a debate in the House on the prison system and its purpose?

Mr. Newton: We have just had a debate on home affairs and Home Office matters during the debate on the Queen's Speech, and I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman participated. I have not had a chance to study the evidence to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will look at it carefully.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): May I support the calls to my right hon. Friend for a debate on combat knives so that the House can get down to the problem of definition, bearing in mind the fact that a small penknife is a combat knife if used in combat? It is a very difficult question, on which my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary needs proper support rather than all the absurd criticism that we have heard from the Opposition.

Mr. Newton: I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend will be grateful for my hon. Friend's comments and, as he says, there is no doubt that it is a genuinely difficult problem.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that during the passage of the Broadcasting Bill the Minister of State at the Department of National Heritage promised to bring forward regulations to change the television concessionary licence scheme for old age pensioners. When can we expect those regulations? Will they be published before Christmas, because many pensioners are waiting for them?

Mr. Newton: I shall bring that question to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): Has my right hon. Friend seen today's report from the Select Committee on Social Security on unfunded pension liabilities? Will he allocate time for a debate on it, for two reasons? First, we could debate the success of early Government policies to reduce our own liabilities, but, most important, we could give a lead to the rest of Europe in exposing that incredibly important subject, which will not only destroy the whole process of monetary union, but could rend the fabric of Europe in the next 20 or 30 years. Let us have that debate now and give a lead to Europe.

Mr. Newton: I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the report is a valuable contribution to the debate on these matters, and it certainly highlights how much better placed than our European partners we are in that respect. I cannot promise an early debate, but it is highly likely that there would be an opportunity for such matters to be considered in the Budget debate following my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor's Budget statement and the associated social security announcements.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): May we have a debate on opencast mining, which is spreading like a virulent cancer throughout north Derbyshire, where the Government closed the final pits? Early-day motion 24 mentions a case in my constituency.

[*That this House calls upon the Secretaries of State for Health and the Environment to jointly establish a full-scale and impartial investigation into the nature, extent and impact of hazardous and toxic materials on contaminated land on the site of the former Avenue Cokeworks at Wingerworth, Derbyshire, which would undertake detailed research into the impact of past operations on the site upon the health and well being of the former workforce and of the local communities; further calls for such an investigation to assess the likely impact for cases of asthma, cancer, heart disease and ill-health generally of present plans to commence opencast mining operations on the site, which will involve the movement and burial on-site of the contaminated land in question, and insists that a block be placed upon the commencement of the opencast operations to allow this investigation to take place, which should be given the duty of reporting on the best available methods of cleaning and decontaminating the site in the safest possible fashion.*]

In another place, between Barrow Hill and Eckington, it is proposed to dig a great hole in the ground, which for 19 years will be filled by waste, brought in over that vast period by train in 50 sealed containers, which will be dismantled and then brought in by road. That is just one of the problems that exist in that area, which we need to debate in the House.

Mr. Newton: I have some constituency experience of a somewhat comparable matter, involving, not extraction of coal and insertion of rubbish, but extraction of gravel and insertion of rubbish. It is for the mineral planning authority in the first instance to decide whether permission should be given for such proposals.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): As my right hon. Friend is also my constituency neighbour, might he be aware of the concern in north Essex about the erection of telecommunications masts, and is there a possibility of his drawing that matter to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency? Will there be a space in the forthcoming business to raise that matter of concern, as, if a telecommunications mast is constructed adjacent to or in an area of outstanding natural beauty, there will be considerable anger in my constituency?

Mr. Newton: I am aware that, in what I will call our part of the country, there is quite a lot of concern about the number of such masts that have sprung up and are springing up. I understand that my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency, who is sitting on the Front Bench, has both met my hon. Friend and replied to a debate on the matter, but that would not exclude other possibilities being considered if I can find an opportunity.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): The Leader of the House will be aware that there is growing concern that medical evidence is excluded in appeals arising from the all work test. Is it not time that we had a debate to discuss how that all work test operates? There are many unfairnesses, and I do not believe that even the present Government intended the test to work as unfairly as it does.

Mr. Newton: I have already said that I would anticipate that, because of the association between the Budget and social security matters—I take it that that is what the hon. Gentleman is raising—there will be opportunities for debate on such matters in the immediate aftermath of the Budget.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): So that the debate on the Local Government and Rating Bill can be better informed, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Secretary of State for the Environment comes to the House before next Wednesday to give a statement explaining why his Department rightly had to lodge an objection with Labour-controlled Hillingdon borough council against its proposed changes to the unitary development plan in the borough—in particular to promote social housing on public open space, green belt and green chain, to the grave damage of the local environment? Those are entirely germane issues, for which a statement is opportune at the earliest possible date.

Mr. Newton: I will, of course, bring the request for a statement on those matters to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, although I had not regarded Hillingdon as an entirely rural area of the type to which the Local Government and Rating Bill is intended to apply.

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate on the crisis facing many local authorities, especially in London and in the London borough of Lambeth, following the ruling in the courts about asylum seekers? Does he realise that many local authorities are faced with huge financial burdens, for which they receive absolutely no extra money from Government? That is a national responsibility, not the responsibility of London authorities and not the responsibility of those local authorities which in the past have done their best to help asylum seekers.

Mr. Newton: My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Social Security Secretary will have had those concerns drawn to their attention and will consider them carefully.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): May I add my support to calls for an early debate on the threat by the Communication Workers Union to disrupt the postal service during the Christmas period? The postmen and postwomen of this country have much public good will, but they will lose that if they carry out their threat. We need to consider the monopoly position of the postal service, because simply lengthening the period during which the monopoly is suspended to three months will not attract enough people into delivering mail. A debate on that subject will also tempt the Labour party to say something about the dispute, so that we can demonstrate once and for all that new Labour is still on the side of the unions and that the Conservative Government is on the side of the consumers.

Mr. Newton: It should not require a debate to extract a view on those matters from the Opposition; they should be prepared to condemn the industrial action anyway.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Does the Leader of the House keep a checklist of resolutions passed by the House? If so, why have we had no action on resolution No. 3, which the House passed unanimously on 1 July 1994 after four hours' debate? Will the right hon. Gentleman ask the Prime Minister to make a statement next week on his intentions in respect of that resolution?

Mr. Newton: I would be in a slightly better position to reply if the hon. Gentleman had told me what the resolution was about.

Mr. Mackinlay: I will show the right hon. Gentleman what it is.

Mr. Newton: I think that I know, as I was here when the hon. Gentleman made his speech. I believe that it concerns the administration of arrangements for war veterans—my memory is quite good. Comments have been made on those matters from time to time and I shall bring the matter to the attention of my appropriate hon. Friends. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman's intended gesture of marching across the Floor of the House did not work, because I remembered what he was talking about.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): May I endorse the call for a debate on the Social Security Select Committee report published today on unfunded European pension liabilities, which are set to run into trillions of

[Mr. Alan Simpson]

pounds? As a single European currency would preclude national Governments from using any combination of variations in interest rates, exchange rates, inflation rates and Government borrowing to cover the bill, it would be extremely helpful if the House knew the position that the Government intend to take in the intergovernmental conference negotiations on how the bill should be paid and by whom.

Mr. Newton: I commented on that in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford (Mr. Duncan Smith). I cannot add much except to assure the hon. Gentleman that we have no intention of allowing our assets to be combined with other people's liabilities.

Mr. John Austin-Walker (Woolwich): On that same point, it is such a serious issue within the Social Security Select Committee report that it may get lost in the general debate on the Budget. There is extreme speculation that, if a single currency is introduced, liability may fall on British taxpayers. We should therefore have an early debate on the issue.

Mr. Newton: There are important issues here and the Government will respond to the report in the usual way. Thereafter, apart from anything that I might wish to do, there are opportunities for Select Committee reports to be debated in a way that is well understood in the House.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (York): Does the Leader of the House agree that it is as important to retain overseas investment in this country as it is to seek inward investment in the first place? He is aware that the Swiss-Swedish company Asea Brown Boveri closed down the carriage works in my constituency with the loss of some 1,650 jobs, but is he aware that the American printing giant, Donnelley's, has announced its intention to close its commercial printing operation in York with the loss of more than 300 jobs? Why does not the DTI respond by giving the same help to those companies as it does to companies considering inward investment? May we have a debate on the importance of retaining overseas investment in this country?

Mr. Newton: I cannot comment on specific cases but obviously I accept the importance of not only attracting inward investment but retaining it. I would find the hon. Gentleman's comments more credible if he were using his influence against his party's policies, which would manifestly make overseas and inward investment more difficult to obtain and to keep.

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): Will the Leader of the House confirm that next week has been designated regeneration week? Will he therefore ensure that an appropriate Minister makes a statement to the House about the transfer of 80 sites from British Coal to English Partnerships? The right hon. Gentleman will recall that those discussions have been going on for 18 months. Does he share our concern to bring new investment, new jobs and a new future to coalfield communities by putting an end to those interminable discussions?

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend the Member for West Hertfordshire (Mr. Jones), who has responsibilities in the relevant Department, is by my side and I am certain that he will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's remarks are communicated directly to the Secretary of State. No one need doubt the Government's determination to maximise the speed and degree of regeneration both in the areas to which the hon. Gentleman refers and in many others.

MEMBERS' CONSTITUENCIES

3.59 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is with regret that I ask you to use the authority of your office to draw the attention of the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) to the courtesies of the House. He turned up in my constituency to campaign on a very sensitive local issue without informing me of his visit. This is obviously a tiresome and repetitious point of order, which you must take many times, Madam Speaker. Would it be possible to formalise the rebukes made to hon. Members who abuse that courtesy? We must continue to raise such points of order otherwise hon. Members will transgress with impunity.

Madam Speaker: I deprecate such behaviour. I have let it be known on many occasions that it is simply common courtesy for an hon. Member to inform another hon. Member of his intention to enter his or her constituency—as, indeed, I shall do myself tomorrow. I know that the hon. Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) has made representations to the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vax), and I shall do what I can through the usual channels on both sides of the House—as I did only a few weeks ago—to keep up the pressure and ensure that courtesies are respected.

BILLS PRESENTED

Birds (Registration Charges)

Mr. Secretary Gummer, supported by Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Forsyth, Mr. Secretary Hague and Mr. Clappison, presented a Bill to make provision (including provision having retrospective effect) authorising the Secretary of State to impose charges in respect of registrations effected in accordance with regulations under section 6(2) or 7(1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 9.]

Firearms (Amendment)

Mr. Secretary Howard, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Portillo, Mr. Secretary Forsyth and Miss Widdecombe, presented a Bill to amend the Firearms Acts 1968 to 1992; to make provision in relation to the licensing and regulation of pistol clubs; to make further provision for regulating the possession of, and transactions relating to, firearms and ammunition; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed. [Bill 10.]

Orders of the Day

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.1 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The purpose of the Bill is to provide the future Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's London economic and trade office with a limited range of privileges and immunities.

At present, the Hong Kong Government operate a number of ETOs around the world. They have offices in Brussels, Geneva, Washington, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Toronto, Sydney and Singapore. The prime function of the ETOs is to promote trade with Hong Kong and to provide assistance to companies that are considering investing or starting operations in Hong Kong. The ETO in Brussels also maintains close links with the European Commission, and the ETO in Geneva is responsible for handling Hong Kong's relations with the World Trade Organisation.

The Sino-British joint declaration of 1984 provides that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will, after 30 June 1997, enjoy a high degree of autonomy, including in the conduct of its trade and commercial affairs. For example, the future Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government will be responsible for Hong Kong's trade policy. Hong Kong will continue to be a member in its own right of the World Trade Organisation and of the Customs Co-operation Council, as well as other international trade organisations.

The joint declaration provides for Hong Kong on its own to maintain and develop economic and trade relations with all states and regions and for it to establish official and semi-official economic and trade missions in foreign countries. Thus, Hong Kong will be able to maintain and further expand its network of ETOs after 30 June 1997.

The Hong Kong Government office in London is in a slightly different position from Hong Kong's other ETOs, reflecting the fact that Hong Kong is a British dependent territory until 1 July 1997. While the present London office performs a valuable trade and investment function, it also promotes Hong Kong in other ways—for example, by maintaining close contact with hon. Members who have an interest in Hong Kong affairs.

I expect that most hon. Members in the Chamber today will know the Hong Kong Government's Commissioner in London, Sir David Ford, who has done an excellent job, and I am pleased to see that he is continuing to do so. Over the years, many hon. Members have made sponsored visits to Hong Kong organised by the London office.

After 30 June 1997, the London office will become an ETO. It will continue to have contact with hon. Members, and I hope that educational visits will continue, but it will play a less active role in this respect, as the Chinese Government will be responsible for Hong Kong's foreign affairs. The main function of the office will therefore be to promote economic, trade and business links between Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, which is the work normally undertaken by the commercial section of an embassy.

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the large number of visits that have taken place—I am thinking in particular of the one in which I was involved recently, which was, I think, the last visit to be made to Hong Kong by Commonwealth Members of Parliament before the handover.

Is he aware that members of the delegation came away with an overwhelming and extremely encouraging impression of tremendous optimism among the business community—Chinese and other nationalities working there—for the future; that, in respect of contact with the People's Republic of China authorities represented in Hong Kong, there was a strong determination to let Hong Kong continue to be run economically and in other ways by the local Hong Kong Chinese; and that that double impression created a tremendous overall impression of great optimism for the future?

Mr. Hanley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am pleased that his experience has confirmed what we have all been working for. I mentioned yesterday during Foreign and Commonwealth Office Question Time that, some five years ago, the Hang Seng index was at about 4,000. Today, with only seven months or so to go before the transition, it is up at 12,000. That is hardly a sign of lack of confidence, either in the present Hong Kong or its future. I am very grateful for what my hon. Friend says.

The Hong Kong Government are, however, concerned that their ETOs should be given suitable status by host Governments, including a limited range of privileges and immunities. The privileges and immunities are of practical benefit to the ETOs, and they also help to reinforce the fact that Hong Kong has, and will continue to have, autonomy in the conduct of its trade relations.

The ETOs in Brussels and Geneva have enjoyed such privileges and immunities for a number of years. The Canadian Government have enacted legislation to grant privileges and immunities to sub-state entities, and provided a range of these to the ETO in Toronto. The Australians have enacted similar legislation for Hong Kong's new ETO in Sydney. The Japanese provide a range of non-statutory privileges and immunities to the ETO in Tokyo, and are considering enacting legislation to provide these on a statutory basis. The Singaporeans are still discussing with the Hong Kong Government what privileges and immunities they will grant to the ETO in Singapore, and the American Government have undertaken to enact legislation so that the three ETOs there can receive privileges and immunities.

The Hong Kong Government look to the British Government, both as the sovereign power until 30 June 1997 and as a co-signatory to the joint declaration, to help support Hong Kong's future autonomy. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear when he visited Hong Kong in March this year that Britain's obligations to the people of Hong Kong will not come to an end at midnight on 30 June 1997. It is against that background and the steps that other Governments have taken to give Hong Kong's ETOs a suitable status that my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade, who I am pleased to see present, and fellow signatories have decided, through the Government, to introduce the Bill.

[Mr. Hanley]

The limited privileges and immunities that we propose are set out in the schedule to the Bill. They are taken mainly from the Vienna convention on consular relations. They are, however, not nearly as extensive as those found in the convention, as the ETO will not be a consular mission.

The Chinese Government have been consulted and have agreed to our proposal to grant limited privileges and immunities, with effect from 1 July 1997, to the London office of the future Special Administrative Region Government.

The proposed package of privileges and immunities has been discussed with the Hong Kong Government to ensure that it will meet the functional needs of the ETO. In considering the Bill, I would urge hon. Members to bear in mind the important message that we shall be giving about the future autonomy of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It is only right that, as the former sovereign power, we do all we can to provide assistance.

I am pleased to move the Second Reading of the Bill. I am conscious that the House will have a full debate on Hong Kong on 14 November, and I look forward very much to that. It is a technical Bill, and I am grateful that the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) and the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) support it.

4.10 pm

Mr. Derek Fatchett (Leeds, Central): The official Opposition support the Bill. The Minister was right to say that, although it is a technical measure, it sends a number of constructive signals to the people of Hong Kong, and is important to United Kingdom-Chinese relations. The Minister was also correct in saying that, given the specific and technical nature of the Bill, we cannot broaden the scope of our debate. In any case, we have no need to do so, as a full day's debate on Hong Kong is scheduled for two weeks' time.

We are delighted that the Government have acted quickly on the matter. We understand the reasons for the Bill. We wholly accept that obligations arise from the joint declaration and the responsibilities defined within it, and we wholeheartedly agree with the Government that Britain's responsibilities to Hong Kong and its people do not end on 1 July 1997.

Although I might sound old-fashioned, I believe that it is crucial to Britain's future standing in the world that we honour our obligations to Hong Kong after July 1997. In many respects, our role may be more important now than it was previously. We owe that responsibility, and whether a Conservative or Labour Government are in office in 12 months' time, we shall endeavour to carry out all the commitments that we consider morally important.

Let me add the praise and thanks of the Opposition to the Hong Kong office that is currently based on London. This may be almost our last chance to thank Sir David Ford and his colleagues for their work on behalf of Hong Kong and for the service that they have provided, not only to hon. Members, but to others in the United Kingdom who are interested in either trading with Hong Kong or looking to that country as a potential source of inward investment into the United Kingdom. The role of the Hong Kong Office will change substantially after 1 July next year. That is one reason why we need the Bill, and it should become law.

The Minister rightly pointed out that Australia and Canada have already taken measures to ensure that the privileges and immunities set out in the Bill will be in place in those countries. It would look wrong indeed if Britain had not carried out those responsibilities when other countries had already done so.

There is no disagreement on this technical measure—far from it. We support the Government, we wish the Bill full speed, and look forward to it becoming law.

Let me end with two slightly broader points that are relevant to the role and functions of the new economic and trade office. As the Minister said, It is worth reminding ourselves that, a few years ago, there was a great sense of pessimism about the future of Hong Kong. That pessimism was totally unjustified, and today, optimism in the island continues to grow at some pace. All hon. Members would like the United Kingdom to repeat the economic performance of Hong Kong. That is probably a matter of consensus across the British political divide.

It is worth while reminding ourselves of some of Hong Kong's success. A great deal of potential has already been realised, and there is a great deal more. Hong Kong is the eighth largest trading community in the world, the eighth largest stock market, and the fifth largest centre for foreign exchange dealing. Probably the most remarkable figure, and the legacy that China will inherit, is that, at the end of the current financial year, Hong Kong's fiscal reserves will be equivalent to 150 billion Hong Kong dollars. That is a very healthy nest egg for Britain to leave for Hong Kong and the future.

It is also worth while reminding ourselves that, in Hong Kong, China will have a new economic force representing 20 per cent. of China's new gross domestic product. Hong Kong is already a substantial economic success; it is already a substantial world trading partner. The facilities in the Bill are important for maintaining that economic and trade function. The lesson from such figures and the broader issues that we shall debate in two weeks' time are clear enough. It is in China's interest to allow, maintain and encourage the development of Hong Kong's economic success. We have an interest in that; China has an even greater interest.

Much of Hong Kong's economic and trading success has been based on the values that are central to its political system and way of life. It is important for the future that all recognise that there is an intimate link between political activity and economic success, especially in the context of Hong Kong. We shall be raising those broader issues in two weeks' time, but they are important in the context of this Bill, because, in agreement with the Chinese on these narrow issues, we are ensuring that Hong Kong will have the right to trade and encourage its trade, and be seen as a separate entity in a whole range of activities.

The Bill is specific, but still part of the changeover of control in Hong Kong. It is certain that, although the changeover will take place, all hon. Members have great faith in the people of Hong Kong continuing to make their island a great success. We have seen what they have done in the past, and I believe that they will continue to achieve such success in future. Britain's task in future, as it is in

this Bill, is to ensure that we do all that we can to maintain such success and the Hong Kong way of life. I support the Minister in introducing this legislation.

4.17 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North–East): I, too, can be brief. The Minister may be relieved to hear that I have not brought a megaphone with me, in the light of our exchange yesterday during Foreign Office questions and his characteristically generous telephone call to my office this morning.

As has already been pointed out, the Bill is entirely sensible. It will enable the United Kingdom to do as much for Hong Kong as Canada and Australia have already done, and should clearly pass through the House with neither let nor hindrance. I am particularly encouraged by the fact that the Bill is being introduced with the agreement of the Government of the People's Republic of China. Such agreement may well be the basis on which we can effectively argue for a closer coming together of opinion on some more fundamental issues, several of which I have no doubt will be touched on in the debate on 14 November.

I add my good wishes and congratulations to those already expressed to Sir David Ford, who has been a most assiduous representative of Hong Kong in this country. He has taken every opportunity in the least officious way to promote the case of Hong Kong and ensure that right hon. and hon. Members have been well aware of the issues at any particular time. He has been especially effective in ensuring that a ready stream of individuals from Hong Kong, especially members of LegCo, have visited the United Kingdom to talk face to face with hon. Members. The debate on 14 November should not be foreshadowed by this debate, because we are concerned today with essentially a technical measure.

The Minister will have readily anticipated that there will be concern in the House during the debate on 14 November about civil rights, particularly freedom of expression in the print and broadcast media. Recent observations from a fairly high level in the Chinese Government have raised a number of questions in the minds of the people of Hong Kong. These are important issues. To put it bluntly, it would be a poor legacy if we left free trade, but not free speech. The House should be concerned with those matters when we consider the broader issues. The Bill should pass through the House as soon as is convenient, and I am happy to give it my support and that of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Anthony Nelson): I take the surprising liberty of coming to the Dispatch Box—having not expected to do so—because my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has kindly given me the opportunity to wrap up this short debate. I do so with great pleasure, because I have taken a close interest in trade relations between Hong Kong and the UK.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) and the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) for their remarks, and I particularly note what the hon. and learned Gentleman said about free speech as well as free trade. I am sure that their courteous and responsible remarks today will have been greeted by a much wider audience, as they have added to the aura of political stability and bipartisan national unity that we express in this House on behalf of our country towards Hong Kong.

This non-political Bill is a practical measure with limited expenditure implications. The people of Hong Kong will be heartened by the reservoir of good will in this House towards Hong Kong, and I hope that they will see the Bill as evidence of the Government's determination to do what we can to ensure that Hong Kong continues to enjoy full autonomy in the conduct of its economic and commercial affairs. I am sure that many hon. Members will continue to have dealings with Hong Kong in the London office long after 1997 in trade and commercial matters, and that the office will continue to perform its functions as effectively as it does now.

I very much appreciate the personal commendations that have been rendered on this occasion, and I am sure that the office will continue to play its role fully and effectively. The office will promote trade and investment between the UK and Hong Kong, which will help to secure the future of Hong Kong as a special administrative region, not just politically but commercially. For reasons of prosperity and good commerce at a time of transition—as well as for constitutional reasons—I very much welcome all the expressions of support that have been made today.

I have great pleasure in supporting my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, whose personal work in this area has been outstanding. He has taken his visits to Hong Kong seriously, and I take great pleasure in adding my commendation to the Bill.

Dr. Marek: I wish to question the Minister of State on one aspect of the Bill. Will any of the rights to be granted to the Hong Kong office on 1 July 1997 be in any way weaker than those granted to the offices of the provinces of Canada or the constituent parts of the Commonwealth of Australia? I hope that that is not the case, but if it is, I should like to know where and why the privileges will be different from those currently offered to all the other offices that will be in a similar situation after 1 July. This is a pure point of information, and I wonder whether the Minister has the answer to hand.

4.24 pm

Mr. Hanley: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall reply to the question of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek), who takes an assiduous interest in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Government office in London already receives partial exemption from rates and exemption from income tax for its staff. These are provided on an extra-statutory basis. The additional privileges and immunities in the Bill are for the running of the office, and include exemption from duties and taxes for the staff on the importation of certain effects and a motor vehicle, and on official vehicles for the office. The number of staff at the Hong Kong Government office will fall slightly.

The revenue forgone—this is not quite what the hon. Gentleman asked, but it may help the House if I say it—as a result of granting a limited range of privileges and immunities to the office and its staff should be well below £1 million. That is quoted in the explanatory memorandum.

[Mr. Hanley]

As for the differences between the Hong Kong office and any other office, I should explain that Hong Kong's position is unique. It is incumbent on Her Majesty's Government, as a co-signatory to the Sino-British joint declaration, to help Hong Kong to maintain its autonomy and international standing in trade matters. It would seem bizarre, as the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) said, if the United Kingdom did not help Hong Kong on this issue when other countries such as Australia, Canada and Singapore have planned or have granted a similar range of privileges and immunities to Hong Kong.

As for the differences with other countries, I think that it is true that the privileges that we are granting here are extra to the privileges and immunities granted to other offices. I shall certainly list them for the hon. Member for Wrexham. I shall send him a letter and publish the list of privileges and immunities granted to others, although it is true to say that most other similar offices have fewer privileges and immunities than are listed in the Bill. I do not have the detailed list with me, but I shall willingly answer the hon. Gentleman's question. It would be helpful to the House if I put the list in the Libraries of both Houses.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

Bill committed to a Committee of the whole House.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

Further proceedings stood postponed, pursuant to the Resolution of the House [25 October].

HONG KONG ECONOMIC AND TRADE OFFICE BILL *[Money]*

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 50(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of refunds paid by virtue of the Act.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill immediately considered in Committee; reported, without amendment; read the Third time, and passed.

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Mr. Roy Thomason be discharged from the Select Committee appointed to join with a Committee of the Lords as the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Mr. Walter Sweeney be added to the Committee.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

Manchester Airport Eastern Link Road

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. Lait.]*

4.29 pm

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I wish to raise a matter of considerable importance and interest in my constituency and I am grateful for the opportunity for this Adjournment debate to do so. My hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads visited my constituency and saw some of the problems that I wish to mention, so he is aware of the difficulties facing my constituents because the Manchester airport eastern link road—the MAELR—has not been completed.

The central section of the road, from the new A34 bypass—running north-south through my constituency—runs from the A34(M) in the west to Woodford road in Bramhall. My hon. Friend visited Woodford road in Bramhall to see the junction that has been located where none was originally envisaged. That junction has created terrific traffic problems in the villages of Woodford and Bramhall.

While the central section is welcome in itself, it can be properly welcomed only when the whole road has been completed: the central section alone has perhaps created more problems than it has solved. The central section was built with the aid of some private finance, which meant that it was finished well ahead of the other two sections in the west and east.

At the time of the public inquiry into the central section of MAELR, it was estimated that there would be an extra 15,000 to 20,000 daily car movements owing to the two out-of-town shopping developments. Those two developments contributed financially to the building of the central section. There is no doubt that those stores are a great success, but their commercial success has produced massive traffic problems. I shall give evidence to show that the increase in traffic has gone way beyond that anticipated at the time of the public inquiry.

My constituents and I are also annoyed that the constituency has had to wait 30 years for the road. The line has been laid down in some form or other for that long, but there is still not a complete bypass around the area that I am privileged to represent. There is merely a third of a bypass, which benefits the shopping cities, but does little to alleviate the constituency's traffic congestion. Indeed, the congestion will be worse until the Government build the rest of the MAELR.

The eastern section of the MAELR runs from Woodford road in Bramhall, through to the A523 Poynton road and will hopefully eventually link up to the proposed A6(M) Hazel Grove bypass. Congestion in Bramhall village, Woodford road and Chester road in Woodford and in Poynton—in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton)—has become intolerable. I shall give evidence of the scale of public concern within those areas and I am sure that my hon. Friend will too.

There is a lot of annoyance in the villages of Woodford and Bramhall at the increased traffic congestion, with heavy goods vehicles and cars coming on to the end of the MAELR, not only to reach the new shopping cities, but to reach the M63 by way of the MAELR and the A34(M). Of course, no junction was ever intended at the

point of entry to the MAELR in Woodford road at Bramhall, so the annoyance to residents who have to suffer the traffic has to be witnessed to be believed—their feelings are entirely justified.

When my hon. Friend the Minister visited Woodford road and saw the junction to which I referred, he met representatives of Bramhall and Woodford community councils. They expressed residents' views, but—being community council representatives—they were perhaps more polite than residents would have been if my hon. Friend and I had walked along Woodford road and knocked on their doors.

The western section of the MAELR will require building from the A34(M) through to the M56—what could be called the airport link. Traffic that would have bypassed Heald Green had the original scheme gone through in its entirety now comes off the central section of the MAELR and, if travelling west, comes on to the old A34 and goes straight on to Finney lane, which is the east-west route to the airport, through the village of Heald Green.

Again, the central section has brought no relief to my constituents, but merely more traffic—traffic that is of no benefit to the area I represent. The central section has increased traffic congestion significantly. Stockport metropolitan borough council monitored traffic and found that there had been a 30 per cent. increase in daily traffic along Finney lane, which is the only available western route at the western end of the central section for traffic going to the airport. Knowing how important Manchester airport is, my hon. Friend the Minister will realise the scale of that traffic.

Many developments have been proposed for the area: some are in the pipeline—approved but not yet built—and others are at some stage of the planning process. Their impact should not be underestimated and lend significant weight to the case for an early completion of both the western and the eastern sections of the Manchester airport eastern link road.

At Cheadle Royal hospital, which is adjacent to the old A34 and the shopping city at Cheadle Royal in what was Bruntford park, extra housing and commercial properties are at various stages of planning or build. They can only increase the traffic pressure on the old A34 and, indeed, the central section and surrounding roads.

At Hanforth Dean, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Hamilton), there is a large shopping development—one of the those that contributed toward meeting the cost of the central section of the MAELR. Construction on that development will continue—some with planning permission, some without—to enlarge the leisure and retail complex that is already there and generating the extra 15,000 to 20,000 car movements a day.

A little further north up the A34 we have a proposal for a multiplex cinema which, if built, will be the biggest in the country. I hasten to add that, although they are not my hon. Friend the Minister's concern, I opposed all those developments—for reasons that are obvious, given the traffic congestion that we already suffer—and some of them will be subject to public inquiries.

There is also a proposal for a plastics factory to be built next to the multiplex cinema—all that on the Sharston-Gatley boundary, which is also the boundary between the city of Manchester and the borough of Stockport, and not far from the M63 and the new A34 bypass. That would increase local traffic flowing on to local roads in my area, turning one of the most pleasant parts of the country—as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield would agree—and a lovely residential constituency into sheer hell for many of my constituents. That is not good enough.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to take into account the possibility that Manchester will get a second runway. The matter is before the Secretaries of State for Transport and for the Environment, who will make the final decision. The increased traffic would be intolerable if the proposal went ahead, in addition to all the developments that I have mentioned and the extra traffic that has been generated, over and above that expected by the public inquiry. It would be inexcusable if approval were given for a second runway without the MAELR being completed all the way through from the M56 to the A6(M).

There has just been a public inquiry into a proposal for opencast mining at Poynton, which would affect my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. God forbid that that development should go ahead, but if it does, extra traffic pressures—very heavy traffic—will result.

The completed MAELR scheme from the M56 to the A6(M) was designed to cope with traffic levels anticipated in conjunction with a single runway at Manchester. A second runway would demand not only the completion of MAELR, but substantial upgrading to cope with yet more traffic.

The Commonwealth games are to be held in Manchester in 2002. Part of the grand south Manchester bypass system is, however, nothing more than a joke and a grand driveway to Sainsbury's car park at Cheadle Royal. That is the best way to describe it and the only function that it fulfils—apart from creating massive problems for my constituents.

The need to complete the road is recognised by other hon. Members. I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield wishes to contribute to the debate. Other hon. Members have given their permission for me to cite their support for my argument. The hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) writes:

"This long-standing scheme which will bring benefits to airport users and all the residents of Stockport has my total backing."

My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale (Sir F. Montgomery) states:

"I believe that this scheme will bring major benefits to our area and allow the full benefits for the A34 by-pass to be realised. I think it will also ease a lot of congestion on the roads which will be of benefit to local residents. I realise that there is enormous support for this scheme in your constituency"—

that is, Cheadle—

"and I would also like to give you my full support."

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Wythenshawe (Mr. Morris) wanted very much to contribute briefly to the debate and, as his constituency neighbour, I should have been glad to allow him to do so, but because of a family bereavement, he cannot be present. He has asked me to read on to the record his support for my case. He states:

"This long-standing scheme will bring major benefits to South Manchester/North Cheshire and allow the full benefits of the A34 by-pass to be realised. In particular, it will improve access to the

[Mr. Stephen Day]

Airport from the south and east and remove traffic from congested roads through residential areas. This will benefit passengers and staff as well as local residents.

While the full benefits of the MAELR will require the completion of the A6 Stockport by-pass"—

amen to that—

"even without this there will be significant local benefits.

I understand the Airport Company fully support the completion of the remaining sections and that its planning has been designed so as to be compatible with MAELR. It"—

that is, the airport—

"would be prepared to fully co-operate in any initiatives to progress MAELR."

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to mention also that residents of his constituency have expressed concern about the impact of the second runway construction traffic coming from the Peak district in the absence of MAELR.

I shall show my hon. Friend the Minister my file of constituents' letters on MAELR. I have been inundated with letters, and rightly so—that is my job. I want to pass on not only my constituents' concerns, but their anger at being left with one third of a road that is of no use to anyone and is causing more problems than we had before. We desperately need the road to be completed. If, at the end of the debate I have impressed on my hon. Friend the Minister the importance of the road to the area, I shall be well satisfied.

I shall read the most recent letter that I received. A few letters arrived today, as people in my constituency heard about the debate. A resident of Woodford road writes:

"The traffic situation is quite unbearable on Woodford Road from early in the morning to late at night. In the rush hours the traffic is solid and frequently at a standstill.

The volume and speed of the traffic at other times is such that access onto Woodford Road involves a long wait and a frantic dash on most occasions.

Lots of heavy vehicles use the new bypass as a better access to the M63 than other routes, and will drive from Hazel Grove, Disley etc. at all hours of the day or night to gain access to it."

That is the living reality for people on Woodford road, where no junction was ever intended.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will repeat what he told me when he visited Bramhall and that he will give an assurance that when the eastern section of the MAELR is completed—sooner rather than later, I hope—the junction at Woodford road will be closed and returned to its original planned status as a proper bypass for Bramhall and Woodford.

I have a letter from councillor Kenneth Holt, who represents the Bramhall East ward on Stockport metropolitan borough council. He states:

"The partial completion of MAELR has increased traffic flows in and around Bramhall throughout the day to levels only previously experienced in the rush hour with journeys to and from local industry. The huge volumes of through traffic are making local traffic manoeuvres particularly difficult, and of course significantly increasing the hazards to local schoolchildren and all other pedestrians."

I can vouch for that. Crossing the road in Bramhall village is a nightmare, and it is a brave person who dares to cross Woodford road.

Councillor Peter Burns, an independent councillor representing the Heald Green ratepayers association, also sent me a letter of support. He says:

"I write on behalf of the Heald Green community of some 15,000 residents ... For many years the community of Heald Green has been seriously damaged by the amount of East-West traffic along Finney Lane, the main road through the village. This road provides the only decent bridge for East-West traffic over the North-South railway and, therefore, is the route for traffic to and from the East and South-East, bound for the motorway network and Manchester Airport . . .

Recent traffic counts by my Council"—

that is, Stockport metropolitan council—

"have shown 30 per cent. increase in the daily traffic flow along Finney Lane. This has been achieved not by increasing the already saturated number of vehicles per hour but by extending the number of hours of this saturation.

The only way to relieve the ever-worsening ill health, danger and environmental damage being caused, is by the construction of the western section of the MAELR Route."

I do not disagree with Councillor Burns.

Woodford community council has sent a brief letter of support for the completion of the road scheme. Its chairman, Bryan Leck, says:

"As Chairman of the Woodford Community Council my members would strongly support your campaign to ensure that the extension from the Woodford Road roundabout in an easterly direction be expedited.

The completion of the central section has caused horrendous problems in the Bramhall and Woodford area which can only be alleviated by the construction of"

the eastern section of the road.

The chairman of Bramhall community council wrote:

"The leisure centres on the A34 sharing the Cheadle Royal Hospital site"—

to which I referred earlier—

"opposite the J. Sainsburys-John Lewis shopping complex have been opened recently. They will attract more traffic."

He wrote that he was grateful that the Secretary of State for the Environment had called in some of those applications, and continued:

"Now the enquiry into the application for opencast coalmining on Towers Farm, Poynton, near to the Hazel Grove 5 ways road junction, has just been completed."

He says that the short distances between those local developments emphasise the potential for increased traffic congestion in Bramhall. He then wrote:

"Therefore you can well understand why an Action Committee has been set up to urge the completion of the east and west sections of MAELR as soon as possible.

The residents of Hazel Grove, Poynton, Woodford and Bramhall held a public meeting in Poynton on October 7 1996 to appoint a committee which met a week later."

I have a letter from one of the founders of the MAELR and Poynton bypass campaign—a constituent of mine who lives on Chester road in Woodford—which said:

"I write to express my growing concern about the increasing levels of traffic using unsuitable roads through Woodford, Bramhall and Poynton which have resulted from the partial completion of MAELR . . . I am particularly concerned that the daily traffic levels are already well in excess of the projected level of 18,000 for the year 2009, a figure which was submitted to the Public Inquiry in 1992. Almost 20,000 vehicles per day were measured by Cheshire County Council along Woodford Road south of the MAELR's 'temporary' termination point in May this year, barely six months after the central section of MAELR was opened.

The resultant increase in traffic is causing considerable congestion and delay for road users as well as excessive noise and pollution for residents, pedestrians and cyclists along the existing roads. More worrying is the large increase in traffic resulting from heavy lorries,

over 10 per cent. of the traffic or 2000 vehicles per day is now in this category, and this extends from early morning and late into the evening. The result is considerable additional noise, vibration and pollution, a particular concern when there is a weight of evidence confirming the effect on health of particulates arising from diesel vehicles. Large vehicles on the narrow roads also pose considerable dangers for cyclists and for those using the pavement or attempting to cross the road.

There is considerable support for the completion of this scheme, from residents and businesses throughout Bramhall, Woodford and Poynton, but growing anger that the scheme could have been allowed to proceed in part only with a totally unsatisfactory 'temporary' termination on Woodford Road—in spite of the weight of objections presented at the public inquiry."

Stepping aside from my constituent's letter for a moment, I can tell the Minister that at the time of the public inquiry I was one of those who warned of the dangers that would result if construction of the central section went ahead. I hate to say, "I told you so," because I wish that I had been proved wrong. I am afraid that the residents' warnings about the dangers of building only the central section have proved to be correct.

My constituent continued:

"The decision to proceed with MAELR on a partial basis has, in the short period since its completion in November 1995, proved to be totally unsatisfactory, causing severe congestion and all the attendant noise ... I would therefore wish the scheme to be progressed to completion without further delay to enable the people of Woodford, Bramhall and Poynton to be relieved of the distress caused by the wholly unacceptable and growing levels of traffic on our roads which have resulted."

The last letter of support is from Manchester Airport, and I am pleased to have received it. It says that the MAELR

"Will bring major benefits to South Manchester and North Cheshire and allow the full benefits of the recently completed A34 by-pass to be realised. It will also improve access to the Airport ... remove through traffic from congested roads through residential areas. Obviously, the full benefits of the completed MAELR scheme will also require the completion of the A6 ... by-pass".

That bypass is not the subject of the debate, but it is on the minds of my constituents and many others in the area. The letter continues:

"The Airport Company fully support the completion of the remaining sections and we have joined forces with the Local Authorities to try and progress the road. Thus we would be more than happy to fully co-operate in any initiatives which come forward to progress MAELR particularly once the uncertainty about our own future growth prospects have been resolved."

Will the Minister please talk to the people who have commercial or potential commercial interests in the area, and let us get the road completed at the earliest possible opportunity?

I want to show the Minister a petition signed by more than 6,000 people, all of whom are my constituents. The names were collected over the summer months, during the recess. More forms are still to be collected from other petition points. I hope that when we reach the target figure of 10,000—which I expect to happen shortly—he will accede to my request and ask the Secretary of State to receive this petition, because it is addressed to him. It expresses the concern of 6,000 of my constituents in Cheadle. As I said, my hon. Friend can expect more names before we are done.

The road is vital to the well-being of my constituency. Support for the scheme is overwhelming. I look round the country and see demonstrations against bypasses here, there and everywhere. The Department has had great difficulty getting those roads built, whereas in Cheadle we have wanted this road for 30 years. No one is against it, yet we cannot have it. I wish that hon. Members who have problems with bypasses in their constituencies would write to the Minister and say, "Let Mr. Day in Cheadle have the money for the bypass up there." We would take the money with both hands and say, "Get on and build the MAELR."

We need an early starting date. We lost the original starting date. We were told at the public inquiry that there would be a four-year gap between the building of the central section and the building of the western and eastern sections. I am now told by the Highways Agency that we could be looking at 2006. That is not acceptable, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield agrees. My constituents are furious, and I do not blame them—I share their anger. Something must be done to fulfil the promises made at the public inquiry.

Surely the Minister is now in no doubt about the overwhelming importance of the scheme to my constituency and the area beyond. We have waited 30 years, so please let us have our road. My constituents have waited far too long. They now have problems because only the central section is being built, whereas the whole scheme should have been built.

The people of Heald Green, Bramhall and Woodford—I leave it to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield to mention places in his constituency—are looking to the Minister to provide the relief that they have waited 30 years for. We desperately need that relief, because the traffic congestion is appalling. My constituents have a right to expect the Government to act; I expect nothing else, and neither do they.

4.59 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) for allowing me to speak in his Adjournment debate. As he implied, the road projects about which he spoke so well and so accurately impact upon my constituency as much as on his. I endorse to the letter, to the word and to the dot, everything that he said to the Minister, through the Minister to the Secretary of State for Transport and through the Secretary of State to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Earlier today, I asked the Chancellor a supplementary question highlighting the importance of infrastructure expenditure and investment to the prosperous and progressive economy, and he agreed that such investment was vital to the on-going progress of the United Kingdom economy.

I am here to represent the interests of the people of Poynton, of the village of Newton and of the large village of Prestbury. All those areas are suffering immensely because of the A34(M) Handforth-Wilmslow bypass and the Department of Transport's failure to proceed with the construction of the MAELR east and west.

I have bombarded the Secretary of State and the Minister with letters. I recently had a letter from the county engineer of Cheshire county council, Mr. Peter Cocker. He says:

"I refer to your letters of 11, 14, 15, 16 and 18 October 1996".

With those letters to Mr. Cocker, I enclosed numerous letters from constituents, mainly—not exclusively—from people who live on or near the Chester road in Poynton.

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

Their environment has been dramatically disadvantaged, undermined and damaged since the opening of the centre section of what I would call the MAELR contract project road—that is, the Handforth-Wilmslow bypass, the A34(M).

Mr. Cocker's letter continues:

"Most of your constituents have highlighted the need for the Poynton By-Pass"—

my hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that that is part of the MAELR contract—

"and I can only reiterate the County Council's support for this scheme. The by-pass, and the western MAELR Link, represents the only real means of resolving"

the local problems to which I had referred. Mr. Cocker then makes an important point; he says:

"These schemes are part of the Department of Transport's Trunk Road programme."

We are not pushing something that is not part of the Department's programme.

The letter continues:

"The Department of Transport supported the Wilmslow/Handforth/MAELR schemes through their Public Inquiry process, indicating"—

this is a critical point—

"a programme for an early completion of the MAELR/Poynton By-Pass scheme in evidence at the inquiry."

Was that fraudulent? Was that dishonest? Did the Department mean what it said? If so, it must proceed with the scheme. Perhaps the inspector found as he did because the road would be part of a wider trunk road building programme.

The county engineer goes on to say:

"The element of the MAELR scheme which was considered at the Inquiry (and now completed) forms a part of the protected Trunk Road link between the A6(M) scheme and the M56 spur at Manchester Airport. The failure to carry forward these schemes on a timetable which was specifically put before the Inspector at the public inquiry by the DOT is giving rise to the current problems in this area."

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle referred several times to that matter, and I fully support what he said. Perhaps Mr. Cocker put it even more succinctly.

The Department of Transport owes this road to my hon. Friend and me, as well as to my hon. Friends the Members for Hazel Grove (Sir T. Arnold) and for Altrincham and Sale (Sir F. Montgomery) and to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Wythenshawe (Mr. Morris), to minimise the unacceptable congestion in our areas which is damaging the environment and adversely affecting the quality of life of those people whom we represent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle mentioned the public inquiry, which I believe has almost finished, into the application by coal contractors for opencast coal mining at Towers farm in Poynton in my constituency. Uniquely, for the first time in 25 years, I appeared personally to object and to oppose the application. I was delighted that my hon. Friend also found time right at the end of the recess to appear and give evidence.

My evidence related to a range of reasons why the appeal should not succeed and my hon. Friend, representing the best interests of all his constituents, highlighted the existing road problems, which could only be exacerbated. I hope that I am not out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I express the fervent hope, based on facts and on democratic representation, that when the report comes before my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, he will see that there is overwhelming opposition to the opencast application. I hope that the inspector's conclusions will be the same, that the Secretary of State will support them, and that the appeal will be dismissed.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows the beautiful village of Prestbury. Peter Hayes, a well-known local business man, was elected to the council in May this year. His time has been dominated since then by the representations of hundreds of local people on the matter of the road chaos caused in Prestbury by the opening of the Handforth-Wilmslow bypass and by the huge increase in the volume of traffic flowing through the village, with all the environmental and road safety implications that go with it.

Prestbury parish council feels so strongly that it has set up a special highways road sub-committee, to which it has co-opted people who do not even sit on the parish council—I refer in particular to a Mrs. Lillian Burns, who is becoming an expert on roads and who is doing a great deal of work in close co-operation with Councillor Peter Hayes. Sadly, a past mayor who was the second councillor for Prestbury and Adlington, died recently. The new councillor is Mr. John Braithwaite, another local business man; a great deal of his time is spent dealing with fair and reasonable representations from people who are appalled by what is going on. Because the road schemes have been postponed, people's life style, quality of life and environment have been badly disadvantaged.

I know that my hon. Friend does his best as Minister for Railways and Roads, and I ask him to listen to the concerns of both Conservative and Opposition Members. I do not think that I am being selfish: the areas of my constituency to which I have referred—Prestbury, Mottram St. Andrew, Newton, Adlington and Poynton—contribute massively to the income of the county council, by way of domestic rates, and to that of the Government by way of the business rate and taxation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle referred to some very desirable residential areas of his constituency. Do we want to destroy the environment of those areas? Do we want to deny those who live there—who make a great contribution to the economy through their work and through the taxes, the domestic rates and the business rates that they pay—some return on all that money? The Department of Transport recognises the importance of the roads.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister. He has been to my constituency and has gone round with me to see the sites of some of the road projects that are required. We hear of the huge sums of public money wasted on security for the construction of the Newbury bypass and of the strong opposition to the Salisbury bypass. The people of the area of Cheshire that I represent would love to have roads built. They want to put civil engineers back to work and they want to help the environment. The roads are well designed and some are fairly advanced in the contract procedures. The designs are finalised. The public inquiries may be still to be held in some cases, but a great

deal of work and money has been invested. How much money have the Government had to fork out on security for the Newbury bypass? I suspect that a large part—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. The hon. Gentleman could table a question about that if he was so minded. This has nothing to do with the Manchester link bypass, which is the subject on which he has been given permission to make a contribution.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, the money spent on security at Newbury could have been spent on the Poynton bypass, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle and I are making a plea to our hon. Friend the Minister. We want an assurance that the A523 Macclesfield-Poynton road improvement scheme, which ties up with the Poynton bypass and is part of the MAELR east and west, will remain a priority in the Government's trunk road construction programme. We are not asking him to say that the project will go ahead within two years, although I would love him to say that. If he did, he could come to my constituency and drink champagne from dawn until dusk at my expense.

The roads are vital. All the elected councils want them: Cheshire county council; Macclesfield borough council; Poynton parish council; Adlington parish council; Mottram parish council; and Prestbury parish council. The Members of Parliament representing the areas concerned also want the roads. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle spoke with great eloquence for his constituency and its councils. I hope that I have added to his argument.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle and I have slightly different views on the airport. I am in favour of the second runway because of its economic importance to the north-west. However, that aside, the airport company believes that if the runway plan is to go ahead, the MAELR projects are essential, although the company hopes that a great deal of the stone that will come to the airport for the second runway will be transported by rail, subject to a freight support grant from the Department of Transport.

If a buoyant area of the country is to continue to play its role in the economy of the north-west and of the United Kingdom, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will appreciate the sincerity with which our arguments have been advanced and will at least go some way towards giving us the reassurances that we have asked for. Surely the views of the public are important in a democracy. The majority of people in the area are in favour. I hope that that carries weight in the House and with the Government.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Railways and Roads (Mr. John Watts): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) on his success in obtaining parliamentary time to debate an issue on which he has been campaigning tirelessly on behalf of his constituents. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on his efforts. Both my hon. Friends have spoken not just on their own behalf, but for many other right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friends' constituents are fortunate, or perhaps wise, to have chosen such powerful advocates of their interests.

I know very well that the delay in the provision of MAELR is a matter of considerable concern to local residents, particularly those who live on Woodford road and Chester road, where traffic flows have increased substantially following the construction of the central section of MAELR by Cheshire county council. I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to those concerns. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle showed the House an impressive bundle of letters. I suspect that it included a substantial number of replies from me, because I find probably two or three such letters in my box every night, which I read and sign on my way home.

On the petition to which my hon. Friend referred, I cannot guarantee now that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be able to meet his constituents to receive it. I am sure, however, that, if there is time available in his diary, he would be prepared to meet them. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that, if he cannot do so, I shall certainly be willing to meet his constituents again and receive their petition.

It is relevant to consider the background to the scheme, although my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle and Macclesfield have filled in a great deal of its history. It is a fact that, as long ago as the 1950s, a route for an east-west link between Hazel Grove and Manchester airport has been protected against development by local authorities.

In 1989, the national importance of the scheme was recognised, when it was added to the trunk road programme. The scheme was then entitled the "A6(M) to M56 (Manchester Airport) Link", and was expected to follow broadly the route protected by the three local authorities whose boundaries were crossed—Cheshire county council, Stockport metropolitan borough council and Manchester city council.

The purpose of the scheme was, and is, to provide improved access to a thriving and expanding airport from the south and east, and to provide relief to congested roads across the southern fringes of the Manchester conurbation. It is an important part of the infrastructure that is needed to serve Manchester airport, which is becoming one of the nation's most important airports, and certainly the most important of the regional airports.

I must not allow myself to be drawn into commenting on the merits or demerits of the plans to expand the airport because they are subject to public inquiry and, ultimately, a quasi-judicial decision by my right hon. Friends. It is clear, however, that even given its current development, the airport would benefit significantly from improved infrastructure. That, in turn, would offer an additional economic benefit to an important region of the United Kingdom.

Following the addition of the scheme to the trunk road programme, the route protection was taken over by my Department. The scheme was then split into three sections. The eastern section from Hazel Grove to Woodford is included in the proposals for the A555-A523 Poynton bypass, for which there is a preferred route following a public consultation held six years ago. The western section, which links with the M56 at the airport and extends to the A34 at Handforth, also has a preferred route following public consultation held in the summer of 1993.

As my hon. Friends have already said, the central section has already been built and the immediate effects of its provision are the cause of concern, or at least the increased concern of my hon. Friends and their constituents.

[Mr. John Watts]

I apologise for going over ground with which I know my hon. Friends are extremely familiar, but it is important to make clear the sequence of events that have led to the current situation. That is particularly important in relation to the central section, which was built by the county council as part of its scheme to provide a north-south bypass of the A34 through Handforth and Wilmslow.

The Handforth section, and the central section of MAELR has now been open for just over 12 months, and I understand that the Wilmslow section is due for completion in December.

As my hon. Friends are aware, the availability of private finance from major store developments enabled Cheshire county council to proceed with its scheme. It may be now viewed as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, one is aware of the advantages of seizing the opportunities of the availability of private finance to provide a road that would otherwise have had to be provided at some time wholly at public expense, but the advancement of the phasing of the construction that it permitted, and my Department's inability to put the other two pieces in place at the same time, have created the problems that my hon. Friends eloquently described.

Mr. Day: Yes, it is a mixed blessing, but it becomes a blessing if we get the rest of the road. The ultimate disaster would be for us to be left with only the central section. That would be worse than no road being built at all. The fact that the central section is there makes the rest essential.

Mr. Watts: I take my hon. Friend's point absolutely.

Regarding the central section, my Department's involvement was to meet the cost of upgrading the carriageway provision of the central section of MAELR only from single lane to dual two lane and to provide grade separation at the junction, in order to meet the future requirements of traffic forecast to use the completed MAELR between the airport and Hazel Grove. We made no direct contribution to the main component of the scheme other than an element of transport supplementary grant, which is a feature of all major local authority roads.

Both my hon. Friends have ensured that I have been made aware of the effects of traffic using the completed section, almost from the day that the road opened. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle extended to me a very warm welcome to visit his constituency just before or just after the Conservative party conference last year, and I had the opportunity then to see the problems. My hon. Friend drove me around the area—fairly slowly, because of the amount of traffic—and I had the opportunity to meet many of his constituents and their local representatives.

I saw the validity of the concerns of residents of Woodford and Poynton, and especially of those living on the Chester road and the Woodford road. They are worried about increases in traffic, type of traffic, pedestrian safety and effects of traffic in the form of noise and other nuisance.

There appear to be three main causes of that concern. First, the opening of the central section has led to a redistribution of traffic movements on the local road network. Secondly, the opening of the prestigious and large scale shopping developments at Cheadle and Handforth Dean has led to increases in traffic on many local roads, including key routes in Poynton. Thirdly, there are at present major works by statutory undertakers on the A6 in Stockport and Hazel grove, which are causing severe congestion and resulting in drivers seeking alternative routes. Some of that traffic will add to pressure on local roads in the area, but, fortunately, that third element should be only a temporary problem.

I am well aware that a local campaign has been formed to press for the completion of the airport link road. On a positive note, both the western section of MAELR and the Poynton bypass remain firmly in the main programme following the extremely stringent review that I had to undertake last year, which concluded in the publication of the revised road programme last November. It is obvious why those schemes have remained in the main programme. They have done so for the reasons that my hon. Friends have so eloquently explained. Those roads are of great value in helping to resolve local problems, are significant for the region and would form part of the linkage to the airport, which is important for the north-western region.

However, my hon. Friends appreciate that the Government are determined to maintain public spending at levels that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor believes can be afforded, and the transport budget, with others, has had to be set at a level commensurate with the total sum. In the past two spending rounds, my trunk road budget lost more than £1 billion, making the programme more difficult to manage.

I assure my hon. Friends that I understand their eagerness for progress. The schemes will be implemented as soon as resources can be made available.

I understand the feeling that the possibility of private money should be considered. The Government have very successfully promoted the private finance initiative in the roads programme. In line with that policy, if there is a possibility of private funding contributing toward the earlier completion of these schemes, we shall always be happy to speak—

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend the Minister heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle said. I also took up, in a modest way, the issue of the airport's role, and I know that the airport management would be happy to co-operate with any initiative that could speed up the road's construction. I suggest that the Department of Transport talks to the airport management, because I suspect that that might involve financial assistance on a modest scale, which could be part of the private finance initiative that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr. Watts: I would be happy to pursue any such possibility, but, although I would not necessarily expect offers of private funding to cover the whole scheme—that would be very ambitious—any private sector contribution would need to be fairly significant to have a significant effect on the rate of delivery.

Following my visit to Cheadle, I asked the Highways Agency to investigate the possibility, suggested by the Woodford Community Council, that part of the eastern section of MAELR between Woodford road and Chester

road should be constructed before the remainder of the road, to provide relief to those local roads. That suggestion was considered very carefully, but unfortunately we had to conclude that we could not go ahead with temporary measures of that type because there would have been abortive costs. We would have ended up building sections of roadway that would not form part of the ultimate trunk road scheme, and we could not justify using trunk road money for what would have been only a local traffic alleviation in the longer term.

I understand that Cheshire county council is to undertake traffic survey work in that area, with special emphasis on the A5149 Chester road. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle will be aware that my direct responsibilities are limited to the trunk road network. The Chester road forms part of the local road network, for which the local Highway Authority is responsible, and as such it would be for the county council to determine, in the light of its survey work, what measures it may believe that it is appropriate to pursue. I am not in a position to give it any instructions as to what it should do.

Priorities have had to be set within a realistic and fairly tight framework. I hope that we have done so responsibly, concentrating our efforts on key national routes. It would not have been realistic to try to progress each and every scheme in the main programme at the same time, and we would have consumed resources in preparation work at the expense of having money to start construction.

I assure both my hon. Friends and those other right hon. and hon. Members on whose behalf they spoke today that the needs of their constituents have not been forgotten, and that we shall continue to invest sensibly and carefully to meet the transport needs of this area, as elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield spoke of the timetable that was outlined at public inquiry. I do not believe that my officials were behaving fraudulently or dishonestly in what they said in their evidence to the inquiry, but the significance of timing is that that inquiry took place before we had had more than £1 billion removed from our trunk road budget. I was therefore pleased to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield was able to ask my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor about the importance of infrastructure maintaining a buoyant economy and received a satisfactory reply from my right hon. and learned Friend, which is no less than we would ever expect of him.

Mr. Day: I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will not forget a major point that I asked him to respond to. He may have been coming to it, but I wish to be certain. It concerns Woodford road junction returning to its original design: the junction being closed and done away with, and the road going under Woodford road as originally proposed. That is very important to my constituents.

Mr. Watts: It would ultimately be a matter for the local highway authority to decide whether it wished to maintain the junction as part of its local network. Once we are in a position to complete our trunk road scheme, it would be odd if an unnecessary part of the network were maintained.

Mr. Day: At the public inquiry into the MAELR, my constituents on Woodford road were assured that the junction created there would be temporary. Temporary means that it will be removed. My constituents are not being unreasonable to think that the promise made at a public inquiry should be honoured. They were promised at the public inquiry that, once the road was completed, the junction would disappear; anything else would be to let them down and to have misled them in a way which I am sure my hon. Friend would not wish to be guilty of.

Mr. Watts: Any undertaking given at a public inquiry by my officials on my behalf will be honoured, and I expect that any undertaking given by Cheshire county council will be similarly honoured.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 1 November 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BILLS PRESENTED

CONTRACT (SCOTLAND)

Mr. Secretary Forsyth, supported by Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, presented a Bill to reform the law of Scotland relating to the admissibility of extrinsic evidence to prove an additional term of a contract or unilateral voluntary obligation, to the supersession of a contract by a deed executed in implement of it and to the obtaining of damages for breach of contract of sale; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Monday next and to be printed. [Bill 11.]

Bill referred to a Second Reading Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No.58B (Law Commission Bills).

SCOTTISH LEGAL SERVICES OMBUDSMAN AND COMMISSIONER FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN SCOTLAND

Mr. Secretary Forsyth, supported by Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, presented a Bill to make further provision about the Scottish legal services ombudsman; to alter the jurisdiction of the Commissioner for Local Administration in Scotland; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Monday next and to be printed. [Bill 12.]

Improving Schools Programme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

9.34 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Robin Squire): Today's debate is slightly unusual—

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): Yes, indeed.

Mr. Squire: It may be unusual for other reasons that the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) has yet to tell us, but I anticipate that will be unusual as it will concentrate overwhelmingly on standards rather than funding in schools. Those of us involved in education—there are some familiar faces in the Chamber—will know that such debates tend to be dominated by funding.

The reason why the debate should concentrate on standards is simple, and I can sum it up clearly. First, those who continue to believe that funding or input measurement is more important than output measurement or qualifications clearly have not been looking at the annual summaries of achievements and examination results. There is no correlation between money spent and those achievements.

Secondly, that view allows lazy thinkers, who assume that it is just a question of funding, to get away from the essence of what should be happening in each of our schools. Let me make it clear at the outset that the Government's top priority is to raise standards of achievement for all pupils in all schools. One has only to look at the facts to see that we can be proud of our record.

This year, standards have again improved. Schools have achieved the best GCSE and A-level results ever. The percentage of higher grades awarded in GCSE is now up to 53.7 per cent. The overall pass rate for GCE A-levels is up to 85.5 per cent. Those results are a tribute to teachers, pupils and parents alike. They are the measurable result of Government policies on standards—although Opposition parties have opposed virtually every measure in the past decade. I shall touch on that later.

Much more can be achieved. Our challenge is to ensure that every pupil is achieving at the highest level they are able. To accomplish that, schools need to provide their pupils with a top-quality education and to settle for nothing less than the best. However, schools cannot do it alone. They need support from central and local government and all the key educational partners.

There is, of course, no particular secret as to what makes a good school. The features that the best schools share include: strong leadership from the head teacher and the senior management; a strong moral ethos, with a clear focus on the importance of learning; high-quality teaching and learning which encourages excellence; a disciplined environment and mutual respect between pupils and staff; parental support and the involvement of the local community; and, not least, a sense of enjoyment and self-confidence shared by all in the school.

Although there is no secret, the challenge is to translate those qualities into every school. Schools know only too well the importance of getting a child's education right. After all, they have only one opportunity. Virtually all

[Mr. Squire]

schools share the ambition to provide their pupils with the best education. I also believe that schools benefit from guidance and need support if they are to improve year on year and sustain that improvement. The improving schools programme brings that support together for the benefit of schools.

The programme is a concerted effort to ensure that schools have the necessary tools to secure year-on-year improvement, starting from the assumption that every school, even the best in the land, is capable of continuous improvement. It provides a coherent framework within which that improvement can be achieved.

The programme is driven by the ideas of the consultative group on school standards, which I chair on behalf of the Secretary of State. That group brings together leading practitioners from schools, universities and the business community, as well as representatives of local education authorities, the Office for Standards in Education, and key Government agencies such as the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the Teacher Training Agency and the Funding Agency for Schools. I am grateful to all those bodies for their support, and to the individuals concerned, who give up many hours on the work of the group.

In its first year, the consultative group established a set of core principles, which included: placing pupils' learning at the heart of the programme; recognising that schools themselves are the main agents for improvement, with support and pressure from national and local partners; the central importance of schools re-examining their teaching and learning processes; and the importance of school development planning, with the use of comparative information and target-setting. I shall say a little about each of those core principles.

At the heart of the process of school improvement is the use of hard evidence about performance to identify strengths, weaknesses and priorities for improvement. The programme has shown clearly that, when schools set out systematically to improve standards, those standards rise.

For example, during the first year of the programme, guidance has been given in the booklet "Setting Targets to Raise Standards". More than 25,000 copies have been ordered in the first six months after publication. It contains guidance and ideas on how schools can use pupil performance level data to identify goals for individual pupils, groups, classes or the whole school. A key to its success is that it draws on excellent existing practice and practical examples.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris) no doubt knows of the Grove primary school in Birmingham. It has the clear expectation that all pupils should progress by half a national curriculum level a year. Pupils falling behind are quickly identified for extra help. High achievers are encouraged to move forward as far as they can.

By using a range of performance information, including national curriculum attainments, the school has focused its resources effectively on raising attainment and addressing areas of weakness. The quality of teaching is very good, especially in mathematics. The proof that the approach has helped to deliver excellence—hon. Members will be fascinated by this fact—is that, in the year that the report was written, four pupils at that primary school achieved a higher grade GCSE pass in mathematics.

I could have quoted other examples from across the country—

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Squire: I shall willingly give way to my hon. Friend, who has wide experience in these matters.

Mr. Thompson: My teaching experience was mainly in physics rather than mathematics. Is my hon. Friend aware of the continuing shortage of physics and mathematics teachers in schools? I know that the Government are doing a great deal to address that. I hope that my hon. Friend will have a chance to explain what is being done in that very important area.

Mr. Squire: My hon. Friend is right. The Teacher Training Agency has responded seriously to our request that it should consider the likely flow of teachers in and out over the next few years. My hon. Friend has identified one area in which there is a clear need for greater recruitment. We shall continue to examine further any possible measures to stimulate interest in subjects such as mathematics and physics.

Targeting can be used in a variety of ways. I look forward to hearing the well trailed comments of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) and the hon. Member for Yardley on targeting the under-achievement of boys. Targeting can be used on individuals or on groups of pupils, such as under-achieving boys.

I should like to highlight another publication—"Benchmarking School Budgets"—which shows how schools can improve their financial planning and value for money by sharing information on how they spend their budget. That simple approach works. One of the head teachers involved in the pilot project said:

> "I am now more confident at setting budgets—it's not just a question of squeezing costs, but being bolder in taking positive action."

Every school involved in the exercise reported having discovered ways of finding more money for the chalk face. I commend that excellent exercise to all schools.

We have been building the partnership between key agencies. I have already mentioned the consultative group. In March, Ofsted, SCAA and the TTA came together to host a series of conferences entitled "Teachers Make a Difference", which helped to clarify the agenda on pedagogy and achieve a closer focus on teaching. [*Laughter.*] I am sorry that the hon. Member for Newham, South should laugh. I realise that he found the title humorous, but I should have thought that there was no disagreement between us on the importance of teachers. I shall flag up the humorous parts later, if he wants.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): The Minister said a moment ago that teachers make a difference. I could not agree more. Does he believe that caning makes a difference?

Mr. Squire: I suppose that we were bound to get to the bottom of it sooner or later, if hon. Members will pardon the expression. We have clearly got in there early. *Hansard* will show that I voted to retain corporal

punishment in 1986. I was on the losing side. I speak with the additional benefit of being married to a teacher of many years experience who also believes that, as a last resort, it was a useful deterrent. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is no question of the Government bringing in such a proposal. Unless new Labour is moving faster by the day, I assume that those on his Front Bench take the same approach at the moment.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) has raised an important issue. What is to happen to a pupil who is consistently and seriously troublesome? Is it better to expel him or to bring him to heel with a stroke or two of the cane on his bottom, without being brutal? When corporal punishment was available in moderate measure, many boys who would now be expelled were not.

Mr. Squire: From his experience as a former senior teacher, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) speaks with considerable authority. In the two years that I have been involved as a Minister in discussions with every teacher association and governors group, as well as other interested bodies, none of those groups has asked for the return of corporal punishment as part of a package of measures on discipline. As my hon. Friend would expect, I listen to professional groups.

Mr. Patrick Thompson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Squire: I shall willingly give way in a moment.

The measures announced this week in the new Education Bill clearly reflect the views put to us by many teacher groups. If teacher groups said that, in addition to the measures that we are introducing in the light of their representations, they also wanted us to consider the return of corporal punishment, we would do so. However, there has been no such approach or suggestion, so, as my right hon. Friends have made clear this week, there is no suggestion of including corporal punishment in legislation.

Mr. Patrick Thompson: My hon. Friend has almost taken the words out of my mouth, but not quite. Is he aware that, in my area of Norfolk, there has already been a strong welcome from teachers' representatives for the measures on discipline that are about to be introduced in the Education Bill? That is important and relevant.

Mr. Squire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I appreciate that the new measures will not have quite the headline-striking capacity as the subject on which we have exchanged views in the past couple of minutes. However, in truth, those measures which my hon. Friend correctly identifies are the result of negotiations and discussions, and represent what teacher representatives say they wish to have.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I will not make a habit of intervening during my hon. Friend's speech.

Although I wholly support what my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) said, is it not a fact that, when corporal punishment was available, in moderate and reasonable terms and under the proper supervision of the head or his deputy—the use of corporal punishment should not go wider than that—far fewer children were expelled? A line was drawn.

Corporal punishment was not always a cure—nobody could claim that—but a line was drawn beyond which pupils usually would not go. Many fewer children appeared in court, and many fewer were expelled from school, resulting in no education. It is a serious matter which we need to address seriously, yet the Labour party is running away from it, as it always does.

Mr. Squire: Everything that my hon. Friend says is correct, although he will accept in turn, I think, that there are other aspects to the matter. Those aspects have no doubt influenced not just all the teacher associations I mentioned, but many others.

Before that interesting small divertissement, we were talking about the improving schools programme, and I said that I would not be talking much about resources. In truth, as I hope the House is starting to see, the argument is not essentially a resources argument. However, at the margin, there have been opportunities for the better steering of resources within the context of the improving schools programme.

Those have included changes to the arrangements for the school effectiveness grants, amounting to £130 million, so that schools can better target their improvement efforts. Every school that is inspected by Ofsted subsequently receives additional support to help it to implement changes in response to the inspection team's findings, on approval of its plan.

Mr. Spearing: We all agree that resources are not the only factor. However, the Minister spoke about their distribution and availability. Does he agree that the lack of resources for special needs in the case of a pupil in a Nottinghamshire school and the inability of the governors, the school or the local education authority to provide those resources is at the heart of the present discontent? Does he agree that it is a matter not just of the volume of resources, but of their availability to meet the needs of pupils in the right place, at the right time and in the right way?

Mr. Squire: The hon. Gentleman properly invites me into one of our two causes célèbres—that is the second French phrase this morning for the hon. Member for Walton. I hesitate to go into the matter, and if I do go in, I hesitate to go in through the door through which the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) invites me. I do not believe that, at heart, what is going on at Manton is summed up overwhelmingly in terms of the special needs funding available to Nottinghamshire. A number of issues are involved, not least whether the main responsibility should reside with the governors, as the Government believe. That point applies to all schools, including Manton. There is also the question of what the responsibilities of teachers and local education authorities are.

The Government have taken special needs seriously. The hon. Member for Newham, South has played a part in that, and he knows that there was wide support for the code when it was introduced. He also knows that extra money has been provided. Special needs is one of the

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areas that we look at each year when considering annual funding. Nottinghamshire gets significant funding from the Government, and I would do a disservice to some of the wider issues involved in Manton if I agreed today that the problem was essentially special needs funding. I believe, in fairness, that it is about rather larger issues.

I mentioned the funding that now arrives at all schools post-inspection. We have used a few million pounds of that funding to support 23 school improvement initiatives, all of which focus on the use of performance data to set targets in primary and special schools. Information about the initiatives will be widely disseminated, so that other schools can learn from the experience.

I return to the point that at the heart of the matter is the work of teachers and head teachers. Our challenge is to equip teachers with the necessary skills for the demanding job of working with young people. We have risen to that challenge, making teaching and its improvement a high priority.

We place schools at the heart of initial training, which my hon. Friends have welcomed. We gave Ofsted the right to inspect and publish reports on training providers. We recently established the Teacher Training Agency to raise standards in teaching, providing a focus for teacher training.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): The Minister referred to the important work done by the Teacher Training Agency and the important work done by teachers. Does he share the view expressed earlier this week by the head of the TTA? She expressed considerable concern about the constant barrage of criticism of teachers. She said:

"Teachers feel embattled, caught in a cross-fire like civilians in some-one else's war. This is undermining their determination to make things better."

Does the Minister agree with that view?

Mr. Squire: I have learnt to treat with some reserve reports of extracts of speeches. I make that point from practical experience. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has had a similar experience of selective quotation being used against him—not by Conservative Members, of course!

The serious point, to which I shall come in a moment, is that not only Her Majesty's inspectors, but all Ministers regularly pay tribute to the overwhelming professionalism and dedication of the teaching force. When one goes on to point out that, none the less, a small minority need improvement or whatever, one finds that the following morning, the only thing reported is that second part of the speech.

One thing we need—this is a comment addressed to those outside the Chamber—is for those who report on education to seek broadly to reflect the views expressed by people in public life on education. Overwhelmingly, those people say the same thing—that teachers are not criticised as much as the reports in many of the media make out. We are all in the hands of the media, and I hope that, in future, they will report our comments in a more balanced way.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), with reference to the annual report of Her Majesty's chief inspector, was making a point about the emphasis placed by the inspector on the figure of 15,000 teachers who were said to be failing. The inspector did not refer to the percentage, and no comparison was made with other professions. He did not point out that one would expect the same proportion of failure or whatever in professions such as medicine or the law. The emphasis was on the number of teachers, and that figure was flagged up as evidence that the teaching profession as a whole was lagging far behind other professions.

Mr. Squire: As soon as I have answered immediate points, I intend to turn to the whole question of inspections and to mention the chief inspector's annual report. If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself for a moment, I shall seek to cover the points he has made.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury): Does my hon. Friend accept that the vast majority of teachers are dedicated and very hard-working, and that that reputation is jeopardised by a very small minority of sub-standard teachers? Will he consider ways in which sub-standard teachers may receive mid-career retraining? Where that fails, will he consider simplifying, indeed shortening, the mechanism of getting rid of bad teachers, because it is a very long and cumbersome process at present?

Mr. Squire: My hon. Friend makes some very valid points. I especially endorse his earlier comments about the overall value and excellence of teachers. One keeps saying that, and that is why comments that are sometimes attributed to either Ministers, chief inspectors or whomsoever, are usually taken out of context. We invariably stress that we are talking about a minority.

Many years ago, when I still had a proper job, I qualified as a chartered accountant. I do not know how to say this delicately, let alone from the Dispatch Box—I shall whisper it—but some accountants are not really up to the job. I do not consider that, because I recognise that, as do all my hon. Friends, it damns the accountancy profession—there may be other reasons for that—or that merely raising the point somehow increases the schadenfreude of accountants in general. That is a German word.

Mr. Kilfoyle *indicated assent.*

Mr. Squire: The hon. Gentleman is on the ball this morning.

I hope that we can move just a little towards an intelligent, mature discussion of such matters and recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton-Brown) rightly said, that we need to make improvements in the initial selection of teachers and the way in which they are reviewed during their work; and, yes, when one is under-performing, either ensure that they perform better or, if necessary, relieve them of their responsibilities if they show that they are simply not up to the job.

I said that I wanted to say a few words about Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, and the hon. Member for Walton has led me nicely to the subject.

Chris Woodhead has brought his considerable talent and passionate concern for the improvement of education received by the nation's children to bear on this issue.

His unswerving commitment to the crusade against schools that are performing badly, which short-change their pupils with inadequate standards of teaching, has legitimised the most difficult questions—those that need to be asked where education offered by a school does not come up to scratch. I am just about to talk about the very good schools, but we should be clear that we need to look at the whole continuum of schools when considering education. Unless we are prepared to tackle the weakest schools and teachers, we will not raise educational standards.

It is simply untrue that the chief inspector has dwelt solely on the bad news. For the past two years, in his annual report, he has identified a larger number of outstanding and excellent schools, and others which are not only good but improving. The Secretary of State, myself and my ministerial colleagues at the Department for Education and Employment have helped celebrate the success of many of those schools at a series of receptions across the country designed specifically to get over the message of some of the good work that is going on in our schools.

We rightly highlight the outstanding achievement of our best schools, but in truth, transforming the worst 2 per cent. or so of our schools is having a significant impact on the quality of education offered across the country, not least to many who have previously suffered some of the poorest education.

In the past three years, Ofsted has identified more than 200 schools that have failed to provide an acceptable level of education. Some of those, frankly, have been failing their pupils for many years, and this Government have stopped the rot. Once identified as failing, the school, jointly with the local education authority, must prepare a recovery plan to a strict deadline. As hon. Members know, Ofsted returns termly to monitor the implementation of the plan.

I take great pride in evidence that the policy works. The vast majority of schools on special measures are making good progress. Indeed, 10 have improved so much that they have come off special measures, and more should follow this year. More than 85 per cent. of the other schools monitored by Ofsted are making good or reasonable progress. If the improving schools programme had done nothing else than turn around that worst 2 per cent., and that was widely known, there would be, if I dare say it, dancing in the streets. Education is being transformed where it matters, and none of it would have happened without the impetus of our commitment to school improvement.

Mr. Spearing: Ha!

Mr. Squire: The hon. Gentleman scoffs, but the reality is that inspection reports available in the old system were discussed in private among consenting adults in the Inner London education authority. Nobody ever got to know about them, rarely did reforms occur, and standards continued at an appallingly low level.

Where a school fails to make progress, we will transfer it to the control of an education association. We will not hesitate to do so. The House should be aware that nine schools that have so far been found to be significantly failing—including, of course, Hackney Downs school—have been closed. I should stress that my concern is to achieve improvement in all our schools. The lesson to be learned is that one does not have to be ill to get better.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I cannot resist intervening, because I went to Hackney Downs to see it in operation as a grammar school. I was also at its opening as a comprehensive school—first under the ILEA and then Hackney local authority. That school was totally failed by Labour party policies and administration. It has to be said, and it is known, that there was one teacher to every eight pupils, and the money spent on pupils exceeded the national average by 300 per cent. Yet the school failed totally, after a brilliant beginning, in a wonderful building, with a very good base of excellent boys and very good staff. It was the Labour party's failure, so let us take no lessons from it on education.

Mr. Squire: My hon. Friend refers to the tragedy of Hackney Downs school. Those a little older than myself will remember it in its heyday. The lessons to be learned—there are many to be drawn from Hackney Downs—including the near-irrelevance of high funding and low class sizes when faced with a collapse of authority, and an education authority's inability or unwillingness to step in and turn a school around are, I am afraid, a reverse tribute to that authority.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Of course nobody on either side of the House would support or condone failing schools, but will the Minister comment on the ignorance and failure of the then Conservative-controlled Calderdale council to take into account representations about the inevitability of the problems at the Ridings school when the amalgamation went through?

Mr. Squire: I was confident that our other cause célèbre would come up this morning. I am happy on most occasions to debate what I submit is a multi-faceted problem, but I certainly reject outright the hon. Gentleman's implication that amalgamating two schools—even two schools with problems—necessarily and inevitably produced a new school that could not or would not cope. That is not true, and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, there are examples across the country of schools that have been created in unpropitious circumstances that are being turned round or have been turned round. The issues are rather wider than he implies.

What is certain is that a school with appalling results seemed to wait, sit around and descend, until other matters—in this case teacher action—took over. That raises other issues—including, of course, LEA responsibility. As I have already said, although the hon. Member for Walton may not remember, LEAs have a role in helping to turn round schools. They also have a watching brief to ensure that schools do not descend and degenerate to levels where some of the sort of things that we are reading about may take place.

I am conscious that a number of hon. Members wish to contribute, and I do not wish to delay the House because I look forward to hearing their contributions. In concluding, I wish to flag up what my right hon. Friend has already announced about shaping up initial teacher training. I will not repeat our proposals in detail, because I would like to think that hon. Members on both sides of the House are aware of them, but our scheme recognises

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the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury raised a short while ago—the continuing importance of tackling teacher quality. When better to tackle that than at the outset of the exercise?

I also wish to cover target setting. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set out our plans to require schools to set and publish annual targets for improvement. That further initiative of the improving schools programme will lead schools to learn from the best practice in target setting across the country. In doing so, schools will bring together sound management processes which have already been shown to lead to improvement.

Schools will have five stages to follow. First, they will ask how well they are doing, and they will seek performance data on all aspects of their work. Secondly, they will compare themselves with other schools, to establish how well they should be doing and to establish priorities for improvement. Thirdly, from this information, schools will be well placed to set clear targets to improve pupil achievement, individual and collective. Fourthly, having set the targets, they will have to turn them into plans of action. Fifthly, they will have to revisit those plans. That programme is one that ex-council leaders and others will recognise as a proper and normal action cycle. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will also consult the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority further.

The debate we will enjoy this morning about raising standards in schools would have been virtually impossible, in the same context, 17 years ago, except in a purely theoretical way. It would have been virtually impossible to identify a failing school in public before 1979, or to discuss it and ensure that it was turned round.

Mr. Spearing *rose—*

Mr. Squire: I have given way a lot, and I am anxious to make progress.

It is only because the Government have introduced measures aimed at raising standards in schools that we are now able to have an informed debate. We will no doubt hear shortly from the hon. Member for Walton that new Labour has discovered a new-found enthusiasm for raising standards in schools, but what new Labour says now is unbelievable. Their words today are worlds apart from how old Labour has voted consistently over the past decade, and what new Labour says today is totally divorced from what new Labour is doing in town halls up and down the country.

Mr. Spearing *rose—*

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point) *rose—*

Mr. Squire: I am reaching my concluding comments, but I shall give way for the last time to my hon. Friend.

Dr. Spink: My hon. Friend mentioned consistency. Does he think that we should have a new subject called consistency on the national curriculum, and that we should send the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) back to school?

Mr. Squire: If the subject on the curriculum were consistency, many Opposition Members would struggle at key stage 1.

Labour's record has been one of opposition to each and every measure to raise standards. I find it hard to take seriously a claim that Labour now has a programme of its own to bring higher standards in our schools.

Mr. Spearing *rose—*

Mr. Squire: I will not give way, because I am finishing my speech.

The Opposition do not seem to understand, let alone accept, that their friends and fellow socialists control the worst-performing local authorities. For instance, the Labour party runs nine of the 10 local education authorities with the worst GCSE results. I do not say that to score points, but to point out that, if the Labour party had discovered some miraculous elixir of school improvement, we would surely have seen a significant improvement in results in those areas.

We have not, and we are entitled to have grave doubts. Indeed, Councillor Graham Lane, the most senior Labour education councillor, speaks only of accelerating a programme to bring grant-maintained schools under LEA control and abolish grammar schools. So much for Labour's commitment to excellence.

I look forward to the debate, and to contributions from both sides of the House. I am glad to have put on record the fact that only through the persistence of this Government have we got improving standards in our schools, within a framework that delivers a better education for all our pupils.

10.14 am

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): I assumed that we were here this morning to provide a platform for the morality statement from the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, but the Secretary of State made something of a faux pas earlier in the week. As a result, the launch of yet another policy initiative has been scuppered.

I closed my eyes for a time during the Minister's speech, not simply because of his delivery, but because I wanted to imagine the context in which he was speaking. For a flashing moment, I thought it was the chair of education for Birmingham city council, because, almost word for word, line for line and policy for policy, the Minister had taken all his thoughts from that most excellent of authorities. Incidentally, that is the authority whose chief education officer was described as a madman by a former Secretary of State, who paid the penalty in the courts.

Mr. Don Foster: As a "nutter".

Mr. Kilfoyle: Yes, that was the exact word—he was called a nutter. Yet that is the man who has been at the forefront of carving out the very policies that the Government now seek to plagiarise from a Labour authority and the Labour party.

The context in which the Minister put his opening remarks about standards simply amazed me. I should like to take the Minister on a short trip around the educational world as everybody else sees it, at least those who do not wear the rose-coloured glasses that seem to be de rigueur

on the Government's side of the House today. *[Interruption.]* When I get into my Serbo-Croat, it will really throw the Minister.

Let us talk about all our schools, including nursery schools. The Minister and I recently sat on opposite sides on the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill. The pilot schemes have become phase 1, but there has been a massive shortfall of places in those schemes. More than a quarter of four-year-olds in pilot areas failed to get a nursery place through the scheme.

Those are not my figures: they come from leaked memoranda, from the Conservative-controlled authorities in London, that have come into the hands of the Labour party and, as the Minister knows, have been well publicised. The Government have been economical with the truth. They have provided the figures for the number of vouchers issued, but not the number of vouchers redeemed, and that figure tells us how many children have secured a place.

I shall give the Minister some figures. In Westminster, only 58 per cent. of eligible four-year-olds got places. In Kensington and Chelsea, the figure was only 59 per cent., and in Wandsworth, 20 per cent. did not get a place. Instead, £1 million has been wasted on advertising, to add to the £20 million that will be wasted on bureaucracy if the Government have their way on the scheme.

Mr. Robin Squire: The hon. Gentleman could scarcely be more wrong. All four phase 1 authorities say that the scheme is going well administratively. All of them have got back as much or more money than they anticipated. Norfolk have opened 26 new nurseries, and more than a quarter of all pre-school groups have expanded their sessions. Furthermore, I repeat, for something like the 10th or 12th time, that £20 million will not be spent on bureaucracy, but £5 million will be spent on the administration of the scheme and £15 million on inspecting, for the first time, every provider.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I take issue with the Minister; I will send him copies of the internal memoranda and let him make up his mind on that basis, not on the party political pap which he seems to be fed by his colleagues in those authorities.

What the Labour party will do could not be more different. We will guarantee to provide a place for every three and four-year-old. The Minister mentioned targets earlier, but we will establish targets to provide for three-year-olds as well as four-year-olds through local co-operation between education authorities, the voluntary sector and the private sector in true partnership.

Mr. Harry Greenway: What does that mean?

Mr. Kilfoyle: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman needs some remedial English lessons. It means precisely what I said: it is a voluntary partnership between all sectors.

I can give the hon. Gentleman an example. The Pre-School Learning Alliance has identified 200 black holes where there is no provision. If the potential provider in one of those areas were a private provider, we would work in partnership to ensure that places were available. Such partnerships will be needs-led, but the biggest need is to provide of the places.

Mr. Greenway: This may be another example of the Labour party saying one thing and doing another. On 29 April 1994, the then leader of the Labour party came to Ealing and said that, if Labour won control of Ealing council, every child between three and five years of age would have a place in a nursery school if parents wanted it. The Labour party won control a month later, but only one extra class has been provided, and thousands of parents have been disappointed.

Mr. Kilfoyle: We are debating national policy, not local delivery under a Conservative Government who are not interested in assisting local education authorities to provide nursery places. We will provide a balance, and will support nursery education. We will offer an integrated programme of early-years provision.

We will also encourage partnership on parenting with community health service workers, which is the practice in Birmingham. When the Minister goes on about good practice, I get a sense of deja vu: I have seen this case argued in many Labour party documents. Labour Members would not disagree with much of what the Minister said. However, Government practice is at odds with the practice of those who are doing excellent work around the country.

Mr. Don Foster: The hon. Gentleman was unfortunately unable to attend the recent meeting of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, when we took evidence from the Pre-School Learning Alliance. He rightly talks about the importance of partnership as distinct from the competitive approach developed by the Conservative party. Is he aware that the Pre-School Learning Alliance told the Select Committee that a number of its member schools had had to close because of the introduction of the voucher scheme? It also made it very clear that the competition element of the voucher scheme was damaging.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Gentleman touches on the core of what divides the House: whether education is a co-operative exercise or a competitive one. I accept that, internally, it is competitive in many respects, but the logical conclusion to draw from the fact that nursery schools have to compete against one another is that there will be losers as well as winners. Some of those losers will be the playgroups that come under the aegis of the Pre-School Learning Alliance.

The Labour party has two other proposals on the under-fives. One is the establishment—or pioneering aspiration—of early excellence centres around the country that would propagate and disseminate information on best practice. As that is advocated by the Minister, I hope that, in the short time that the Government have left before the election, they will take it up more seriously; otherwise, we will have to put it into practice after the election.

Our other proposal, which was flagged by the Minister, is baseline testing as an early diagnostic tool. Labour authorities such as Birmingham and Nottingham have pioneered this sine qua non for effective measurement throughout a person's educational life.

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): The hon. Gentleman referred to the dissemination of good practice. Has he looked at the Internet aspect of the Department's

[Mr. Piers Merchant]

improving schools programme? Will he give his view on the contribution that that makes to the dissemination of good practice across the country?

Mr. Kilfoyle: No, I have not, but that will be academic for many schools unless they are wired up to the information super-highway. The leader of the Labour party announced at our conference last year that that would be at the heart of our education proposals. That was reiterated this year.

What happens to our children at key stage 1 under the improving schools programme? One third of primary school pupils are in classes of more than 30, which is a 24 per cent. rise in the past five years. The Government refuse to acknowledge that large class sizes can hamper educational achievement. Many people, including many Conservative Members, choose the private sector precisely because smaller class sizes equal a better education.

Respected research by Tennessee Star is often quoted in the House. It carried out an excellent research programme that showed that class size has a direct effect on educational achievement. In October, an independent study commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers recognised the importance of class size to educational achievement. Most frightening of all is that in 1996 there has been a 20 per cent. jump in the number of children in classes of more than 36 pupils.

Lady Olga Maitland (Sutton and Cheam): Is not the hon. Gentleman twisting and distorting the facts to suit his own interests? Does he acknowledge that larger primary classes have classroom assistants? No teacher is required solely and alone to teach such a large number of children to read and write. Teachers are always supported by a classroom assistant.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is teaching methodology that counts? He should not just complain about class sizes. Good-quality teaching will always do well.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I could not disagree more with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland). Not every class has a classroom assistant to pad out the adult-pupil ratio. I shall deal with that later. Teaching methodology has a place, but it is not the sole factor. I have taught senior classes of 48 people, but those client-pupils were well-motivated academically. I did not have a problem. We are talking about the most formative years of a child's life, when individual tuition is a prerequisite to the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills that will enable children fully to participate in education later on.

Lady Olga Maitland: The hon. Gentleman misses out another important factor: the relationship between the school and the parents at home. Does he agree with me that it is vital that parents support their children when they are learning to read? Children's reading experience with their parents is equally important.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I shall come to that shortly. The reading recovery programme, which is probably the most successful scheme to date for those who have fallen behind, is predicated on the need for a partnership with parents. My understanding of that scheme is that, unless the parents are supportive, it does not work. But that is writ large for every child early on in school life.

Labour will address those areas of concern. We have said honestly and openly that we will abolish the assisted places scheme, which currently costs £118 million.

That figure is set to rise next year—if the Government have their way—to £141 million. We believe that the transfer of that money will enable us to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds. I am sure that the Minister will tell us about the written answer that the Government gave. They said that the cost of our proposals was between £120 million and £250 million, which I find extremely interesting. It was the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) who tabled the question. The fact that there is such a lack of precision speaks volumes about the DFEE. I am sure that the Minister will enlighten us, but we have based our figures on independent research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Mr. Patrick Thompson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me before he moves too far beyond his mention of the assisted places scheme. I have experience of schools where that scheme has worked, and is working, extremely well. Would he and his Front-Bench colleagues be prepared to visit one of the large successful schools that operate the assisted places scheme, so that he can see what would be at stake if the scheme were to disappear?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have visited Wisbech grammar school, which last year received more money than any other school from the assisted places scheme. My old school, St. Edward's college in Liverpool, was one of the top three recipients of APS money. I could not but agree that the scheme is successful in putting money into schools. As the hon. Gentleman will recall, that was the original motivation behind it. It was designed to provide a subsidy for erstwhile direct grant schools that went into the independent sector. The arguments about the socio-economic background of the recipients of APS money were a post facto justification of what took place at the time.

Mr. Spearing: My hon. Friend may be interested to know that I visited a rather well known former direct grant school of the type described by the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson). As a Labour Member, I was asked about the assisted places scheme, and my reply was, "You do very well here. You have marvellous facilities and teachers and a site that serves the area. I would like all the boys in the borough"—it was a boys school—"to have similar opportunities. What do you say to that?" Should not the hon. Member for Norwich, North, who is a professional educator, share that view?

Mr. Kilfoyle: One of the great misunderstandings among Conservatives is that we want to drag people down. We do not. We want to drag everybody up. We want everybody to share the benefits of the excellent education that no doubt most of the youngsters on the assisted places scheme get. And we have a different set of priorities, because a reduction in class sizes, which will enable all our children to get on to the ladder of

educational opportunity, is far more important than providing a subsidy to independent schools and giving an advantage to 33,000 or 34,000 youngsters.

Mr. Robin Squire: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is developing his argument on assisted places. It must be one of the few policies of new Labour that is unpopular with the public, because it has not been developed in response to whatever seems to be the mood of the moment. It is clear that the public support the assisted places scheme.

May I clarify something else? The hon. Gentleman asked why the range of costs was so wide, but on reflection he will realise why no one, including the NFER survey on which he relied, and which specifically excluded capital costs, can give exact costs. Until one checks school by school, one cannot possibly know whether there would be space within this or that school for another classroom, or whether three, four, or five children would be deprived of the opportunity to attend a school in the future. The whole idea is flawed, but I thought that I would give the hon. Gentleman a factual answer.

Mr. Kilfoyle: From the Minister's perspective, that may appear to be so, because it may be beyond the wit of the Government to achieve a better distribution of the 800,000 surplus places that already exist. One would hope that, where there is a commitment to state education and to the provision of smaller classes—where there is a will—there will be a way. And under Labour, there will be a will.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Colchester, South and Maldon): The hon. Gentleman said that he would use the money saved by the abolition of the assisted places scheme to reduce class sizes. What figure did he use in calculating the cost of educating the pupils now on the assisted places scheme when they have to move into the maintained sector?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I shall come to that in a moment, but we have said repeatedly that the programme will be phased. It is not as if, overnight—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Obviously, we shall not prejudice the education of any child. We shall simply stop awarding fresh scholarships. That will have an impact. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives say one thing and do another.

Let me give some figures. The hon. Member for Colchester, South and Maldon (Mr. Whittingdale) asked about costs. In 1993, the average expenditure per secondary school pupil in local education authority maintained schools in England was £2,250. The average fee charged per pupil under the assisted places scheme is £4,110. If that is not a subsidy to the private school and an advantage for the individual pupil, I do not know what is. Natural justice, if nothing else, demands that that no longer be allowed.

As for what one should do at key stage 1, throughout the early school years we shall reintroduce the reading recovery scheme I mentioned. We have set up literacy and numeracy task forces to work out how best to address the real needs of all our children and help them to acquire basic competence in maths and English.

Later, especially in primary school, there are major problems, and too many of our children fall behind in literacy and numeracy skills. Recent SATs results are alarming. Two fifths of 11-year-olds—40 per cent.—fail to meet the expected standards in maths and English tests at the end of key stage 2, and only three fifths of pupils achieve the appropriate standards in science.

Next time we consider an education Bill, we should ask ourselves what selection can possibly have to do with meeting the needs of those thousands upon thousands of children who have already fallen behind and will end up among the huge number of disaffected, alienated and unemployed people that 17 years of Conservative government have created.

Lady Olga Maitland (Sutton and Cheam): I fear that the hon. Gentleman is a touch hypocritical. He says that he is all for trying to improve standards and help children along, so how does he explain the appalling performance of Labour-controlled education authorities such as Hackney, Islington and Lambeth?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I shall touch on that later, because I am going through my speech stage by stage.

In his closing remarks, the Minister began by talking about standards, but he could not resist a side-swipe at local education authorities. LEAs have had many of their powers and responsibilities taken away. We accept that there is no constituency for a return to the status quo ante the Education Reform Act 1988 in terms of schools running schools. However, we do not accept the idea that there is no role for local education authorities—or, as I prefer to call them, the local education service—because they provide the day-to-day support and pressure that the Minister mentioned.

I have already acknowledged that we agree with what the Minister said about that, because his examples are taken from successful Labour authorities. The reason that the hon. Lady can point the finger at Labour authorities, even if she does so erroneously, is that almost all authorities are either Labour or Liberal Democrat. There are not many Conservative authorities, but if the hon. Lady wants to talk about the mistakes that those authorities have made, I have only to direct her attention not a million miles up the M1 to Milton Keynes. It is despicable that the new unitary authority there will have foisted on it a school that it does not want. Buckinghamshire county council is adopting a scorched earth policy.

Mr. Skinner: There is also the question of grants. As my hon. Friend said, Labour-controlled education authorities do not get the same treatment as the few Tory authorities, such as Westminster, where we are now. If my local authority, or Halifax, or Nottinghamshire, which covers Manton school, could get the kind of grants that Tory-controlled Westminster council does, there would not be problems in the schools there. The Government feather the nests of Tory Westminster and Wandsworth, while the rest are left to do as they like. That is one reason why there are problems in our society.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I think that the electorate recognises that partiality has been shown between different authorities. There has been another type of partiality, too—the attitude towards locally managed as opposed to grant-maintained schools. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) has struck at the core of an important matter, so I shall tell the Minister about something that I had been reluctant to mention.

[Mr. Kilfoyle]

I met senior officers of the Funding Agency for Schools to discuss a school in my home city, St. Francis Xavier's college, and concerns relating to its financial procedures, and put down a list of 20 detailed questions. During the summer, when others were on holiday, we were in the House trying to get answers. I wrote to the Secretary of State two and a half weeks ago to express my alarm at one aspect in particular.

Obviously, public money is involved, but what concerns me is the fact that local authority schools are treated in one way, and grant-maintained schools in another. Of particular significance in this instance is the fact that a member of the Funding Agency for Schools is the head teacher of the school concerned. There is clearly a conflict of interests. I find no speed, urgency or consistency by the Government to investigate important matters in that school, as they would readily do in the case of a local authority school.

Mr. Harry Greenway: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to correct the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who missed earlier parts of the debate, and point out to him that Hackney Downs school was receiving three times as much per pupil as any Westminster school, and that 45 children out of every 100 educated in Westminster schools are from other boroughs, virtually all of them Labour-controlled—Brent, Islington, Hackney and others? Those children include the son of the shadow Home Secretary, who cannot face education in Islington, where it is so awful.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Minister said earlier that matters were more complex than merely funding, but funding is an important element in all schools and authorities. There are disparities and difficulties. We all wrestle with the difficulty of the area cost adjustment, as the Minister knows. People strongly resent that, as I am constantly reminded, and as he is, no doubt, when he travels to certain parts of the country.

The computation of standard spending assessments is immensely complex, and all sides are working to make it fairer. It comes down to the notion of winners and losers. We contend that some authorities have been winners because the odds have been stacked in their favour, while other authorities have been losers because the odds have been stacked against them, not just in funding, but with respect to their catchment area, the children they must teach, the history of local schools and other elements, which together form a complex matrix.

Mr. Don Foster: The hon. Gentleman expressed concern about the way that money is spent in grant-maintained schools. Is he aware of the report issued two days ago by the National Audit Office, which expressed considerable concern about the financial arrangements in GM schools, and cited concerns about governing bodies? In one school, for example, the governors awarded £100,000 to the head teacher to spend in any way he liked, without any reference to them, and in another school the head teacher had new buildings built and staff appointed for a sixth form, without the governors being involved in the decision.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I cannot but agree with the hon. Gentleman. It seems that the school I mentioned might, with great facility, have switched funds that were liable for audit because they were public funds into those that are allegedly charitable funds. People draw on that money without receipts, and without following any of the usual financial procedures. That might be in order in terms of the law, but it would not be allowed to happen in a local authority school. Investigations would take place.

When I involve the appropriate authority, the FAS, I get no satisfaction. When I write to the Secretary of State, I do not even get the courtesy of an answer within two and a half weeks. I know that she is a busy lady: she must take the knives out of her back with increasing frequency, prepare herself for the disintegration of the Conservative party and wonder where she will end up in the broad spectrum that has developed in the party. Whether she is after the leadership or simply wants to maintain her job is open to question, but, notwithstanding the internal political intrigues in the Conservative party, she should respond to concerns about education that affect a great many children, teachers and parents.

Let me make three positive points on key stage 2, one of which the Minister said that we would take up. We have proposed summer schools for children who are failing, before they enter secondary education. Why not help them to overcome the barriers they face in literacy and numeracy, to give them a fair start in secondary education?

We want more homework to be part of the home-school contract. We want to develop clear guidelines for schools and parents on their responsibilities. We would encourage homework clubs. The Minister knows that children spend 12 times as long watching television as doing homework. Given Britain's performance in the world economic league, it is high time that we addressed the ethos, or lack of it, relating to homework.

Early diagnostic and remedial intervention is needed, beginning with the under-fives, to ensure that difficulties are dealt with and later problems pre-empted.

The crisis is most apparent at secondary level. We heard comments earlier about the Ridings school and the ghettoisation that arises from poverty, lack of aspiration and failure. I accept, as does the Minister, no doubt, that various factors compound the problems of the Ridings school: management, disaffected teaching, parents who do not meet their obligations—a heap of historical issues coming together.

The problems will become more widespread if the Conservatives try to implement the Prime Minister's commitment to a grammar school in every town. For every grammar school that is built, there will be at least one Ridings school. Matters will become worse and worse.

Dr. Spink: I wanted to make a positive contribution to the debate, and return to the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the crisis in secondary education. Does he agree that primary education is the foundation? If we get that right, everything is easy, especially in secondary education. The real crisis is in the primary phase in the early years. We must focus on that if we want to succeed in education.

Mr. Kilfoyle: We need two things, and the next Labour Government will pursue a twin-track strategy. First, we must deal with the problems of the here and now, and all

the manifestations of disaffection that we see in huge numbers of young people whom, frankly, the education system has failed in recent years. Secondly, we must take longer-term corrective measures to create an education system that deals with the twin needs for economic prosperity and social cohesion. Education is central to that.

We will put those building blocks in place. Meanwhile, emergency measures must be and are being taken. I hope that the Department, the inspectors and the LEA concerned will get together over the Ridings school—they may be doing so now—because instant partnership and instant action are needed in the present crisis.

Mr. Robin Squire: As the hon. Gentleman knows, things are developing at the Ridings, and it would be inappropriate for me to speak about the inspection report. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that.

Sadly, Labour Members have a blind spot on selection by ability—not selection by aptitude, but selection by ability—if they assume that the creation or existence of grammar schools makes other schools poorer. The thrust of the debate is that every school, whatever its intake, can work to better those children. The hon. Gentleman is mistaken if he assumes that it is simply a matter of changing the nature of the intake. What matters is the attitude in dealing with the intake.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I agree that it is a matter not just of dealing with the intake, but of attitudes in every school. That is the nub of our case. We cannot afford to show preferential treatment to a minority who may be academically gifted. Naturally, they need support. Naturally, we want excellence for all our children, including those at the top of the attainment ladder. We must ensure, however, that the best is expected of every child and every school.

I noted the Minister using one of his favourite phrases—an oldie but goldie—about pressure and support. He was right: schools and teachers need pressure and support, but that must apply equally to every school.

The results of the long years of Conservative stewardship of the education system make disturbing reading. One in 12 youngsters leave school with no qualifications. The gap between the top and bottom 20 per cent. of GCSE results is described by a factor of 12. Matters are therefore worse than they were in the 1970s. There is a 10 per cent. gap between boys' and girls' performance—about which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris) will have more to say later. As we enter the 21st century, supposedly the era of equality of opportunity, 47 per cent. of Oxbridge students still arrive from private schools. The Government's policies have resulted in massive divisions.

My party will continue to advocate a number of measures to improve the situation. We want clearer indicators used in what are known as league tables. That requires baseline assessment; it also requires weighting the results to take in other factors. We have long advocated fresh start proposals, which appear to be called for in the Ridings school. When a school is failing, we want it closed and a new institution opened on the site with a new management team, with a different ethos, and with all the support that can be mustered for staff, parents and governors.

We need to tackle the failure of boys in the system. White working-class boys and Afro-Caribbean boys are the main groups of academic failure, and hence the source of future problems in terms of offending behaviour.

We must begin to tackle the backlog of the £3.2 billion needed for the repair and maintenance of school buildings. We intend to do that through our form of public-private partnership, based on borrowing against revenue, not assets. I do not know whether Conservative Members realise that there are still 600 schools with outside toilets.

I am sure that the Minister would agree with many of my party's proposals. We want, for instance, to encourage leadership of the highest quality. We want to boost management and leadership skills with new national qualifications and with a national register of teachers qualified to become heads. Where there is failure of leadership, we shall streamline the system for replacing that failed leadership quickly.

We value teachers, which is why we propose the establishment of a general teaching council, to give full recognition to the professional status of teachers. We want to improve the quality of teacher training, and to create a new grade of advanced skills teacher, designed to recognise and reward the best teachers, whose place is at the blackboard using their skills for the betterment of our children.

We want to improve the quality and effectiveness of teacher appraisal, and to root out bad teaching wherever it occurs. Of course the vast majority—as much as 97 per cent.—of our teachers are good teachers, but we cannot afford any bad teaching in the system at all. As the Minister said, children only get one chance, and bad teaching cannot be allowed to frustrate that chance.

As for parents, we wish to reinforce home-school contracts, to build stronger partnerships between teachers and parents. The sad events of recent weeks have shown up the non-existence of such relationships.

We want to introduce clear homework guidelines to ensure consistency for every child in every school. We want every primary school to involve parents more in children's literacy and numeracy. As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, parents are a vital element in the early stages of a child's life.

I have quoted before the former director of education in Strathclyde, Frank Pignatelli, who, despite the objections of senior officers in the authority, proved what I have always believed to be true—that, even in the most deprived inner-city areas, parents want the best for their children. That is the most natural thing in the world. We must harness the aspirations of all such parents, we must surmount the jargon barriers, and we must involve these parents much more closely. That will have a huge impact on standards.

We want to reinforce governors in their role. We should like every LEA to establish independent governors' forums or associations, in which full consultation on policy developments and improving strategies can take place. I am pleased to note that the forthcoming education legislation shows that the Government have taken account of our views on LEAs. We expect them to undergo the same sort of inspections as schools. We expect LEAs to exceed certain quality thresholds and to provide a certain level of service to all schools.

We want to encourage business partnerships. On Monday this week, I visited Prudhoe community high school in Northumberland, where I saw an excellent

[Mr. Kilfoyle]

synthesis of all these ideas, including a business partnership. The school enjoys technology status under the Government's initiative, and it offers modern apprenticeships. I saw there what a truly local community comprehensive high school can achieve. It is indeed a model of best practice.

We need to establish a standards and effectiveness unit, and the DFEE—*[Interruption.]* I am willing to be corrected, if the Minister wants to tell me that one has already been set up.

Dr. Spink: It is my understanding that the Department has always been primarily concerned precisely with standards and effectiveness.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am not suggesting otherwise. I am talking about a separate unit dedicated to the dissemination of good practice around the country.

Mr. Robin Squire *indicated assent.*

Mr. Kilfoyle: I stand corrected by the Minister, who tells me there already is one.

We have already agreed that national targets should be set and followed locally. We will need to review the many funding anomalies in the education system—a major task for any party in government, this, and I fear it will always remain so. We want to develop national guidelines for baseline testing. We would make it a clear duty for all schools to set improvement targets based on their previous best performance.

We would develop mentoring and encourage the presence of more adults in the classroom, so as to give disaffected young people role models. These are often lacking both in the home and at school, because of the declining numbers of male primary teachers. We think it essential that there be male role models in these schools—our proposals on the millennium volunteers might tie in with this. We could use young males as classroom assistants—subject, obviously, to proper checks on their suitability.

We want to encourage more extracurricular, after-school and summer activities, and to foster clear strategies to help struggling schools.

The Minister spoke of improvements in standards, and attacked local education authorities. I need only refer him to DFEE statistics for 1995 to demonstrate what these 17 years have done to young people's motivation to stay on in school.

The table on page 20 of the document compares the proportion of young people who remain in full-time education in this country with the figures of our overseas competitors, and tells us that only Turkey is worse off than the UK. Finland has 95 per cent. of 16-year-olds staying on in further education, Germany has 95 per cent., France has 92 per cent., the Netherlands have 97 per cent. and Sweden has 89 per cent. In the UK, the figure is 75 per cent.

For 17-year-olds, Finland has 86 per cent. in education, Germany has 93 per cent., France has 89 per cent., the Netherlands have 92 per cent. and Sweden has 87 per cent. The UK figure has fallen back to 57 per cent.

For 18-year-olds, Finland has 82 per cent. in education, Germany has 84 per cent., France has 79 per cent., the Netherlands has 79 per cent. and Sweden has 61 per cent. The UK has a derisory 34 per cent.

Is that a measure of the success of our schools under the Government during the past 17 years? It is a terrible damnation of the Government and their achievements. More than 750,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 25—who have spent virtually all their educational lives under this Conservative Government—are outside the job, education and training networks. Even the likes of the *Financial Times* now recognises that this is a major national tragedy and a terrible loss of resources that undermines our hopes not only of economic prosperity, but of social cohesion. It is time to say, "Enough is enough."

11.1 am

Lady Olga Maitland (Sutton and Cheam): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Squire), the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, on being so refreshingly positive about education and on his commitment to raising standards in our schools to improve the life chances of our young people. I say that from the bottom of my heart, and I contrast his remarks with the negative whingeing approach of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), who denigrated every achievement of the Government. He ignored the fact that, today, one child in three goes on to further and higher education—in contrast with 1979, when the figure was one child in eight.

We have made enormous strides—our young people know that, industry knows that and employers know that. I welcome the improving schools programme, as it is never right to rest on one's laurels. We must keep pressing forward and try to tailor children's talents and aptitudes to where they will be of most benefit. I am impressed that the Government are now paying close attention to children entering the primary level by trying to assess their starting point to ensure that their individual tuition is tailored to maximise their abilities in the essential early years.

I am all for schools being held accountable for their achievements, and we have seen that working well in the independent sector. I regard competition as healthy. I fear that Labour's code word of "co-operation" is a way of masking difficulties, rather than bringing the facts of how schools perform out into the open so that they can be compared with others as they look to build on best practice.

It was disappointing that the hon. Member for Walton spent a great deal of his speech running down the immensely succesful programmes introduced by the Government, including grant-maintained schools—the very schools that are giving opportunities to the children of Opposition Front Benchers. The Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield, (Mrs. Blair) had no doubts about deserting a sinking ship and running to a grant-maintained school to get the most benefit for his children.

Mr. Don Foster: Is the hon. Lady aware that the grant-maintained policy has been so succesful that, in the past 12 months, only one half of 1 per cent. of all eligible

schools have balloted for grant-maintained status? Secondly, what evidence does she have of the success of grant-maintained schools?

Lady Olga Maitland: I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman about the success of grant-maintained schools. In my constituency, grant-maintained schools have fought like the devil to achieve that status despite the resistance of local Liberal Democrat councillors, who wanted to deny children the opportunity of being in a school with the right to manage its own affairs. As a result of becoming grant-maintained, the schools have improved their academic standards and achieved better results. In addition, the schools are over-subscribed. Let us have no more cant from the Liberal Democrats, who are trying to run down grant-maintained schools. Those schools are here to stay, as far as we are concerned.

New Labour says that it is all for improving standards, but it wriggles on the hook when challenged about the Labour party's performance in the local education authorities that it controls. It is not good enough for Labour to say, "Don't blame us. We are only reflecting national policy." That is not the case. The Government have tried hard to devolve responsibility to the lowest possible level, and LEAs are responsible for getting it right. Nine out of 10 of the bottom LEAs in the country are Labour-controlled, and that is a disgrace.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Lady might like to talk to the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton–Brown) about his local authority, which—although hardly a hotbed of socialism—has consistently argued that it has been disadvantaged by the Government's funding policies. They are not my words, but those of the county council. That area is not a Labour hotbed—I do not think that we have a Labour Member of Parliament from that area.

Lady Olga Maitland: The problem is that my hon. Friend's borough is controlled by the Liberal Democrats, and that problem is reflected across the country. In my constituency, the local authority is controlled by the Liberal Democrats, who are trying to squeeze our schools and attempting to rub out the assisted places scheme. It is a disgrace to try to deny opportunities to others by levelling down.

It is depressing to hear Labour say that it wants to upgrade education. We should look at its track record before 1979. At that time, Labour cut spending on education by £1.6 billion, and teachers' pay lagged way behind that of their peer group. This Government have increased teachers' pay fivefold, so let us have no more cant from Labour on this matter.

I wish to refer to the positive agenda of the Government, and congratulate them on the attention that they are giving to discipline in schools. Without discipline, children will not have a chance to learn. Two weeks ago, I took part in a Central television programme on parenting. I went up to Nottingham and sat in a studio with parents and children from the Ridings school.

It was an unhappy experience, because I saw angry parents pitted against teachers, and sullen, truculent and aggressive children. The children were poor in their articulation, and had pale, thin faces. The youthful innocence that should have been theirs was gone. It told a sorry tale of a breakdown in personal discipline and a total lack of even the remotest understanding of a moral code. Discipline has to be instilled into their lives if we are to give those young people a decent chance in life. It is impossible for any one of them to settle down and work calmly and effectively when his or her life is in turmoil.

The behaviour at the Ridings school has shocked us all. It is a condensed nightmare; but, although shades of that school's experience are present in other schools, it is mercifully rare to find such disorder all in one place.

Mr. Spearing: The description given by the hon. Lady is sad and almost certainly accurate, but does she agree that the remedy lies primarily in co-operation—a word that she dismissed summarily a few minutes ago—and not in imposed and arbitrary discipline or competition?

Lady Olga Maitland: The hon. Gentleman is side-stepping the issue. School discipline comes from a variety of sources. School leadership is absolutely essential. I myself saw how a non-selective school in Sutton was transformed from a bin school into a tremendously successful one. Before the current headmaster took over, discipline had so broken down that a boy was found riding a motorbike through the school's corridors. Today, that school, with firm leadership, has a powerful and vigorous sixth form and children are achieving more than they had ever believed possible. That is because the headmaster believed in them and believed that the principle of discipline had to be enshrined in their school.

The headmaster takes a no-nonsense approach, and success has been achieved through being tough on discipline. He does not hesitate before sending home an unruly pupil—one who is rude, offensive or aggressive—and that child is not allowed back into school until he has said that he will come to the headmaster's office, properly dressed in school uniform, with his parents beside him, and then apologise.

Imposing fair discipline is hard work—none of us would deny that. The head teacher in all cases must be backed by parents. The difficulty at the Ridings school is that the parents were aggressive and blamed teachers instead of examining what had gone wrong. Parents felt deeply mortified if fault was found with their child. We all know that children are sometimes naughty and that they can misbehave, but a child who is undermining a school is not helped by its parents insisting, "My Johnny is perfectly well behaved." The child then has no fear of retribution, either at home or at school. In the end, it is up to a school's leaders to be clear about where they stand on behaviour.

It is significant that the neighbouring school to the Ridings—a Catholic school, only one mile away, which has a similar catchment area—has had a vastly different experience. One boy at that school, when asked whether the moral decline had affected his school colleagues, replied:

"Has it, heck! If you go into the dining room with trainers on, you're sent home."

That is the key—discipline begins at home. It must be admitted that some children have little chance—those who come from dysfunctional family backgrounds, hurtling between a changing scene of partners and step-parents, have an unstable base to build on.

[Lady Olga Maitland]

Against those disadvantages, an essential start is home-school agreements that give parents a clear understanding of their responsibilities and show how they can support the school. There is a creeping tendency among some parents to talk more about their rights than about their responsibilities—to complain rather than to support the school.

Head teachers need more than such agreements, however—they need to enforce effective discipline when a small minority breaks ranks. Bad behaviour does not affect only the individual child, but the entire peer group. At present the means available to head teachers are somewhat limited. An imaginative head teacher will devise a series of disciplinary measures in graduated steps, such as isolation at break or at lunch time—young people hate to be isolated from their peer group—missing school treats and outings, and other punishments. That will leave teachers with a final sanction, before exclusion, of after-school detention.

Head teachers tell me, however, that detention is not as effective as it might be, because, until now, a head teacher has had to write to the child's parents giving them 24 hours written warning of detention. The sting of the punishment, which should be immediate, is thus delayed to the point where it is no longer effective. I therefore welcome the provision in the forthcoming Education Bill to permit head teachers to detain pupils without advance parental consent. That power is really obtained in principle when parents sign their home-school agreement.

My second point is that discipline is meaningless unless it is backed by a moral code. I congratulate Frances Lawrence on her brave stand to ban violence and promote civic values. She deserves our whole-hearted support in her campaign for society to remain civilised. Her message fell on fertile ground and stimulated a vigorous debate. It appears that the silent majority that she represents has had enough and is fighting back.

Of the many laudable aims that Mrs. Lawrence proposed, the one that resonates most with me is her plea that

> "Governments must no longer be neutral on the family."

In her manifesto, which was published in *The Times*, she said:

> "One of the most effective crime prevention measures is, surely, action to protect and encourage family life."

She recognises that stable families provide the loving support, backed by gentle authority and natural affection, that encourages children to treat others with interest and respect. She added:

> "Deprived of the simple warmth of family life, however, children, for self preservation, may have to seek refuge in the harsh, unfamiliar and tenuous camaraderie of the streets. Gangs, like those of the boy who murdered my husband, attract the unloved young and provide inane and ugly occupation."

Mrs. Lawrence's warning should be taken very seriously—it came from her heart, not from a political pundit trying to score points.

That is why I take seriously the School Curriculum Assessment Authority consultation document on values which was published only this week. I take heart from the fact that it is a consultation document and that there is time to amend it, which is just as well. I am disturbed by the lack of attention paid in the document to the family, which is the foundation of our society.

Mr. Patrick Thompson: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, especially as I missed the earlier part of her speech. Is she as disturbed as I am by the fact that the word "marriage" is not mentioned in the document?

Lady Olga Maitland: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was about to address that point. In fact, five of the people who were involved in the consultation exercise, led by Mr. Guy Hordern, declared their great dismay at the fact that marriage had not been mentioned. I support their call that

> "children should be nurtured and developed within a stable, moral and loving home environment with preferably both mother and father present in a happy marriage relationship."

When reading the SCAA document I felt that it was so vague as almost to neutralise morality. It is as if the SCAA is terrified of grasping the matter—as if the issue is too hot to handle and the SCAA has run away from the possibility of being burnt.

Virtue has to be taught and the roots begin at home. I believe it was somewhat cowardly of the consultation document to back off and not mention marriage because consensus could not be achieved. It was feared that because so many children in a classroom might come from broken homes, it would somehow be insensitive to draw attention to the successful, structured and traditional family.

However, I agree with Mr. Hordern that we must regard marriage as an ideal; to do otherwise is a fundamental betrayal of the next generation. I support him in his desire not to put down single parents or exclude them but to expose sensitively and realistically the great shortcomings of bringing up children in a single-parent household, a situation made even more difficult if the parent has never been married or is constantly changing partners.

We have to grasp the nettle. The revival of the family, meaning two heterosexual parents and the institution of marriage, should be the central theme running through policies for social recovery. Parents have the duty of stewardship over their children, and to duck that duty is to fail in our responsibilities.

For all the reasons that I have outlined, we should be bold and brave in promoting the institution of marriage. Young people who do not have the good fortune to enjoy a stable family life are under no illusions about their own circumstances, so it is up to us to give them firm and clear moral frameworks. We have to deter them from starting another disastrous cycle of their own. This country has paid a high price—of all European countries, we have the largest number of children born outside marriage.

The traditional family provides the moral framework that no school curriculum can provide. Therefore, to omit marriage from the consultation document is to deny the next generation the rights that it fully deserves and which it is entitled to enjoy. Countering the influence of feckless parents is one of the things that schools used to do with unblushing confidence. That was before training colleges persuaded teachers to stop inflicting bourgeois values on working class children. I believe that, with tact, it is possible to convey a message that might persuade some children not to make the mistakes that their parents made, but that can be done only if we do not duck the difficult issues—we have to face them.

Getting the consultation document right and promoting family values will be a first step in giving children the firm basis and stable home that they need to be able to concentrate on school work and to do justice to themselves and to society.

11.22 am

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): I agree with many of the descriptions given by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) and her comments on some of the omissions from the consultation document, but my moral background—which I believe I share to some extent with her—leads me to almost precisely the opposite conclusions in terms of national education policy and many other matters relating to the life of our nation. I shall expand on the differences between us at the end of my speech.

I must apologise to the House. This time yesterday and, indeed, until late in the evening, I was intending to stay until the end of this debate, but I have had a rather urgent message on a domestic matter, which means that I shall not be able to hear the reply to it.

I begin with a quotation of a retiring teacher:

"I come to the problems facing secondary schools in urban areas, particularly those which do not have the first choice of pupils or staff. There are indications that the difficulties which are caused by socially deprived, unhappy and maladjusted pupils are on the increase. One of the most frustrating and tragic aspects of the job which I am in the process of relinquishing is represented by the difficulties experienced by teachers through being faced by unhappy, sullen and inarticulate young people and the fact that, in the present structure, many teachers are not able to produce an educational response suited to their deepest needs.

The result is that a significant number of adolescents are leaving school today inadequately prepared for learning for themselves, which is one of the objects of the exercise. Indeed, it is the main purpose of it. They are leaving with bitterness and with a grudge against adult society.

In some schools the emotional strain on teachers is considerable. Even the most sympathetic and experienced of them are liable to be abused, sworn at or even physically attacked. It is not surprising, therefore, that even some of those who are educationally committed are leaving the profession."

He had said earlier:

"I do not believe that even the most enlightened education authorities, let alone the Department, have a realistic appreciation of the real needs and difficulties involved."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1970; Vol. 803, c. 735.]

Was that said last week, or about the causes célèbres mentioned by the Minister? No, it is from a speech made in the House 26 years ago. For reasons that I shall come to, I think that the situation has got even worse.

The situation has got worse because, even now, not even the most enlightened education authorities—we must remember that they have been deprived of many of their powers—let alone the Department for Education and Employment, understand the fundamentals of learning in a classroom. If we do not start with the classroom, ensure the provision of resources and good leadership and encourage co-operation—I stress the word co-operation for the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam—the learning process does not get off the ground.

I once heard a wise headmaster, a man who had fought in the trenches in the 1914-18 war, say that the object of the educational process was to enable individuals not only to learn how to live wisely—which I think was Archbishop Temple's definition of education—but to become literate, numerate, manipulate and sociate. The final one is often left out, which has a bearing on what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam suggested.

That headmaster said that none of those objectives, which I suggest are far more important than any other measurable attainment at a given age, can be achieved without a certain motivation, and that motivation cannot be achieved without a prospect of success. Success having been achieved, greater success is built on it. I would expect most teachers and headmasters who aspire to do a professional job broadly to agree with that view, but we do not often hear about it. Instead, we hear about resources, money and legislation that must be organised and directed to those very ends. That is the responsibility of the House and locally elected representatives.

For the first time in a long while, there is debate in the newspapers about the principles on which we build our society and which we wish to offer our young people. Acres of space are devoted to the matter and to two or three causes célèbres, which I shall not speak about in detail but which are symptoms of something going wrong, but I understand that even some important education bodies are not aware of our debate today.

How many teachers will be able to read what has been said? Is there a radio channel for schools from which this debate can be recorded? What is the vague programme that the Minister mentioned? I have heard talk of the improving schools programme, but the London county council and County hall had a whole department to deal with the professional improvement of teachers. I used to listen to some of its lectures and even gave some. It is the job of local schools, local education authorities, institutes of education and the profession to improve schools. Of course the Government can get a bit of kudos by publishing papers on the subject, but I suspect—I hope that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam agrees—that the state per se, embodied in the Department for Education and Employment, is not in that game. It should be a matter for LEAs, the professional bodies and academics.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that the purpose of today's debate is to provide a launch pad for the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority document, which was torpedoed by the Secretary of State earlier in the week. That is why so many people do not know about it. The document no longer serves the propagandist purpose of a Government who now dedicate everything to their campaign to retain office at the general election.

Mr. Spearing: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for a possible explanation. It begins to fit, and it may well be right.

I expect—there has not been much mention of this except from the Minister, although I make no complaint about that—that the Government have a set of remedies. On Wednesday, they published a Bill—80 pages of education legislation. The Minister referred to it en passant. The Bill has not featured much in the newsprint yet because it is a bit technical. It implements most of the ideas from the document "Self-Government for Schools".

Dr. Spink: Hear, hear.

Mr. Spearing: The hon. Member says, "Hear, hear," but the Bill extends a policy that the Government have

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been pursuing for the past five or six years. The policy that has been advanced for the administration of schools, their financing and the assistance of teachers in the classroom and talented heads has been the opposite of what is required to achieve the educational objectives I saw Conservative Members nodding about a while ago.

On choice, diversity and specialisation, paragraph 4 of the White Paper, Cm 3315, says:

"Since 1979 one of the Government's main objectives has been to give parents more choice in deciding the education they want for their children, and to promote more diversity among schools as a means of broadening that choice."

That is not my understanding of what parents want. They want to be able to rely on a school relatively close to where they live to provide a high standard of professional service from dedicated public servants that meets the needs of their child. They want sufficient choice within the educational offering at that school to allow their child's needs to be met.

I agree that there may be a need for a few specialist schools such as the Yehudi Menuhin school for highly talented children with certain aptitudes. Special schools may also be required for those who physically and perhaps intellectually have special needs, but the bulk of children are now at least thinking about taking a GCSE in four or five subjects. Surely, if there is to be proper choice, the heads and teachers, particularly in schools teaching 11 to 16-year-olds—the crucial years—should have the opportunity to make the whole educational offering available and match it to the needs of each pupil. [*Interpeption.*]

The hon. Member for Castle Point dissents. I am happy to give way if he does not think reasonable the proposition that choice should be provided between schools that offer the same standard, particularly in rural areas with a county town or where pupils go to a school in a large village or town. I should like him to rise if he disagrees with that. Surely that is what all parents need. They need a choice—a limited choice perhaps—between a number of schools, each of which can provide that educational offering. I challenge any Conservative Member to disagree with that as an ideal.

Mr. Don Foster: Can the hon. Gentleman help me with a dilemma? As he rightly points out, the Government are promoting the idea of parental choice, but does not the extension of selection deny parental choice? Under a selective system, the school selects the child; the parent does not choose the school.

Mr. Spearing: Indeed. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am hastening on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Any denial of the principle that I have enunciated results in the situation that the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) outlines. The variety and skill of education to a high standard which we want for all our children can be offered in a school which has—if I dare use the term—a comprehensive, with a small "c", offering. That is why that unfortunate word was used when the concept was introduced. Such schools should simply have been called high schools. That is the history of the dilemma. I have proved my point thus far, I think.

Furthermore, a wise head and a wise staff at any school will consider not only the needs of pupils who clearly need something extra—those who are either scholastically behind or non-sociate, to use the phrases that I used earlier—but will assess the needs of all pupils, all the time, every year, and will assemble the right response within the organisation that the school permits. That is another educational principle which I am sure the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) and others who have had experience of teaching—I see that the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) is not here—cannot deny.

Alas, the principles that I have enunciated are not being adhered to in Newham. In Newham, we have a great need to meet the needs not only of all pupils in all our secondary schools but of children with special needs which the House, the education authorities and even the Minister say must be made clear in a statement. It is important to bring such pupils up to a level at which they can begin to learn for themselves, and learn to walk before they can run. Once those needs have been stated, the resources have to be made available to meet them. Hence we have the question of special needs, about which I intervened earlier.

My understanding from my constituency experience is that there is a great need for special needs provision. We have in Newham the Tunmarsh centre. A few months ago, I was summoned by the head of the centre, which sends out remedial teachers to the schools in the borough. It also has a centre to which pupils can come for extra help. It is equipped with many facilities including devices, books and visual aids.

The head said, "Mr. Spearing, we are in danger. Are we going to be able to continue? Will I be able to recruit staff? It looks as if we are going to have to cut down." I asked why. She said, "We get our money from the LEA and we have been told that there is some difficulty with it." There is some formula involving 85 or 95 per cent. It is all a bit obscure. Some money comes from the Department—15 or 16 per cent. The centre has to sell its services to each school in turn.

While the centre receives money from the LEA, the schools are very glad for it to help them out, but in future the governors of each school will have to examine their spending and decide whether to purchase what the centre provides. The head said that many of the schools would think that they could do the job better because they could choose how to spend their money. She said that the centre's service to the community and the borough was at risk. I found out from various conversations with officers of the much maligned education authority that they thought that what the head said was true, but they had no choice about the matter because the Government were changing the scheme of distribution of resources. There is talk about that now.

The common-sense thing to do might be to aggregate in any one LEA the special needs of pupils, roughly assess the cost of meeting them and take that figure out of the figure which the Government require the local authority to distribute to local management of schools. I suggest that we need urgently to look at that. If we do not, the people who need a proper educational response will continue to be the unfortunate people whom the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam graphically described a few moments ago.

The hon. Lady also mentioned head teachers. The difference that a head can make is well known. The hon. Lady had an example. Indeed, the head teacher in the sad

instance she cited is trying to do just that—make a difference. He has a terrible task. A head teacher will develop staff and school over five or 10 years before there is the lift-off in morale and motivation, like an aeroplane taking off, which is the heart of a good school.

What has happened to school heads in the past few years? I am sure that the National Association of Head Teachers and the Secondary Heads Association could describe to the Minister what has happened. Before the changes of the past 10 years, head teachers were responsible for the educational response; they got resources from the local education authority and did not have to worry too much about it. They now have 50 to 100 per cent. more functions: they have to be lawyers—much of the law in the Bill will apply directly to them, because each school is now its own quango—and they have to advise governors on a range of issues that used to be outside their responsibility, such as school buildings, repairs and organising money. The Minister cannot deny that running a school has become a semi-business.

The time that a head teacher has to devote to education qua education has been severely restricted, especially with the necessity for public relations. There was always an element of selling one's school—that is human nature—but now heads are forced into it. There was even a revolt among governors and staff of the private, self-contained quango of Cheltenham college.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): Quango?

Mr. Spearing: It is a self-contained quango, just like many so-called maintained schools. They are in competitive tables, like football league tables. Cheltenham college is sound and well looked after, as Conservative Members will appreciate, but the head was in danger of being sacked because it had gone down about 2 per cent. in the tables—at least, that is what I read in the newspapers; it may not be accurate. Every school head and all staff have to contend with such problems.

What are the problems that heads face now? They are dealing not only with education and with the centralities, but with an infusion of business criteria, which is all right for people making or repairing motor cars but not for people coping with pupils and their activities. I challenge the Minister about standards: educational achievement can be assessed by way of some examination on some curriculum, which can vary from year to year, but there is more to it than that.

The Minister mentioned his close connection with somebody connected with education. I have had 13 years' experience in the classroom, and I calculate that that means 13,000 lessons—a staggering figure. The petrol that fuels education is as I have described, and all the changes have diminished the ability to teach. Heads are faced with the prospect of having to consider annually whether to opt for grant-maintained status and with the prospect of sponsor governors. My impression—the Minister may wish to correct it—is that sponsor governors are at present associated only with GM schools, and that their function is to bring in financial or other resources.

Mr. Robin Squire: The key role of sponsor governors is in the development of specialist colleges, especially the technology colleges, which could be either grant-maintained or under a local education authority.

Mr. Spearing: That is at least half an answer. The idea of having specialist schools for under-16s in the secondary range, rather than making provision available centrally, is controversial, because that is not the universal provision for 11 to 16-year-olds that people generally consider necessary. Schools will have to decide whether to go technical in order to secure backing from some local firm to supplement resources that are restricted under local management of schools.

What about teacher recruitment and the competitive nature of what might be called the education business? What about school buildings? My first teaching job was in a new school. I thought it would have a wonderful geography department. In fact, there were two rooms rather than the four that were needed and each teacher had a locker only the size of the lockers that were installed for us here in 1850. I asked why that had happened in a newly built school, and was told that it was because of the Horsbrugh building cuts. Even then the building regulations were inadequate; some schools, unlike Eton, Cheltenham and such, did not have enough money to provide a place where pupils could eat properly together and learn the social habits in which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam is so interested.

Now that the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996 has done away with the regulations, there are no building regulations other than those concerned with health and safety matters such as fire exits and the number of lavatory pans. The safeguard of adequate premises has disappeared. That is another, headache for teachers.

What about playing fields? They have been sold off. We are told that there is a ratio, but that was disproved in the early 1980s. We were told that, as the population was declining, we could sell off the playing fields. When we asked what would happen if the population went up—which has now happened—we were told that that would be hard luck. The Prime Minister may talk about academies of sport, but in sport the width of the base is what counts. Sport in schools can be important for morale and for the relationship between staff and pupils, as can out-of-school activities, which declined drastically after the late Sir Keith Joseph introduced various constraints and antagonised the teaching profession—something that is happening more and more.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (Knowsley, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that the decline of school sports, societies and outdoor activities as a result of measures introduced by the Government has led to the undermining of the moral education that the Government suddenly find so lacking in schools?

Mr. Spearing: The challenge of moral education, as can be seen from certain newspapers and programmes, is greater than ever, but the means whereby teachers can offer something superior have been restricted. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam should realise that more than discipline is required; children will not learn without motivation and cannot be taught unless they want to learn. They might want to learn if there is a prospect of some money—employment is a great motivator—but there is not much of that for young people in certain places, including those in the Ridings, as the hon. Lady said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) is absolutely right: human relationships in the classroom, on the playing field and in out-of-school

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activities such as dramatics and hobbies, are fundamental to the school as a society. A wise headmaster once said that a secondary school was a society of children, young adults and adults. All that has been prejudiced by the Government's policies and attitude to the teaching profession.

The Bill will allow GM schools to apply to increase their numbers by 50 per cent. Can the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam tell me what would happen to other schools in her area or in any other if a GM school decided to take advantage of that? What happened to the criss-crossing of boundaries, with people coming in by train? What happens if a school that serves one area suddenly has to cater for a much larger one, purely through competition and places in the league tables? The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam nods, but I suggest that that is not good for the school itself.

A wise education administrator, or anyone—even R. A. Butler—would say that a professional head and governors should not take decisions about their school without considering the impact on the education system as a whole. That is a good principle, but the Government do not understand it. The so-called grant-maintained experiment will increase the problem, but there is more to it than that.

The Bill raises the suspicion that the Funding Agency for Schools will displace local education authorities. That is written clearly in what the Government are doing. The FAS is to be given opportunities to offer advice and to start up schools. The FAS grant system and the grant-maintained school system is being used to undermine and change the structure set up by Mr. Butler.

Mr. Squire: The hon. Gentleman is in full flood, but before he gets too carried away I remind him that the White Paper spelled out significant roles for local education authorities. It is already possible for LEAs and the FAS to come to different conclusions about proposals. In at least once instance, the Government accepted the LEA's recommendation rather than that of the FAS.

Mr. Spearing: That may be, but the Government still imply that LEAs have a role that they do not have. How often, in respect of causes célèbres, we hear the Secretary of State tripping off the phrase, "Oh, that is for education authorities." The public believe that local education authorities are authorities, but they no longer are. Someone should introduce a private Bill to change their name—local authority scapegoats would be more accurate.

The Minister does not deny that the FAS will have the power to create new schools. The school plan of the Butler Act has disappeared. The Government's education policies do not even match up to the education policies of enlightened Conservatism. They follow a competitive compulsion because they believe that all competition is good.

I am nearing the end of my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I understand the impatience of hon. Members—we all feel it when we wish to speak—but I shall read *Hansard* with great care to find whether they have refuted any of my points. The London Diocesan Board for Schools issued a response to the White Paper, though there was precious little time to respond to it. The board said:

"The changes in admission arrangements in recent years have increased the stress and pain experienced by parents and children when choosing a school. We have considerable evidence of this. We are unaware of any demand for increased selection from either parents or educationalists. Only 14 GM schools and 2 county schools have become partially selective beyond 10 per cent. The continual changes to statutory requirements relating to admissions makes it difficult for parents to keep up to date with procedures, resulting in frustration and misunderstandings."

On LEAs, paragraph 6 states:

"We agree with the seven main functions which LEAs undertake as listed in this paragraph. We work with 18 different LEAs and experience the wide range of support for schools provided by them. Where an LEA has pruned back its support to the minimum, the negative results for schools are clear to see. We are disappointed to see how the White Paper weakens the position of LEAs in some areas and urge the government to strengthen the role of LEAs."

Education cannot be run like a regiment, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam seems to think, although the tradition of private schools suggests that it can be up to a point. The problem is more fundamental and subtle. Unless the Government understand the dedication of teachers, the big challenge that teachers face will be made even more difficult by the false remedies that the Government are peddling in the White Paper and the Bill that was published last week.

11.53 am

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point): Education is the most important political subject today. It is the key by which the individual succeeds, and the key to success of our great nation. It is the key to the door of opportunity for each individual. I am delighted that the Government have decided to debate education this morning. I am only sad that, in the first 90 minutes of the debate, only two Opposition Back-Bench Members were present, while there were seven Conservatives. That speaks volumes.

I am always delighted to follow the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing). He speaks well and I enjoy hearing him, because he speaks with wonderful common sense. I agreed with much of what he said, but I disagreed with many of his conclusions, and especially with his aversion to selection.

I am against mixed ability teaching, which I think has failed, and I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's dislike of choice and diversity and of many of the successful Government policies that are turning education around. He invited me to intervene on him on a point when he saw that I was dissenting. I was dissenting from his assertion that the crucial years of education are 11 to 16. *Hansard* will show that that is what he said. I believe that the foundation years—the primary years—are the crucial years. If we get them right, everything else is more simple.

Mr. Spearing: I will clarify what I said. I do not think that everything else afterwards is simple, because adolescence is not simple. The hon. Gentleman is right about the base, but what happens in a single primary school classroom happens in a secondary school in the whole school. We can at least agree that that is a different sort of education organisation.

Dr. Spink: We can agree on that. Education is the key to success. The key to success in education is primary education, and the key to success in primary education is reading. It is a triple lock similar to that which the Government have provided for the single currency.

To drive up standards in schools, we must improve discipline, promote diversity, extend choice for parents and raise standards. I welcome the Government's flagship Bill in the Gracious Speech, because it will do those three things.

Discipline is the foundation; without discipline there can be no education. Without discipline, we will not see the enjoyment and love of learning on the faces of rising-fives when they arrive at school. How sad it is to see some of them quickly losing the enthusiasm and motivation of which the hon. Member for Newham, South spoke so eloquently. Without discipline, children will not achieve the essential skills of reading and numeracy that are the basis for all other subjects.

The Bill is welcome because it introduces long overdue measures to improve discipline and behaviour. It will give schools greater power to detain without the parent's consent; to exclude pupils for up to 45 days in any one year; and to refuse access to pupils whose parents refuse to sign a home-school agreement. Such an agreement, which reinforces parental responsibilities, is therefore essential, and it is a good initiative.

The Bill places a duty on schools to have a defined policy on discipline. It will set down expected standards of behaviour, the means of encouraging good behaviour, and the controls and sanctions that will be enforced when standards fall short.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Opposition are fascinated by the current little diversion in the Conservative party about caning. I wonder whether he can answer the same question that I put to the Minister earlier. Does he agree with the Prime Minister about caning, does he agree with the Secretary of State and, indeed, the Under-Secretary, or will he equivocate as the party chairman did on television last night? Where does the hon. Gentleman stand?

Dr. Spink: The hon. Gentleman will not draw me down that road—he must think that I am wet behind the ears. It certainly is a topical issue, given what has happened at the Ridings school, and I think that the Government's package of measures on discipline have caught the mood of the country. We must, however, keep the two school closures in proportion. There have always been difficult children and schools that are better than others. I should like to stress, however, that there have always been dedicated, excellent teachers who do a wonderful job, although I accept that some may need help and extra training and guidance.

The Opposition say that there are 15,000 bad teachers, and that they should be dumped. I disagree—I do not think there are anything like 15,000 bad teachers, and I certainly do not think that those teachers should be dumped. They should be offered mid-career guidance, training and every opportunity to improve.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Is he not aware that the figure he quoted came from the annual report of Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools? It was not conjured up by the Labour party, but computed by the chief inspector.

Dr. Spink: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has clarified that, because I have heard the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), the leader of the Labour party, quote that figure of 15,000 bad teachers. I cannot believe that that is true.

There has been a lot of media hype about discipline in schools—there must be little other news around. Children will be children, and they indulge in copycat behaviour. They want to get their faces in front of the television camera as they jump up and down outside their school playground. I hope that the media will carefully consider their treatment of the education system. I hope that they will back off from the schools in question, to allow matters to settle down. They must accept that they have a great responsibility in that respect.

The Government have recognised that schools' self-improvement is most important. On 28 September, the Secretary of State announced a measure to support that policy, which I welcome. The Government will introduce legislation to require schools to set and publish annually their own targets for pupils' performance, and to publish pupils' performance in national curriculum assessments and public examinations in core subjects. I welcome that.

The two years of virtual full participation in the national curriculum tests and assessments have given us a sound base on which to measure pupil performance. I recall that the Labour party was opposed to such tests, but I doubt that it is now. Schools will be able to compare themselves against achievement nationally as well as locally. Such comparisons will help schools to recognise what they have to do to ensure that good practice is spread as widely as possible, and to ensure that their standard of performance represents the best possible.

I welcome the introduction of a nationwide baseline assessment in September next year. That assessment will be conducted on young children soon after they first enter school, and it will provide a framework to gauge pupils' progress as they move through the school. I know that the hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara), who is present, and who sat on the Education Select Committee with me in previous years, also welcomes that value-added component, which is much more valuable than straight raw test results.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) spoke at great length about primary class sizes. Does he agree that, the greater the range of ability in any one class, the more difficult it is to teach a large class? Will he therefore apologise for Labour's disastrous policy of mixed ability teaching methods and for destroying the means of selection, and even streaming? I am glad to see that I am tempting the hon. Gentleman to respond.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am happy to rise to the challenge, and shall take the hon. Gentleman's last point first. On the subject of the damnation of Labour policy on selection—what are the hon. Gentleman's views on Lady Thatcher's attitude towards selective grammar schools when she was Secretary of State for Education?

I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman understands that there are many different approaches to the methodology of teaching in terms of mixed ability teaching and its benefits for low achievers. I accept what he says about many teachers finding it easier to teach pupils of one ability group—I have experience of that, and I said so in my speech; but that is not necessarily best for the children themselves.

Dr. Spink: I do not accept the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's point on selection. There is selection in

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schools in Dorset, Poole, Bournemouth and, where I now live, near Southend—and many of my constituents take advantage of it. In those areas, selection has given children from working-class backgrounds a great opportunity to do much better. In addition, non-selective schools also achieve much higher results. Everyone involved in education in south-east Essex, including my constituents in Castle Point, benefit from those selective schools. Selective schools do not usually mean that other schools around them are failed or sink schools.

Mr. Whittingdale: Does my hon. Friend agree that in Essex, the county that we both represent, we have some of the finest grammar schools in the country? Essex county council, under Liberal and Labour control, has waged a campaign of unremitting hostility against those schools, and is now trying to withdraw free school transport from them. Is that not the best demonstration of the Labour party's attitude to selective education?

Dr. Spink: Absolutely—the Labour party in Essex has done what the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) has just castigated the Government for doing: it has tried to sell a school field in my constituency. I have been fighting the Labour council tooth and nail; I have taken the matter to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has overturned the council's decision and forced it to rethink. The Labour council is taking that action against the Government's advice and against what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wanted.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have a simple question for the hon. Gentleman. What does he think of the response to the Government on selection by the Association of Grant Maintained and Aided Schools? There are many such schools in Essex that do not want selection. I have seen the phenomenon at first hand: there is a small number of highly selective schools in Essex, but I have met the secondary heads there, and the vast majority of them do not want selection.

Dr. Spink: The parents responsible for their children know best—they know better than the bureaucrats. That is why I am delighted that my grant-maintained schools—King John's school, Deans school and Appleton school—last week announced that they were all selecting 15 per cent. of out-of-catchment children. This week, they vote for selection; I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to record my congratulations to those schools.

We need more grant-maintained schools in the system. Immediately after the election, I want the Government to come forward with a way to promote more grant-maintained schools, and to stop the local education authorities frustrating parents. We must look at the future value and role of LEAs. That is one of the keys to the difficulty that has been experienced in education in this country over three or four decades.

I am delighted that the Government propose to extend choice and diversity, because they are virtues in their own right: they drive up standards in schools. When a school goes grant-maintained or has a new sixth form, as has happened in my constituency, it is not just that school that benefits, but all schools, as they have to consider the quality of their teaching, how effectively they are delivering it and what relevance it has. Standards rise throughout the system—in the schools that become grant-maintained, in those that get a sixth form and in all the other schools surrounding them. Moreover, a sixth form benefits not only the 16 to 18-year-old students, but the whole school, because it pulls up standards. I therefore welcome the Government's recent decision to provide more sixth forms and specialist schools, and more selection.

Where should those specialist schools be? Not surprisingly, I want them in my constituency, as it is a centre of excellence in education. Schools in my constituency import hundreds of pupils from outside the borough—in sufficient numbers almost to sustain two additional secondary schools. Will the Minister carefully consider the two bids for specialist school status that will be on his desk—or near it—from King John's school and Deans school in my constituency?

Castle Point needs a specialist school, as it does not have one, to reward excellence and invest in success, to give parents more choice and diversity in the constituency, where they appreciate it—they have shown that by their actions—to reward good schools and parents, to give society the highest possible return on its investment in education, and, most importantly, to provide further opportunity for the children in my constituency—and they are excellent children.

One of the defining political differences is that the Labour party tends to level down and back failure, whereas the Conservative party backs success and wants to level up. That is why we promote grammar schools and the assisted places scheme. We must invest in success because that is our core philosophy. I hope that the Minister will consider sympathetically the bids from Castle Point. If he does not, he knows that I shall repeatedly return to the issue.

Further education is also important in raising standards in schools. A sixth form enables the school to improve standards at every level. Therefore, I am delighted that the Government propose to allow schools to add a sixth form without central approval and the old change of character application to the Secretary of State. It would be perverse in the extreme for the Government to deny Canvey Island in my constituency a sixth form and refuse the current application for one.

I have fought on the issue since before I became a Member of Parliament. Essex LEA has betrayed young people in Canvey Island for decades by denying them a sixth form. The 16-plus, two-year cohort on Canvey Island is more than 1,000 youngsters, so, on national average staying-on rates, a sixth form would certainly be viable, although I accept that some young people would want to leave the island for their further education.

The Minister is aware, as I have told him before, that there is not one sixth form place on the entire island, which has a population of about 38,000. That is simply unacceptable. The county council has failed my young people, and I will not allow that failure to continue.

As there are no sixth form places, it is not surprising that the staying-on rate on Canvey Island is only two thirds of that for the rest of my constituency. It is also not surprising that unemployment is higher on Canvey Island than in the rest of my constituency. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said on Tuesday:

"The correlation between education standards and employment is clear."—[*Official Report*, 29 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 476.]

Let me therefore put the case as strongly as I can to the Minister that he should carefully consider the current application, and I hope to hear from him soon.

Another reason why I belong to the Conservative party rather than the Labour party is that the Labour party locally is opposed to a sixth form for Canvey Island, as it wants to level down. Levelling down is not just a philosophy; Labour is carrying it through.

Morals are primarily the responsibility of parents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) so eloquently explained, but the moral dimension to education is important. It is the foundation of knowledge, a thread that should run through all subjects and all years.

I have raised moral issues in the House and elsewhere for many years—religious education, the need for a disciplined framework in which children can learn, teaching right from wrong, the evil of child smoking and drugs, the availability of pornographic and violent materials and their impact on our children. But one moral issue stands above all others—the value, sanctity and dignity of human life, and the right to life.

What should schools teach children about abortion? Should they teach anything? Ironically, those who want children to be taught about sex and condoms often want to deny them knowledge about abortion, an understanding of how and why the life of a child is taken, the unspeakably horrific and brutal manner in which it is taken, and the impact on the mother, who is the second victim of abortion.

It would be inconsistent to ignore the issue of abortion and life in education if we are to address morality in school. Unless we teach our children the basis of all morality—to honour, value and respect life—how can we start to give moral guidance in schools and leadership to our children?

The right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) fails to give leadership on that key issue. In his parliamentary career, he could have voted on life matters 28 times. He abstained on 15 of those occasions and voted for abortion 13 times. He did not vote for life once, but he claims to be against abortion. The Labour leader says one thing and does another. He is as inconsistent on this issue as he is on education.

Mr. Kilfoyle: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. I have been pretty tolerant of the hon. Member for Castle Point (Dr. Spink). He is straying from the subject of the debate. Will he please get back to the subject that we are debating?

Dr. Spink: I shall get straight back to the subject.

There is much to win and much to lose on education at the next election. Giving Labour a chance in power would be disastrous. It did not take Labour long to destroy the education system comprehensively when they had power some years ago. Labour destroyed our traditional teaching methods—whole class teaching, tables, spelling and reading methods. Labour introduced rampant political correctness into teaching and gave us mixed ability teaching, which holds back the able, fails the average and demoralises the weak, who cannot compete.

Labour would destroy grant-maintained schools, specialist schools and selective schools. It would remove choice and diversity, replacing them with a monolithic uniformity and central control. All that would quickly turn around the improvements in standards that are now being secured by dedicated teachers and excellent headmasters and governing bodies. Labour would throw our system of education into chaos again.

There would be real danger for education, as for other areas, in a short sharp Labour shock. I hope, for the good of us all, that the people will avoid that.

12.18 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I begin with an apology to the House. Unfortunately, I shall have to leave the Chamber briefly soon after I finish speaking.

Were we to analyse the debates on education that we have had during the past year, we might be surprised by how many areas of agreement there are. There is considerable agreement on ends, although there may be disagreement about the means to those ends in some cases. Today's debate shows that there is all-party agreement on the importance of leadership for improving schools. Effective leadership is clearly vital. There has also been agreement on both sides on the important contribution that the relationship between home and school can make. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) was right to say that we have, perhaps, for far too long discussed the rights of parents and children without discussing the other side of the coin, which is their responsibilities.

There is probably agreement on both sides that an effective school is one in which there is a clear ethos and in which there is a disciplined environment. The disagreement concerns some of the means that may be used to ensure that disciplined environment. For the record, I make it clear that I am fundamentally opposed to the reintroduction of corporal punishment, for two key reasons. First, there is no evidence that corporal punishment is an effective means of reducing indiscipline in schools. Secondly, I find it almost unbelievable that people think that it is possible to reduce violence in our society by using a violent form of punishment.

There is also clear agreement about the need for us to have high expectations of young people in our schools. As I said in a recent debate, I suspect that a number of schools are not expecting enough of our young people. There is agreement about the need to share good practice and about the need for benchmark testing.

There has been agreement about the need to make better use of our school facilities outside normal school hours. I am delighted to be a trustee of an organisation called Education Extra, which promotes the effective use of schools outside school teaching time to help young people develop a wider range of skills, abilities and interests.

There is also considerable agreement about the vital importance of the early years. There is now unanimity that high-quality early years education is vital. The disagreement, which has been well documented, is on the means of achieving that. Again, I make clear for the record my fundamental opposition to the development of

[Mr. Don Foster]

nursery education through the use of the now discredited, highly complex, bureaucratic and cumbersome nursery voucher scheme.

Mr. Robin Squire: No.

Mr. Foster: The Minister says no. He was not, of course, present, as I was, at recent sittings of the Select Committee on Education when we took evidence from the various areas involved in the scheme. We listened to contributions from those who have had direct experience of the operation of the nursery voucher scheme in the four pilot areas.

Mr. Squire: Only this week, at a conference attended and addressed by both the Norfolk chief education officer and myself, the chief education officer made it clear on behalf of the largest of the phase 1 areas that the scheme was not bureaucratic, and that there were no significant administrative problems.

Mr. Foster: The Minister is normally keen to defend the importance of the private sector and the voluntary sector in nursery education. He now seems to want to ignore the very real concerns expressed to us in the Select Committee by the Pre-School Learning Alliance about its experiences in Norfolk. However, that is a subject for another debate. I merely wanted to place on record the vital importance of high-quality early years education as part of an effective improving schools programme.

As I said, there is much agreement in many areas. However, one area in which there is clear disagreement between the Government and the Opposition was outlined in the Minister's opening remarks. He said that this would not be a debate about resources. The implication is that improving the level of resources will do nothing to improve what happens in our schools. Frankly, that is nonsense.

I do not think that there can be a parent, a teacher, a governor or, indeed, anybody in the country who would not accept the basic premise that if we were, for example, to increase the amount of books and equipment in our schools it would have an impact on the quality of educational provision. I doubt that many people would disagree that raising levels of achievement for all must include children with special educational needs, or that increasing the resources available to help children with special educational needs would not help them.

There can be very few people now—not least after the various bits of research to which the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) referred and the recent research carried out by Nottingham university—who do not believe that making more resources available to ensure that we can reduce class sizes is going to raise levels of achievement in our schools. Those three areas—more books and equipment, more support for children with special educational needs and reducing class sizes—are all vital to improving levels of attainment in schools throughout the land.

The fourth area where additional resources are necessary—in this I am supported by Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools—is in improving the quality of school buildings. In the age of the information super-highway, it is a disgrace that far too many children are attending schools that still have outside loos, and far too many children are in schools that are crumbling, with the backlog of repairs and maintenance well in excess of £3 billion. We need to invest more resources to do something about that. As the chief inspector himself said, poor quality buildings inhibit the ability of teachers to do their jobs.

One separate means by which we could improve achievement in our schools, on which there is growing agreement on both sides of the House, is inspection. I have never criticised the idea of school inspection. My concern has increasingly been that, for rather a long time, we have seemed to treat inspection as an operation in its own right. For too long we have separated inspection on the one hand from advice and support on the other. I see little point in a procedure of inspection that identifies problems in a school—often problems that the school already knew about—if no advice and support are available to help the school solve those problems.

Due to cuts in local education authority funding, there has been a significant reduction in the availability of local advisers and inspectors. The few who remain often spend so much of their time bidding for Ofsted inspection work that they have very little opportunity to provide advice and help for their own schools. It is vital to find ways of linking advice and support. One thing that the improving schools programme, the Teacher Training Agency and others suggest—I entirely agree—is that schools should look at their own self-improvement programmes. The targeting approach to which the Minister referred needs to go very much further. Those developed targeting approaches need to be directly linked to the school's individual development plan and budget. All three need to be brought together under the supervision of the local advisory and support services.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the solution lies in a far more flexible inspection regime, because some schools require more frequent inspection and others, self-evidently, do not?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Of course there is agreement across the Floor of the House on that. Most people would now accept that we need to move to, perhaps, a six or seven-year inspection cycle, with greater powers for inspectors to be called in by local authority advisers, governors or teachers themselves in cases of particular need. The critical thing is not to base a regime on a one-off inspection but to take account of what happens in the intervening period between one major Ofsted inspection and the next.

While I am on the issue of inspection, I raise a point to which I hope the Minister will respond. If inspection is important, it is also important that we have confidence in it. The inspection procedure for the nursery settings, during the trial period of nursery vouchers, gives some cause for concern. I have had confirmed information that Group 4 was given the contract to sort out the inspection arrangements and I am sure the procedures were fair and proper. However, I am concerned to discover that, in the award of the contracts for the inspection of the nursery voucher settings in phase 1, the three assessors from Group 4 who made those decisions had no educational experience whatever. None of them had been involved in the inspection process, although one had experience of being inspected.

I am also concerned by other aspects of the awarding of contracts. I wonder why the British Association of Early Childhood Education, which has a wealth of experience in schools and of inspection, was awarded no contracts when Penzer Allen Ltd. of Sevenoaks and Child and Co. Ltd. from Wallingford in Oxfordshire received contracts. That is worrying, and I hope that the Minister will agree to carry out an investigation, not least into why Ofsted had so little input into the process.

Teachers are a vital element in improving what happens in our schools, and they need more support than they are getting. I quoted earlier from a recent speech by the head of the Teacher Training Agency and the Minister accused me of quoting selectively from her remarks. I can assure the House that I quoted only a few of her many concerns about the barrage of criticism that is being directed at the moment against teachers. She also said:

"But for those many teachers who are visibly striving to meet all the demands which society places on them, including raising the standards of pupil achievement, this approach is positively harmful."

She did not identify people by name, but she said that she was concerned about those

"who seem to think that improvement requires a three-course diet of criticism, criticism and more criticism."

We must give more support to our teachers, and we must quickly establish, as the hon. Member for Walton said, we a professional body for teachers—a general teaching council. We must give teachers the tools to do the job and we must treat them as professionals. Having done that, we must expect far more from them, but we must stop trying to tell teachers how to teach and how to organise their classes. That is something best left to the professionals.

Finally, one issue has not been mentioned in this debate and it needs urgently to be addressed. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam rightly referred to the desire on both sides of the House to devolve more power and responsibility for individual, day-to-day decision making to individual schools and to the governors of those schools. If we are to do that, the time has come to start addressing the question of the accountability of governors. If we are to give them, rightly, more power, we need to ask to whom the governors will be accountable. What are the means of accountability? It should not be only the annual governors' report to parents, which usually takes place on a wet Thursday evening to the three or four parents who turn up to sit on under-sized chairs. We have to develop the means of accountability.

The whole question of power, responsibility and accountability needs to be addressed more widely. If we consider the two schools in the news recently, it is extremely worrying that we have had so many people saying, "It's nothing to do with me, guv. It is somebody else's fault." We do not know who is responsible for what in our increasingly fractured education service, and to whom those people are accountable. If we are to improve our schools, we should turn our attention to that issue. People should know to whom they can turn for redress when they have a grievance, and whom they can praise, which I hope they will be able to do more often in the future.

12.34 pm

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate on the improving schools programme, which is more than a year old. At the outset, that programme recognised that the key to improving schools lay in the classroom. That view has been reflected in many of the contributions to this excellent debate. Sadly, another debate is taking place in the media, to which I shall refer later.

I should declare an interest: my connection with the Professional Association of Teachers. However, my remarks will be purely personal—based on my experience as a teacher, as the Member of Parliament for Norwich, North and as someone with an interest in education. I am always interested in the remarks of the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), because we both have a connection with science teaching. I cannot help agreeing with some of his comments: if two science teachers are put together, they will inevitably have points of agreement. He referred to the points of agreement that arose during the debate, of which there were many.

I shall not take up the points made by the hon. Member for Bath about funding, because I agree with my hon. Friend the Minister that the debate is not about the funding of schools. However, I want to caution the hon. Gentleman. After the war, my father was an architect who designed schools. The hon. Gentleman must not think that a new school is an educational panacea. My father told me—and I have learnt since—that grievous mistakes are often made in the design of new schools.

Mr. Don Foster: Flat roofs.

Mr. Thompson: Flat roofs, too much sunshine coming in, the greenhouse effect and so on. Many of the schools that were built in the 1940s and 1950s—I know that is a long time ago—were faulty. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party will not get too carried away by the idea of new buildings. We should beware when any Government propose to build new schools, because good education does not correlate with good or new buildings. I am not suggesting that no new buildings should be constructed, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman takes note of my cautionary word.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) is not present, because I was interested in his remarks. He agreed with the Government on a number of issues, mainly when he was following the policies adopted by my hon. Friend the Minister. That is good news. However, I did not understand his explanation of the Labour party's commitment to the abolition of the assisted places scheme. I am aware of the debate about the independent sector and the state sector. The matter has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Walden), who is not present this morning. I am an ex-independent school teacher, but I shall not go into the underlying issues. In my opinion, the case for abolishing the assisted places scheme has not been made, and it was not made earlier, so the debate will continue.

The Opposition totally fail to convince me when they try to justify their abolition of direct grant schools, as the hon. Member for Walton tried to do earlier. Many poorer people who were receiving a rattling good education from direct grant schools can no longer do so, because those schools are now in the independent sector. The Opposition cannot escape their responsibility for that negative measure enacted when they were in power many years ago.

[Mr. Thompson]

The situation in the Ridings school is undoubtedly serious, but I agree with the hon. Member for Walton and with the Minister that the matter is highly complex, and it would be inadvisable for any of us to start launching into detail or producing solutions.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Dr. Spink) that the position has not been helped by the recent media treatment of education and morals. Unfortunately, the media often have a negative effect on such issues, and that has happened with education recently. Of course it is right that such issues should be raised and reported, but not that the negative should always be emphasised at the expense of the positive.

Yesterday in the Tea Room I was relieved to read an article in *Country Life* about all the good things going on in this country, and that contained something about education. I wish that the media in general would realise that my constituents, of all party political persuasions, are fed up with the endless doom and gloom that the media pour out day by day. Of course they should report difficulties in schools, but they must think carefully about the way in which they do so.

One of the issues raised recently is corporal punishment. The Minister mentioned it this morning. I was educated in and taught at schools that used corporal punishment. I was never opposed to it. I think that there is a case for it, often as a last resort, and I suspect that that view is shared by most hon. Members. If the question were to be decided again I would vote in favour. But I was interested in the Minister's remarks—

Mr. Robin Squire *rose—*

Mr. Thompson:—and it looks as though he wants to clarify them now, so I shall give way to him.

Mr. Squire: My hon. Friend and almost everyone else here, certainly those who have been present since the start of the debate, may be surprised to hear that a report is circulating of our earlier exchanges which is rather different from what I thought was said. So I hope that my hon. Friend will allow me briefly to clarify one specific point. I said, and I confirm again, that, if any professional group of teachers made proposals on discipline, naturally we would consider them—but I also confirm that no proposal for corporal punishment has been made by any such group. Moreover, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear, as I thought that I had, that not only is there nothing on the subject in the Education Bill but that we will not back any amendment to that effect which may be tabled.

Mr. Thompson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification. I was never opposed to corporal punishment in the schools in which I taught. It was not used often. It should not be the norm, but where it was used it was effective. I believe—I suspect that my hon. Friend the Minister shares my view, but no doubt he will correct me if I am wrong—that this is not the only issue at the heart of the debate about teaching and morals.

Most hon. Members, however they would vote, probably do not see this as a crunch issue. Of course the media love to have a crunch issue. Let them, but so far as I know we can think what we like in this place, and I say that it is not the only issue at the heart of the debate.

I shall now return to recent events in one or two schools, including the Ridings school. This had better be the last criticism that I make of the press, because I have been getting at the media. I was encouraged to see some of the more dignified pupils at the Ridings school and elsewhere putting the reporters and television crews to rights. We know that there are difficulties in such schools, but those young people said, "Look, there are good things about our school. Please report them." I hope that the media take note and listen to the good young people, as well as to the troublemakers who are causing all the problems and who must be dealt with firmly by the appropriate authority.

If things are in bad shape in education, the media must take their share of responsibility. Mary Whitehouse had a point all along, and she is still—thank goodness—expressing her opinion. I hope that some of us are listening. My experience as a teacher for 23 years and a Member of Parliament for 13 years confirms what has been said in the debate: much excellent work is going on in thousands of schools throughout the country. That cannot be stated too often; it must be acknowledged and broadcast. The good work of the teachers must also be recognised. Fortunately, the point has been made by hon. Members on both sides, so I need not labour it.

The Government achievements must be acknowledged, too. I am not uncritical of everything that the Government have done in education, and I may make some criticisms later, but there have been achievements. The increase in spending per pupil since 1979 is real and significant. The introduction of the national curriculum, which had hiccups on the way but was generally desired, is to the Government's credit. Despite the difficulties that were mentioned earlier, the introduction of assessment tests and performance tables and the devolution of financial and managerial powers to schools are generally accepted and welcomed, certainly in my constituency.

As the Minister rightly said in his opening remarks, the key criterion in any school is whether the head teacher and staff are good. That has been my experience, regardless of the kind of school—my wife taught in secondary modern schools in Manchester years ago. I am in favour of good governors and parent-school co-operation, but if the governors and parents have to interfere too much, there is something wrong. The key is with the head teacher and the staff. We hope that in most schools they are effective and there need not be too much interference.

The Labour party, rather belatedly, has recognised the benefit of most of the reforms that we carried out. The Minister described those in detail and reminded the House that the Labour party had voted against most of the proposals. We know, however, that Labour's stance has shifted over recent months and years. I shall not dwell on that, as the debate has been fairly uncontroversial so far.

Nothing is more relevant to improving schools and more important than the belated and welcome shake-up of teacher training. For years I, with many colleagues in the House and outside, have been calling for that. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will not take it hard if I say that the good news is probably about 15 years late. We have known for a long time that there was a problem with teacher training.

When I entered teaching in 1960, several of the better schools said that it did not matter whether one attended a teacher training college, because what one learned there

was not very good. So I was one of those who went into teaching without training. That does not mean that I am against teacher training. I tell young people who go into teaching now that they must have teacher training. It is not right—I do not think that it is even possible—for graduates to go into teaching without training. Back in the 1950s, teacher training did not have a good reputation — and we know why. In many ways the system has improved since then, but it has not improved enough. If it had improved enough we would not be facing many of the problems that we are debating this morning.

I feel strongly about this subject. The Government are entirely right to instigate a shake-up. We have already debated how many people are involved and dealt with that, but when the chief inspector identifies mediocre or weak teaching the fault must lie either with poor selection of teachers in the first place or with poor training thereafter—or, as I have already suggested, with poor leadership.

So the training of teachers and head teachers is vital, and the Government are right to announce a curriculum for teacher training with core subjects of English and mathematics. It is also right, at long last, to suggest that teacher training colleges deal with more than the history and philosophy of education, fascinating and important though they are. I did not find it easy in the classroom when I began teaching. Some people are naturals who find it easy from the start, but most teachers are not like that. They need training in disciplinary methods and in how to handle classes and teach effectively. It is good news that all these ideas are to be introduced to teacher training—the Secretary of State is quite right to drive them through.

I hope that consideration will also be given to training head teachers and senior staff—I suspect that it will be. For years I have been calling for a staff college for head teachers. In the services, the system of a staff college for senior officers works very well, and I still think it a good idea even if the Government do not. It would be useful to have a prestigious institution for senior teachers going on to posts of responsibility.

I hope that there will not be too much delegating to committees in this context. Nor do I want a search for consensus. In this I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland), who made an excellent speech. The very root of the word "education" implies leadership. My classics are a little out of date but I am fairly certain of that. Leadership and example are of the essence. There are so many examples of head teachers and staff providing both of them; they must be encouraged.

Committees, as I say, are to be discouraged in this initiative. For heaven's sake let us not have another national forum. I have nothing personal against the 150 members of the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community. I have studied its document; it is well meaning, anodyne and possibly useful. But as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam so eloquently said, the fact that marriage has been left out is inexplicable, which just proves my point.

The Department for Education and Employment must stop delegating these things to committees, and looking for consensus. What our education system needs, under any Government of any philosophy, is leadership. I hope therefore that any future Government will provide it, and not just delegate and search for the lowest common denominator. I have every admiration for the members of the forum, but they finished up with the lowest common denominator. One cannot disagree with anything in the document, but it will not have much effect on pupils in any of the schools I know. I therefore hope that the five dissenters on the point about marriage and the family will get their way in the end; and I hope that the Minister has noted my support for the ideas expressed by other Members earlier in this debate.

In just over a week's time, we will debate the Education Bill, about which some positive points have been made. I will confine myself to saying that I very much support the measures involving school discipline and exclusions, as do my constituents. Reports in the *Eastern Daily Press* in the past 48 hours have said that these are good measures that are supported by the leaders of the teaching profession, and I wish the Bill all success.

The clauses arranging for the inspection of local education authorities appear to have the support of the Opposition and, obviously, I support them. Perhaps that should be the end of it, but there is also a little clause about the removal of inspectors from the Ofsted register. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to explain more about what this means when he winds up the debate. However, I must be a little critical—Ofsted is not perfect.

The Minister will be horrified—if he is not aware of it already—to learn about the Ofsted report on Heartsease comprehensive school in my constituency. It contained grammatical and spelling mistakes that were worse than anything produced by the pupils. This matter hit the local newspapers and, I suspect, the national newspapers. My hon. Friend will understand that I was a little reluctant to raise the matter, but I felt that I had to, given the subject of the debate. If the reports are true—and if the photograph I saw of pupils at Heartsease school making notes on the blackboard of all the mistakes in the Ofsted report is also true—I hope that heads will roll.

Mr. Robin Squire *rose—*

Mr. Patrick Thompson: The Minister may be about to assure me that that will happen.

Mr. Squire: My hon. Friend knows that, although these operational matters lie fully with Ofsted and not with Ministers, I can assure him of two things—first, that the publicity has indeed been national, no doubt because of the general excellence of other Ofsted reports and, secondly, that the matter has unquestionably been brought to the attention of the chief inspector.

Mr. Thompson: I was reluctant to raise the matter, but I felt that it should not escape notice, and I am delighted that action is being taken. The Government must keep a close eye on the quality of inspection, as has been stated by hon. Members of all parties. A bit of bureaucracy and political correctness of the worst sort has been creeping into some of Ofsted's work and—in relation to nursery education—we must look closely at what happens on the ground when inspections take place. We are looking for good quality in education—that is what today's debate is all about. But I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will look closely at what is happening, because some of the reports have proved rather disturbing to me as an ex-teacher.

[Mr. Thompson]

The Government are rightly committed to the objective of matching our competitors in education and training but I think that we should aim higher, as I have tried to explain in detail on other occasions. We must aim to be the best-educated and best-trained nation in the world. For that reason, the improving schools programme must be encouraged and strengthened, and all power to the elbow of those presently responsible.

12.58 pm

Mr. Stephen Timms (Newham, North–East): I very much welcome the debate, and I agree with what the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) said about the desirability of avoiding party point scoring on this important subject. I welcome the opportunity to draw attention to and celebrate the improvements in standards achieved by the three secondary schools in my constituency in the past year, as a good deal could be learned from their experiences.

I was a member of Newham council for 12 years, and throughout that time, the council wanted to raise the levels of achievement in our schools. We were completely open about it, and we acknowledged that there was a problem that we wanted to address. Why was there a problem? The Government say that Newham has the highest level of urban deprivation in the country, but their local authority funding formula works in a perverse way to deprive Newham of the resources that ought to be spent there. Many youngsters arrive in our schools needing English language support—40 per cent. of Newham school pupils need such support—and 40 per cent. are eligible for free school meals. All those factors add up to a tough job for the schools.

There is nevertheless a great deal of optimism in Newham. Things are changing, and major investment projects are planned for the area. The international station at Stratford on the high-speed link to the channel tunnel will bring many jobs to the area. Green street is becoming the country's most popular Asian shopping centre. Major plans are taking shape for the royal docks: the new university college will go on site next summer, and we are awaiting confirmation of funding for London's biggest exhibition complex alongside the Royal Victoria dock. Yesterday, I was fascinated to learn of the Zoological Society of London's £100-million plan for a new national aquarium in the royal docks. All those projects will bring in new jobs and create new opportunities, especially for young people in the area.

In addition to those developments, the population is growing—Newham has the largest proportion in the country of households with children under five. The borough resonates with bright, keen, energetic youngsters, many of whom or whose parents were born outside the United Kingdom. Our future and London's future now depend on our harnessing and developing their skills and talents. The great challenge facing us is to equip those youngsters to grasp successfully the many opportunities that are coming to east London. The stakes are high, but the consequences of failure do not bear thinking about. If we succeed—as we must—the area's future will be bright indeed.

That is why the local authority is so determined to raise standards in our schools—that is where success or failure will be decided. We have never pretended that everything was wonderful. We have always acknowledged openly that we had a serious problem of under-achievement, and we have been determined, working in partnership with others, to set matters right. Step by step, the benefits of that commitment and determination are emerging, as seen in the success achieved last summer by the three secondary schools in my constituency.

I shall summarise the wide range of initiatives being taken in Newham to raise standards in schools. The local authority has been publishing school-by-school GCSE results for a long time—long before that was required by the Government. We never had any problem with doing so, because the local authority recognised that publication of results was essential to provide a firm and public basis for measurable improvement targets.

The local authority also introduced baseline assessments for five-year-olds and 12-year-olds. We have already heard in the debate that the Government propose to make those mandatory for five-year-olds. That is fine, but in Newham both five and 12-year-olds are already assessed, to provide a firmer starting point for school targets at an earlier stage in pupils' education than is provided by GCSE tables.

The authority is working with all our schools to set targets for the end of key stage assessments and it is providing schools with help in analysing GCSE results, setting targets for the following year and developing school level improvement strategies. The authority is also helping schools to prepare for Ofsted inspections by carrying out a pre-Ofsted check of each school and helping staff to draw up action plans both before and after the Ofsted inspection.

Of particular interest is the authority's learning community strategy, which contains several elements. Next year, at least two Saturday schools will be introduced, one starting in January and the other in September. They will be based on secondary school sites and will offer additional learning opportunities to children in the last two years of primary school. The curriculum will be based on the secondary curriculum and additional basic skills tuition will be available to all pupils. That is a major initiative. There will be additional study support for GCSE pupils. There is already much activity in Newham in the form of homework clubs' enhanced revision schemes, but we are gearing up for a major expansion of such schemes in the coming 12 months.

Thirdly, there will be at least one summer school for up to 2,000 pupils in the late primary and early secondary stages next summer. Like the Saturday schools, they will provide additional opportunities for pupils in specialist subjects and in basic skills.

Newham has a very good record on early-years work, and much has been done to improve attendance—action plans have been drawn up for each school—and strategic partnerships have been developments with parents through home-school agreements and agreements with governors and others. For example, Tate and Lyle, the largest private sector improvement in the borough, is working with the local authority to raise the standard of literacy in schools. It is an excellent scheme, to which Tate and Lyle has made a great contribution.

This financial year, as a result of successful financial management, the council has been able to make available nearly £6 million—much of it from its own reserves—for 69 maintenance and improvement projects at almost 50

schools in Newham. Projects range from the re-roofing of a primary school to the building of new science laboratories at the girls' secondary school.

I am not saying that the problems have all been solved, but progress is there for all to see. Things are moving in the right direction. Ten years ago, just over 8 per cent. of 16-year-olds in Newham were achieving five GCSE grades A to C, or their equivalent. Last summer, that figure had risen to 28 per cent., and 82 per cent. secured five GCSEs at levels A to G. The results in each of the past 10 years. Progress has been made elsewhere, too. Against the national trend, the number of permanent exclusions from Newham schools is falling. Much remains to be done, but there is much to celebrate.

I was disappointed that, in an otherwise thoughtful speech, the Minister chose to embark on an attack on the chair of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities. I understand the pressures placed on him by colleagues who are sensitive to the fact that the Conservatives are 28 per cent. behind in the polls—time is running out, and they are naturally edgy and perhaps need cheering up. However, the Minister should resist such pressure, in view of the importance of the matter. Of course, the chair of the AMA is the chair of Newham education authority.

Mr. Robin Squire: I would hate what I said to be interpreted as an attack, not least because I meet Councillor Lane regularly, perhaps even more often than the hon. Gentleman does. I thought that I was merely saying that he holds strong views, but that they do not happen to be those of the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues.

Mr. Timms: My point is that the individual we are talking about has, as chair of Newham education authority, presided over the very programme that I have been describing, which has focused wholly on raising standards in our schools. It is beyond dispute that the programme has produced impressive results, but it must continue, because there is still more to be done.

I conclude with a brief comment on each of the three secondary schools to which I referred. Each of them did well last summer. They are very different schools, and I have visited all three in the past month. The first is Langdon, a big mixed comprehensive. It has always been highly regarded in Newham, but in recent years there has been a significant leap in its ambition and determination to equip its youngsters for the future. Officials at the Department for Education and Employment know the school well, and visit it often. That level of interest from the Department is greatly appreciated locally.

The school's determination to improve is reflected in its achievements. Last year, 30 per cent. of pupils taking GCSEs achieved at least five A to C grades; this year, the figure was 35 per cent. That trend will continue.

The head teacher picks out three special strands in the successful efforts to improve the school. The first was to create an ethos and a "can do" atmosphere at Langdon school, emphasising the importance of responsible citizenship on the part of the students. Student participation was encouraged in school and year councils. The students were involved in the drafting of a behaviour code, which set out the expectations that pupils could have of the school, and, equally, what the school expected of its students. An ethos has successfully been created in the school.

The second strand picked out by the head was an emphasis on sporting achievement. Tomorrow morning, 20 teams from Langdon school and another Newham school will take part in competitions on Wanstead Flats. Each year, at a major assembly, presentations are made to all those who have taken part in the school's teams during the year. There is an award to the sportsman and sportswoman of the year. That process contributes to raising the general level of achievement throughout the school, particularly among boys. The question of boys' achievement has already rightly been raised in the debate.

The third strand is achievement in the arts. I was recently at the school for a dance presentation. A professional choreographer had come into the school with funding from Lea Valley regional park, and an excellent performance was the result. There are links with artists, and work has been done with the local primary schools to support Langdon's art curriculum. There are drama performances in the community.

All those developments contribute to the esteem of the pupils and their sense of achievement. The last two strands are not necessarily academic, but they have contributed to a much improved level of achievement throughout the school. Any visitor to the school can see the effects of that.

The second school I want to mention, Little Ilford school, is in a very different position. It is a large, mixed comprehensive. It has more than 1,000 pupils who speak a second language alongside or instead of English at home. In April last year, the Ofsted inspection at Little Ilford resulted in the school's being deemed to need special measures. That verdict was confirmed last summer, when only 11 per cent. of the youngsters at the school achieved five or more grades A to C at GCSE.

However, this year the picture is different. The school feels different to walk into. The head, who came into post shortly before the Ofsted inspection, has transformed the school. She singles out particularly the strength of the support from the local authority in allowing her to take that transformation through. The local authority has given access to a special fund to enable improvements to be made, and has attached an inspector as the lead inspector to work alongside the school in dealing with the problems that Ofsted rightly identified.

This summer, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more grades A to C at GCSE exceeded 20 per cent. and there is great confidence—I am very confident—that the trend of improvement will continue as a result of the successful partnership between the school and the LEA in dealing with the problems that had arisen.

The last school to which I wish to refer is Plashet school, an all-girls comprehensive with pupils drawn largely from the ethnic minority communities in East Ham. The recently appointed head—herself an Asian teacher—like her colleagues, has brought a new determination to raise the standards in that school. Last year, 29 per cent. of pupils gained five or more grades A to C at GCSE; this year, the figure was 43 per cent. That is not a fluke, but the product of determination and hard work through a series of carefully planned initiatives to raise the level of achievement in that school.

The school targets students who are on the borderline between grades C and D as they approach GCSE, and the heads of department and subject staff work together to ensure that they get the extra help that they need. A

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revision programme was organised, with funding from the London Docklands development corporation; teachers offer extra sessions at weekends and during holidays to prepare their pupils for GCSE; and there is a programme of monitoring attendance and ensuring that students do not miss school.

Requests are often made for pupils in year 11 to go on extended holidays to visit relatives in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh; the school refuses those requests, because it wants to emphasise the importance of pupils remaining in school throughout year 11 to achieve their maximum potential at GCSE. All those initiatives and more have been successful, and will continue to improve achievement at Plashet school.

A great deal remains to be done, but I was impressed by the determination of head teachers and staff in all three secondary schools in my constituency to improve standards, working in partnership with the local authority and with employers in the borough, and by the significant and measurable progress achieved as a result.

1.15 pm

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): I want to speak about three aspects of the improving schools programme, the first of which is targets.

The hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) spoke at length, drawing from his considerable experience, about the feeling that a teacher has at the chalk face about whether a school is operating successfully. He rightly referred to motivation and to similar non-measurable items. The weakness in concentrating solely on that aspect, important though it is, is that any judgment must ultimately be subjective, making it impossible to achieve a proper comparison between schools, or between one school's performance one year and the next. That is why it is essential that the programme includes some measurement via targets.

I would share the concern expressed by the hon. Member for Newham, South if the only target to be used were some fixed national target against which all schools would be measured; but, as I understand it, the programme will use a system of benchmarks to enable schools to be measured against others of the same type, taking into account factors such as the background, location and history of the school—and, indeed, its intake. Once those factors are in the formula, comparison becomes possible; that is important because it provides the extra pressure and challenge of trying incrementally to improve the quality that schools offer in education, which is what our education system should always aim at.

The national curriculum and testing have been in place long enough to allow schools to make proper measurements, and I am glad that the onus is placed on the schools to do that. I welcome the intention to legislate to require schools to enshrine targets annually in their reports, to monitor the targets and measure their progress against them, and to produce plans to explain how they intend to improve the quality of education they deliver to meet those targets. Those are all aspects of the improving schools programme that I welcome.

I am also pleased about the exchange of information between schools, which enables best practice to become common practice. That has always been a feature of education in Britain, but it has not been encouraged as much as it could be. With a fairly new scheme such as this, which has been running for about 18 months, it is important to draw on examples of practical successes and methods that have worked well in one school, and use them in other schools.

I was especially pleased that one aspect of the encouragement to share information was the launch of a site on the Internet last June. I have looked at the Internet site with considerable interest. There is much useful information which, if I may put it this way, has been handed down from on high, but even more useful is the ability of individual teachers to communicate quickly and directly with teachers throughout the country. I looked at one of the threads, or conferences, that is taking place on the Internet on the subject. I was delighted that teachers from all parts of the country were almost instantaneously able to share information. That was not so easy in the past.

About 50 per cent. of schools are already on the Internet, and it is easy and cheap for others to join, so I hope that the rest soon will. I hope that this small start will result in a mushrooming of information exchange and positive progress that will derive from schools and teachers drawing on successful experiments and following the leaders—the people who are prepared to innovate and prove that they have achieved something—so that it can be drawn on and used in other schools. I am pleased that that aspect of the programme is working so successfully, even early on.

The third aspect that I want briefly to discuss is failing schools. I do so with some trepidation, because it has become such an emotive subject, almost as if it had never been a problem before, which is not true. However, this is the sort of problem that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) rightly identified with the media: the sudden dramatic focusing on a problem, which a few weeks later is forgotten. The problems of the Ridings school are especially severe, but there are problems at other schools.

The matter needs to be put in context. We must remember that the vast majority of schools are not a bit like that but are performing well and producing good and improving results. They have dedicated staff and teachers and good leadership, and they work in a framework of encouragement, diversity and choice that enables them to provide very good education to our children.

That is no excuse for not concentrating on failing schools, and I am pleased that we now have a specific, structured programme that will enable failed or failing schools to be dealt with and for the necessary resources, techniques and solutions to be applied, and applied transparently. That is essential. Such problems can no longer be swept under the carpet; nor should they be.

My constituency is in the London borough of Bromley, which is nationally recognised for its high education standards. I am proud that the vast majority of its primary and secondary schools are of the highest order. The public are well aware of that, and are pleased with it. That does not mean that there are no problems. Some schools have had difficult reputations in the past. I am glad that one of those now has a much improved reputation, and it is continuing to improve. I refer to the Cator Park school for girls, which now sends pupils to Oxford and produces pupils who get three A grades at A-level. That school, which once had an equivocal reputation, has now set and

met its own targets through a flexible and innovative approach to teaching. It has overcome its past difficulties through the hard work of its head teacher, Ann Tiggin, and I wish it every success in the future.

Sadly, one other school in the borough, Kelsey Park school for boys, which is in my constituency, was officially declared a failing school in May. In fact, it has had severe problems for many years. The benefit of that declaration is that it has galvanised the school and concentrated minds tremendously. It has now put in place a tough programme for improvement, and has a first-class new head teacher. It is returning to some of the traditional teaching methods that were sadly lacking from that school in the past.

It is interesting that so many speakers today have referred to the importance of leadership and having a good head at a school. Kelsey Park boys school suffered badly in the past three years, precisely because it did not have proper leadership. The head teacher became ill, unfortunately, and there followed an long interregnum, when a series of acting head teachers were appointed. It was difficult for people like me to know who was in charge at any one time. As those head teachers knew that they were only acting, it was difficult for them to make any long-term commitments.

It is apparent to me that one of the main causes of the problems at the school was the lack of good leadership from a good head. That has been put right. The new head, whom I have met, is dynamic and determined. I am to attend the school next week to present prizes. That occasion is an innovation for the school—there has been no such thing as a prize giving in living memory. How can one motivate pupils without a return to some of the traditional, but well-tried, practices such as prize giving?

I am pleased that the school is on an improving curve, and it is important that it should continue. The Ofsted report that led to the school being described as failing highlights some of the underlying problems that exist in other failing schools.

One such problem was discipline. The inspectors wrote about "shortcomings" and "poor standards of behaviour", which was certainly true—any local resident would tell the inspectors that. Without a disciplined environment, how can one be expected to teach properly? I am suggesting a disciplined environment not for a reactionary reason, but for a purely practical one. It is the only way in which a school can perform and teachers can teach. If they are in danger of being assaulted, everything else is lost.

It is quite appalling to see the bad message coming out of the publicity surrounding the Ridings school, or similar messages about events that are tolerated at local schools. Television cameras have filmed children going to the Ridings putting two fingers up to the teachers walking in front of them. What message does that send to young people and other pupils? If pupils think that they can get away with such behaviour, those who are tempted to misbehave surely will. It is therefore essential to deal with such incidents sharply and swiftly.

I am in favour of teachers, governors and head teachers having at their disposal all the armoury they consider necessary to enforce discipline. It is up to them to choose what they believe to be the most effective methods for their environment. It is not for us or others to limit their ability to take action when necessary. Firm action and a firm atmosphere of discipline, set in advance, will prevent discipline problems from materialising. Otherwise, by the time they do, it will, sadly, be too late for the school. A disciplined framework is essential.

The Ofsted report on Kelsey Park school also said:

"However, the ethos of the school does not engender a high profile for the social, moral, spiritual and cultural development of pupils."

That, too, is critical. In a disciplined environment, there must also be a positive ethos: children must be taught what is right and what is wrong. They will not necessarily know that, particularly if they come from an indifferent home background. Schools must teach them right from wrong, as well as why things are right or wrong, and why discipline and a framework are necessary. As the report states, those elements were lacking in the local school to which I referred. All the signs now are that the school has taken fast and major strides to put that right, which I welcome.

This has generally been a constructive debate. I am glad that the improving schools programme has generally received a warm endorsement. It is a practical and flexible approach, designed as a serious solution to a problem that our schools have faced for too long. Achieving improvements in education is essential.

The programme is already a success; it is non-ideological. It was therefore sad that too much of the speech of the hon. Member for Walton wandered from the main thrust of the debate, and was too ideological.

The Labour party remains obsessed with removing opportunity, destroying measures such as the assisted places scheme that bring opportunities to families, and destroying grammar schools that give people choice and diversity. It is obsessed with abolishing nursery school vouchers, and, as we heard, demolishing outside toilets. The people of this country deserve better than to see education returned to an ideological mould. I think that they will have more sense than to fall for that sort of message.

1.31 pm

Ms Estelle Morris (Birmingham, Yardley): I, too, think that this has been a thoughtful debate. I particularly welcome that in a week when many of us have been involved in specific problems and difficult issues. I also recognise that many Members of Parliament have taken the opportunity to praise the work done in their constituencies and schools. It is a good function of Friday debates to allow local elements and perspectives to be discussed.

In his opening remarks, the Minister seemed to be trying his best to make me feel that I had not left Birmingham on a Friday, but was still in my constituency. The aspects that he mentioned, such as targeting, achievements, learning out of school and baseline assessment, sounded like the primary and secondary school guarantees in Birmingham. As a Birmingham Member of Parliament, I welcome those messages from the Government, in recognition of the work that the city does. For too long at the start of this parliamentary Session, the messages involved nothing but criticism of what was happening in the city. I welcome the fact that Ministers have clearly visited Birmingham, recognised the good work being done there and are learning from it.

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The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) always makes a thoughtful contribution and I always end up disagreeing with him on the same issues. We have sat through the passage of many pieces of legislation. I do not share his perspective on independent schools and how to allocate the necessarily restricted resources in education. I have never underestimated his commitment to raising standards, which he once again made clear today.

It is remarkable that both the Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Squire), and the Secretary of State have had to clarify their respective positions on corporal punishment in the space of three hours. I have worked it out that earlier this week the Secretary of State made some comments at 8 am and was corrected at 11 am. Today, the Under–Secretary of State made his comments at 9.30 am and rose to ensure that we all understood them at 12.30 pm. It is also clear that we shall have to have three Lobbies if we are to vote on corporal punishment: one for those who agree with it, another for those who are against it and a third for those Education Ministers who agree with it but are not allowed to vote for it.

There have been many education problems this week and, in a debate in which we have tried to address all the issues, I join with one Conservative Member who said that whether we bring back corporal punishment is not the most important decision currently facing our country and the education system. Discipline, not corporal punishment, is a major issue.

I was particularly pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) talk about developments in his constituency. He managed quite an achievement, which will be recorded in *Hansard*, in that hon. Members on both sides of the House were eager to join in the acclamation of Councillor Graham Lane, who will read it with pleasure next week.

My hon. Friend also described developments at Little Ilford school. We need to hear more such stories. It sometimes seems as though we cannot overcome the problems in our education system. The success stories cheer us up and give us the certain knowledge that solutions can be found.

My hon. Friend's speech demonstrated that the key to success and improvement lies in working together, but someone has to take the lead. Newham local education authority has done exactly that. I applaud it, and I hope that the good work continues.

I also listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant) said about the school where he is to hand out awards next week. We all know the difficulties that such schools face. I am delighted that the school will have the opportunity to celebrate the success of its young people, their teachers and parents. We all wish them a pleasant evening and the school continued success.

As we have learnt this morning, it is undoubted that the achievements of some pupils match the best in the world. They achieve success in a range of curriculum subjects that has not been attempted by previous generations.

The fundamental flaw in the British education system is the same as it always has been—the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom. After 17 years of Conservative government, that gap is getting wider, and it is clear from the contents of the Education Bill published this week that it will widen still further.

Three years ago, when the Minister mentioned the subject, 41.2 per cent. of pupils gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C. This year, the percentage has increased to 43.5 per cent. However, three years ago, 7 per cent. of pupils left school with no qualifications. Last year, that figure increased to 8.1 per cent. Nothing has been done to address the yawning gap between the achievers and the under-achievers. The subject of the debate is school improvement. That is undoubtedly one answer, but we must start by being clear about the problem—under-achievement.

I should like to address a particularly alarming sphere of under-achievement in schools and beyond. We face a serious, growing crisis in the massive under-achievement of too many boys and young men. There is a widening chasm between the achievement of girls and of boys. I understand the danger of generalising and I recognise and applaud the hard work and achievement of boys in many schools, but the evidence is overwhelming.

In the 1995 national curriculum assessment test, seven-year-old girls out-performed boys in every subject. They continue to outperform them at 11 and 14, most markedly in the all-important subject of English language. Just over 60 per cent. of girls achieved a higher grade in GCSE English language compared with just over 40 per cent. of boys. Last year, 36 per cent. more boys than girls left school with no qualifications. More boys than girls are not entered for examinations.

The bad news is that, this year, the gap has widened still further. New figures compiled by the National Consortium for Examination Results and released today show that, this year, 34.7 per cent. of boys and 45 per cent. of girls achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A to C. On average, girls are leading boys at GCSE in all subjects by 10.4 points. Last year the gap was 10 points. The situation is getting worse.

That difference between what boys achieve and what girls achieve matters. The tragedy is that, in the years during which it has grown, the gap has come to matter more and more. It may not have mattered as much a generation ago, but it matters a great deal now.

The world has changed. Employment patterns have changed. Family patterns and structures have changed. Someone who does not achieve qualifications is not likely to get a job. The message is simple: in the 1990s, to earn, a person must learn. Should we be surprised, given the massive under-achievement of boys in schools, that three out of four of the 18 to 24-year-olds claiming benefit for up to 12 months are male? One in three of the boys under 25 in our inner cities are out of work. One in three of all the unemployed are males under 25.

Those statistics carry a personal tragedy for all those young men and their families. The consequences of those boys failing to reach their full potential affects not just them, but all of us and our communities and society. It is clear that under-achievement can lead to problems in the classroom and to disruptive and anti-social behaviour.

It is well known that exclusions have increased threefold in the past five years—that figure is often bandied about—but do we realise that nine out of 10 of those excluded at primary school are boys, as are eight out of 10 of those excluded at secondary school? Every

day, those working in and with schools spend valuable time and money picking up the pieces after routine acts of indiscipline and disruptive behaviour, most of which are carried out by boys. We all know that classroom indiscipline often costs fellow pupils most of all. It is costing boys and girls their main education chance.

That pattern of antisocial behaviour carries on from school into adulthood. For every one young woman in her early 20s who offends against the law, there are 11 males who also offend. Boys who fail at school and fail to find jobs can become increasingly marginalised from mainstream society. We all know that the changes in family structures and in the pattern of families have marginalised some young men even further. We have to face up to the fact that an increasing number of young men have effectively ceased to be part of mainstream society.

Hon. Members from all parties talk about social cohesion and regenerating our communities. Although we may have different ideas in different parties, we all recognise that we have a problem. It is clear that, to regenerate our communities and recreate a sense of social cohesion, we must tackle head on the disaffection of boys and young men. Education is the key to tackling that disaffection. Too many boys succumb to a group culture in which the dominant values are that there is no point in learning, that it is cool to truant and that it is okay to misbehave.

I do not pretend that the answers to the problems that I have raised are easy, or even that the causes of the crisis are clear, but we must now begin to tackle the problem of under-achievement by boys, and we must tackle it head on.

Boys and their families must be made aware of the consequences of a changing labour market and changing family patterns. Boys have to be better equipped to respond to the challenges they face and they have to understand the necessity of their maintaining a commitment to learning as a lifelong process. To earn one must learn, and boys will not end their under-achievement until every school, family and community makes them understand that that is the motto as we approach the millennium. Schools are central in supporting boys and helping them to meet the challenge.

Today, Labour is putting forward a 10-point plan which we believe will make a start in turning the tide of boys' under-achievement. We must support schools in boosting boys' literacy skills. They are behind in literacy skills even at the age of seven, yet literacy skills are crucial for success in the rest of the curriculum. That is why we have announced that we will introduce and develop literacy summer schools to ensure that all pupils are given every chance of entering secondary school with a level of literacy that will at the least enable them to continue learning.

I agree with the hon. Member for Beckenham that nobody can learn in an ill-disciplined environment, and that boys' behaviour tends to be worse than that of girls. That is why the whole debate about school discipline is crucial and central to stopping the under-achievement of boys. We want to support schools in developing discipline policies that are clearly understood and adhered to, and in ensuring that there are consequences for breaking them. The rules must be understood by pupils, parents and teachers.

Research shows that boys are more ready to use information technology for school work than they are to use traditional methods of learning. That underlines the importance of Labour's decision to place the development of information technology in schools high on the agenda.

However, schools cannot turn the tide of boys' under-achievement by themselves. Some individual schools have already shown that mentoring and building partnerships with business can raise the standards of achievement. Another good news story is that Deptford Green school in London has developed a partnership with SBC Warburg and with IPC magazines whereby 100 pupils are paired with employees from the two businesses. Pupils are given the chance to see what can be achieved. They have their horizons broadened more than might otherwise be the case in the communities in which they live. They have met good male role models, and the result is that unemployment has dropped by half among the group of boys who have been mentored compared with boys at the same school who have not been part of the mentoring programme.

School pupils spend only 15 per cent. of their time in school; never let us forget that. What happens to them in their homes and communities in the 85 per cent. of the time that they are not in school is crucial for their educational success. This summer, 6,000 youngsters attended Birmingham's university of the first age, a university for secondary-age pupils which takes place during the long summer holidays. It was a resounding success. One Birmingham school has commented on the full voluntary attendance during the summer holidays achieved by its boys although some of the same boys have a patchy attendance record at their own schools. Many under-achieving boys do remarkably well in structured out-of-school learning opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South will see, through the Saturday schools that he is about to start, that the same lesson is learned there. Labour wants to encourage the development of more such centres.

Parents also play a crucial role in raising standards, which is why we have long promoted the idea of home-school contracts. Our economy has changed and will continue to change. Family patterns will inevitably change over time. I do not hold the Government entirely responsible for those changes, but I do hold them responsible for failing to react to a situation that is serious for us all.

The Government have failed to recognise that there is a crisis in the under-achievement of boys. There has been no planned collection of statistics, no Government analysis of what is going wrong, and no strategy from Ministers on a way forward. There is a deafening silence from them on what is becoming a learning and a social crisis. That is what I hold the Government responsible for—failing to act while the chasm between boys' and girls' achievement has grown even wider.

A decade or more ago, people recognised that there was a problem with the achievement level of girls, and the opportunity for girls and women. So much progress has been made because people took the time and trouble to try to understand what was going wrong and put it right. We need now to address the issues affecting boys' under-achievement in an equally determined way.

The very future of our society depends on reconnecting those young men and boys to the world of work and the culture of education and training. That is especially true

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for those of them who live in the most economically and socially disadvantaged areas. We have to restore to them their sense of belonging and identity and their self-esteem. We have to give them hope and encourage in them self-reliance.

A generation ago, when we left school, certainly when our parents left school, able young boys and those who worked hard went into a job with a clear career pattern. They sought and achieved promotion; they were assured of security and self-esteem. Less able boys or those who did not have academic opportunities used to fall into work because manual jobs were available. Those jobs offered security and self-respect too. It has all changed. So many of the traditional rites of passage into adulthood have gone for this generation of young men. Too many boys are not adapting to that change, too many schools are not addressing their needs, too little lead has been given by central Government.

There are solutions; there are areas of good practice; but we are failing a significant number of boys. Labour will work with schools, parents and the wider community to begin to meet the challenge of raising the expectations and achievement of boys. That challenge has been ignored for far too long, but, frankly, we ignore it any longer at our peril.

1.51 pm

Mr. Robin Squire: With the leave of the House, I shall begin my summing up of the debate by agreeing with the opening comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris); this has been a good debate. I realise that that will probably mean that it will be condemned by observers and others who read of our proceedings as having no meat, but that was not my impression, having sat in the Chamber for some four and a half hours. What I mean by a good debate is that it went into the sort of issues that rightly concern not only hon. Members but parents, teachers and everyone in the education system. In fairness to those who have spoken, I shall spend most of my time commenting on their speeches.

First, I shall spend a couple of minutes continuing the theme that I set out at the beginning of the debate. The improving schools programme has created powerful partnerships between people with a common aim. That common aim, as we have heard in several excellent speeches, is to raise the standards in schools for all our young people.

The success of the programme speaks for itself. In this coming year, as I said earlier, the Government will continue to help schools in their efforts to achieve higher standards not only in the vital skills required by the national curriculum, which in itself has been instrumental in raising achievement, but in all aspects of schools' work, especially those that contribute to the fostering of skills, good behaviour and values, which are so important if young people are to succeed in society and work. Most importantly, the improving schools programme will help each school to re-examine the processes of teaching and learning. The programme will continue to seek ways in which it can support schools in the most important task of helping teachers to raise the achievement of pupils.

The programme is popular—popularity is not something that is inevitably associated with every Government action—because it is a set of initiatives that work. It draws on the best practice in our schools, practice which is innovative and challenging and which has the clear objective of helping every young person to succeed to the best of his or her ability. Sometimes, that ability exceeds all our expectations, as I am sure it did in one or two cases in the school in Birmingham to which I referred earlier.

The programme is about everyone doing their best. It is about year-on-year improvement and recognising and encouraging the talents of teachers and their ability to motivate and engage pupils in learning. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) rightly said, the programme is about celebrating the success of pupils. We have sought today to celebrate a bit of success without getting starry-eyed about the challenges that we still face. I judge that that is the right way to approach the subject.

Schools have shown that they can set, meet and, in some cases, exceed challenging targets. The best schools and, yes, local education authorities, have always recognised that the responsibility for improvement lies predominantly at school level. The programme will continue to identify ways in which it can provide appropriate support and, in some cases, challenges for schools in raising those expectations.

I shall now turn to the specific speeches, kicking off with the contribution from the Front Bench by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle). He was bound to mention class sizes. I do not want to spend all my time at the Dispatch Box talking about that subject, but not for the first time I shall re-emphasise where we agree and disagree.

No one has ever suggested that class size is irrelevant to the delivery of quality education, but all the reports—including, incidentally, the recent report commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers, which drew on all previous reports—have confirmed, first, that class size is especially significant in the early years. That is common ground between us. Secondly, the reports confirm that there is no clear pattern in the later years, especially one that would lead one to presume that class size was more important than the generality of excellence and improvement in standards.

That is not to say that class size is unimportant. Indeed, if we were to swap figures, I could say truthfully that there has been a significant fall in the number of pupils in large classes of more than 35 during the 17 years of this Government, but that is just a statistic. The key issue, on which I am trying to extend agreement across the House, is whether, if all classes contained fewer pupils than some notional figure—and none was any larger—education would be better transformed than by tackling teaching standards. I do not believe that and if it is put like that I am sure that most, if not all, my hon. Friends at least would agree.

I shall not talk much about assisted places. Several of my hon. Friends did so clearly, and I agree, in particular, with my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) who said aptly that the Opposition have yet to get across a winning argument that says why it would be right to stop pupils from poor backgrounds enjoying quality education that they would otherwise be unable to enjoy.

The hon. Member for Walton raised the specific issue of St. Francis Xavier school and I am aware of the allegations that have been made. I understand that the

chief executive of the Funding Agency for Schools for England has written to the hon. Gentleman and set out the conclusions of the auditors. I assure him that the letter that he is awaiting is imminent, and he will receive it shortly.

The hon. Gentleman also referred, as did the hon. Member for Yardley, to the latest Labour policy on summer schools. I am not here to poke fun and I am anxious, as I hope I have demonstrated today, to consider any way in which we can raise standards, but I think that I am entitled to say that the key issue is getting education right in school time in schools. If we can do that, the Opposition—at least privately, if not at the Dispatch Box—must surely recognise that it will obviate the need for such an initiative.

Ms Estelle Morris: The Minister is right to say that standards in schools must be raised. Does he accept that the great success of summer schools is based not only on what they achieve by the work that they do with the children, but on the fact that pupils are more motivated when they return to school? If he is interested in summer schools, will he ask the Department to undertake research into their effect on children when they return to school? If such schools are a success, will he make resources available to support them?

Mr. Squire: With a proviso, because my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor beams in on me every time I mention resources. This is a serious point, so I am happy to confirm that I will consider what is achieved by summer schools. Whatever is engendered at a summer school would better be engendered in school at the outset. I do not think that we disagree about that. That has been achieved by many schools, including those facing challenging circumstances. The hon. Member for Newham, North–East (Mr. Timms) made that point in his very good speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam made a very good speech. She pointed out that the area that she represents—we have a shared knowledge of the area—contains a significant number of good, grant-maintained schools, including non-selective, grant-maintained schools. She told the hon. Member for Bath—although she did not convince him—that such schools had better results and were more popular with parents. That initiative has been successful and popular, albeit not with the hon. Member for Bath.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam was one of several of my hon. Friends who spoke rightly and properly about the importance of discipline—as did Opposition Members: forgive me, I was not suggesting that we are divided on this issue. She welcomed the measures in the new Education Bill. She made reference to the SCAA consultation document—it was not the first time, and I am sure that it will not be the last. We all look forward to the results of those consultations.

The hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) explained that he could not stay because of a private difficulty. As usual, he made a wide-ranging speech that touched on everything from nursery vouchers to minimum space regulations. He spent quite a bit of time talking about the Bill. Knowing him as we all know him, and loving him as we all love him, we know that we will hear more from him on all those subjects during the next debate on education. He is an assiduous attender, and it is right that I pay tribute to him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Dr. Spink) welcomed the measures on discipline. I agree with his call for a period of calm in the media on the broad reporting of events at Manton school and at the Ridings school. I know that they are newsworthy issues, and I am not suggesting—even if I had the power—that censorship should apply. Those two schools have had their fill of reports and investigations in the past few weeks. They will shortly need—if they cannot have it now—a period of calm to allow teachers and authorities to pick up the reins and work things through. I agree with my hon. Friend on that.

My hon. Friend also underscored the success of grant-maintained schools, based on the experience of schools in his constituency. As a Minister, I am expected to say on these occasions that I note his well-argued pleas in respect not of one but two schools: one for sixth form status, and the other for technology college status. I have no doubt that he will continue to be in touch with me on those matters.

The hon. Member for Bath spoke about value for money in grant-maintained schools. In its report, the National Audit Office found that overall standards of financial management in the 80 schools visited were sound, and that there was real concern in the sector to improve value for money. The two cases that the hon. Gentleman cited are recognised as isolated examples. The impropriety identified in the report concerned internal issues that will be dealt with by the governing body. I understand that in both cases the governing bodies have now taken effective steps to resolve the problems.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was not advancing those cases as part of a general attack on grant-maintained schools because, as he and I are aware, stewardship problems can arise not only in those schools but in other forms of school, and we would be wise to accept the report and the answers that I have given.

The hon. Gentleman has repeated the allegations about nursery vouchers and Group 4 that he made a couple of days ago when we discussed education during our debate on the Queen's Speech. As he knows, Group 4 has been appointed to handle the administration, which means the awarding of contracts, but I remind him and other hon. Members that Group 4 is not involved in any way with assessing the educational quality of nursery providers. By definition, all those appointed as inspectors must be appropriately qualified. I make that point because there is a danger that the hon. Gentleman's comments may be taken out of context.

Mr. Don Foster: I entirely accept what the Minister has said, but my continuing concern is caused by the fact that, as I understand it, the people who assess who the inspection team should be and who should be responsible for the inspections have had no experience either of education or of inspections. That seems bizarre, and I would welcome a comment from the Minister about it.

Mr. Squire: I believe that what the hon. Gentleman has said is not fully right, but rather than rummage through my papers at this stage, I shall write to him with an answer.

The hon. Gentleman asked about resources. Having said at the outset that I would not say much about resources, I shall not break my self-imposed ordinance,

[Mr. Squire]

except to say that, whether we think about national funding since 1979 and the increase of nearly 50 per cent. in spending per pupil, or the priority that has been given to education compared with all other areas of Government spending over the past year, our record is not one of which I am ashamed.

However, clearly—indeed, transparently—as has been mentioned during the debate, in several parts of the country mere higher funding has not achieved quality improvements. That is precisely why I sought to recognise resources but then to say that ultimately they were less important than teaching standards.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned governors, and I shall look forward to further comments from him as the views are developed. I think that governors throughout the country have responded tremendously both to local management of schools and to grant-maintained schools. The fact that one or two exceptions are in the news at the moment does not in any way reduce my belief in governors' success.

I discovered today that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson) is, like me, the son of an architect, and I shall echo the comments made from the Opposition Front Bench by saying that my hon. Friend made his usual thoughtful speech. He rightly stressed teacher training. I shall not now take him through all the measures that we have introduced since 1984 but, as he knows, in 1984 we introduced the first national criteria for all initial teacher training, and we have subsequently sought to tighten and improve standards over the years, concentrating on both initial and continuing teacher training, because they go to the heart of standards in our schools.

The hon. Member for Newham, North–East, who is another member of the former council leaders club, gave an excellent constituency speech. I join him in congratulating the many improving schools he named and the people who have played a part in that process. I am interested to learn that, as the hon. Gentleman said, Newham was ahead of the game in publishing results and setting targets. That makes me wonder what all the fuss was about a few years ago—although of course that was before the hon. Gentleman arrived on the scene in the House.

I am told that Langdon school, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, is twinned with my school effectiveness division, and that staff and pupil visits to the Department are common. I am also advised that those people are very well informed about the improving schools programme, and I am sure that that must be true.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant) delivered an excellent speech—I am running out of adjectives—with scarcely a note. He highlighted what is happening on the net, which is very exciting. In his comments on failing schools he recognised that through the formal regime that we have put in place schools can and will improve. I know that my hon. Friends recognise that; I hope that in time I will convince even Opposition Members. I congratulate my hon. Friend on playing his part in assisting the recovery of the school that had fallen on hard times in his patch.

Finally, the hon. Member for Yardley always gives a good speech, and today's was another one, if I may say so without damaging her promotion prospects. Of course I did not agree with all her comments and, although I am looking for common ground, I entirely reject her claim that nothing has been done to tackle under-achievement. That goes to the heart of the debate.

Until a problem is identified, it will not be tackled. Under this Government we have introduced testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16 years and publicised the results. That has brought the problem to the attention of the public and the education experts. The inspection of schools, linked with the identification of good and not so good teaching, will further assist in determining where other improvements are necessary.

We can and must target under-achievement, in inner-urban boys or any other group to which the hon. Lady referred. I could not disagree with her comments, and we will shortly publish statistics from the performance tables showing the gender breakdown of the 1995-96 results. Like her, I hope that the many schools where that is a particular problem will tackle it using the measures that we have made available.

In conclusion, I acknowledge, as I did in my opening speech, that we all expect a great deal from our schools, teachers and governors. We expect a great deal from parents and pupils in helping and supporting schools and raising expectations and achievement. However, we owe a great deal to the many excellent teachers and head teachers throughout the land, and I pay tribute to them again. Through the improving schools programme, the Government will ensure that they are helped to provide only the very best of education.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 7th November, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14B (Proceedings under an Act or on European Community documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions on the Motions in the name of Secretary Sir Patrick Mayhew relating to the draft Registration of Clubs and the draft Licensing (Northern Ireland) Orders 1997, not later than one and a half hours after the start of proceedings on the first such Motion; and the said Motions may be proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock.—*[Mr. Brandreth.]*

LIAISON COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Sir Thomas Arnold be discharged from the Liaison Committee and Mr. Matthew Carrington be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Brandreth.]*

Greece

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Brandreth.]*

2.12 pm

Mr. Edward O'Hara (Knowsley, South): I apologise to the Minister for detaining him at this unsocial hour of Friday afternoon. I had hoped to secure the debate at the more social time of Wednesday morning, but I am sure that we shall have a positive and friendly exchange on a subject on which there is not much room for disagreement between us.

I begin by declaring an interest, having had a lifelong commitment to good relations between the United Kingdom and Greece, and more recently having visited Greece with some parliamentary colleagues as guests of the Greek Parliament to meet the new Prime Minister, Kostas Simitis, and members of his Cabinet.

The debate, which has two purposes, is summarised in early-day motion 67 which appeared on the Order Paper on Monday 28 October:

"That this House remembers that on 28th October 1940 Greece, despite overwhelming odds, said no to Mussolini's ultimatum and that for six months from that date, until 23rd April 1941, Greece alone of all the countries of Europe stood alongside Great Britain in armed combat against the Axis forces; and reminds Her Majesty's Government and its partners in the European Union that it behoves them to remember with gratitude the subsequent sacrifice of 558,000 of its citizens or eight per cent. of its population made by Greece for the sake of peace, freedom, democracy and human rights in Europe, and to value and support the uniquely important role which Greece can and does play for the European Union in modern times in the furtherance of peace, stability, security and prosperity in South East Europe."

I want first to look back and then, at greater length, to consider the present and future in terms of Anglo-Greek relations. As I have said, EDM 67 appeared on 28 October—Ochi day in Greece. It means "No" day. In this country, we rightly observe Remembrance Sunday every year on the Sunday nearest the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, but the date of Ochi day never changes: it is always 28 October; only the day of the week changes.

Greeks did not go to war on 28 October 1940; they simply fought back. Against all odds, against all logistical considerations, their effort did not make sense. But it was not a matter of logistics or common sense; it was a matter of honour. There is a Greek word, philotimo, a concept dear to the Greeks since Homeric times. It represents a concern for self-esteem, a shunning of the shame of bowing the knee or surrendering one's freedom.

Not for nothing is the national anthem of Greece an ode to freedom: "Her'o here lefteria"; meaning

"Hail, oh hail to freedom".

Not for nothing did the sacrifice of the Greeks strike a chord with the British in those dark days of 1940-41—and how they fought!

We are fortunate that a documentary record was recently published by Costas Hadjipateras and Marie Fafalios. Entitled "Greece 1940-41 Eyewitnessed", it offers contemporary accounts by those who fought—other ranks as well as officers, politicians and journalists and ordinary Greek men, women and children.

We are fortunate also to have a graphic account of the bitter winter campaign in the Balkan mountains in the corpus of paintings by Alexandros Alexandrakis, who served as a corporal in the artillery. His five brothers also fought in the campaign. One of the most graphic pictures shows the women of Mount Pindos struggling up mountains barefoot, without winter clothing, carrying munitions.

The eponymous picture in the collection, "Etsi Polemisame", meaning "The War We Fought"—more literally, "This is how we fought"—reminds us that the Greeks beat back Mussolini and Hitler had to intervene, sending his tanks down the Vardar valley. Those tanks would otherwise probably have gone to the eastern front.

Arguably, therefore, the campaign changed the course of the second world war. Certainly so thought Radio Moscow in a broadcast on 27 April 1941, the day the Germans finally entered Athens:

"It could not be otherwise . . . We Russians won time to defend ourselves thanks to your sacrifi . . . We are grateful to you."

And so thought at least one radio station in the USA:

"The Greeks have done their duty. Only now does the free world realise what this small and honoured country has offered it. If Greece had succumbed to the Italian demands, perhaps today we would all be living in a different world. The Eastern Mediterranean would have become a lake for the Fascist Axis. The borders of England in Asia would have disappeared, and Hitler, without the open wound of the Greek Italian war, would have been in Moscow before winter had caught up with him."

Winston Churchill also paid homage to the Greeks:

"Let Greece rest assured, she will receive all that she deserves and she will live proudly and heroically among the victors."

Even *The Daily Telegraph* paid homage to the Greek struggle in the war when, on 25 March 1941, it said:

"All the free countries owe a great deal to modern Greece. Up until now Greece was considered a small country in terms of wealth and population. Today, thanks to her bravery and virtue, she deserves to be recognised as a great power".

It is ironic to note how mean and carping the attitude of *The Daily Telegraph* is today.

I wish to refer to the gross misrepresentation in the British press of Greece as a member of the family of western democracies, and, in particular, as a member of the EU. Sadly, Greece's credentials are commonly questioned by a section of opinion in this country and elsewhere in the west. Greece is portrayed as semi-detached from the European Community, geographically, economically, culturally and even politically.

Greece has been described by *The Independent* as

"not fit to be a member of the EU".

The Times, in reference to the dispute between Greece and the former Yugoslavian republic of Macedonia, is on record as saying:

"This latest episode again illustrates the dangers of attempting to integrate a semi-levantine society into the western family of nations."

My purpose today is to demonstrate that what are represented as deficiencies and weaknesses in Greece can be viewed quite differently, and I start by referring to the great Andreas Papandreou. He was a political giant, but also a figure of controversy. Under his hegemony, certain sections of opinion in the west turned against Greece and his obituaries were informative. *The Wall Street Journal* observed:

[Mr. Edward O'Hara]

"Under his stewardship Greece's economy suffered from a bloated, inefficient state and widespread corruption. Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos also inherited Greece's damaged image in the international arena, the result of a long list of alienating actions, such as Mr. Papandreou's threats to close US military bases and his refusal to condemn Arab terrorism, the imposition of martial law in Poland and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan."

Note, by the way, that the actions referred to by *The Wall Street Journal* are things that Andreas did or did not say, and the rule with Andreas Papandreou was always to watch what he did, rather than what he said. The *Daily Telegraph* labelled his pursuit of Greek interests in the European Union "cynical manipulation", and made similar observations about his early threats to close NATO bases in Greece. The newspaper even questioned the democratic credentials of the Greek electorate who thrice gave him a clear mandate.

The Times referred to Andreas Papandreou as an

"obstinate, tenacious, prejudiced nationalist whose long tenure as Prime Minister brought Greece to the brink of economic and political ruin",

and went on to characterise his career in terms of hubris and the nemesis of his final phase.

Even *The Times* acknowledged that, to the end, Andreas Papandreou remained an heroic figure—particularly to the villagers of Greece, as he was the champion who broke the power of the big landowners, and the women of Greece. That was not because he evidently had enormous sexual appeal to women, but because he improved their status in society.

The Times acknowledged that, in his later career, he faced some difficult fiscal and economic decisions in an attempt to address Greece's economic difficulties. *The Wall Street Journal* also conceded that, latterly, he made significant reductions in inflation in Greece, and turned recession into 2 per cent. growth, with unemployment at roughly the European average.

The *Daily Telegraph*, sadly, made no concessions in its assessment of Andreas Papandreou's career, and I welcome the opportunity to put on record my reply to its assessment—which the editor, incidentally, chose not to publish.

To the accusation of Andreas Papandreou's "cynical manipulation" of the EU, I say first that people living in glass houses should not throw stones. Proper statistical analyses of allegations of resource fraud—and particularly of CAP fraud—have found that no EU member state is in a position to cast the first stone. Greece's record is not only not worse than other EU members in southern Europe—or than some northern members—but is better in many cases.

To the criticism of Andreas Papandreou's early threat to close NATO bases, I say that it must be set in the context of a Greece still smarting from a sense of its own cynical manipulation by major powers, particularly during the period of the junta. During all his Administrations, Papandreou's record towards NATO was one of restraint and pragmatism, remarkably so in the face of escalating and unchecked provocation from a fellow member of NATO, Turkey.

To the arrogant criticism of the Greek electorate who returned him three times to office, I say that, in return, he gave them improvements in social welfare and the economy. Above all, he restored to the Greeks their pride—their precious philotimo—after the Junta, and gave them hope for the future.

In foreign affairs, too, Papandreou has a record of achievements in relation to his neighbours in the most troubled area of Europe. Those include his fence-mending with Albania and Bulgaria and his initiatives on a wider front in setting an agenda for economic and political co-operation in the Balkans. In short, he has bequeathed a sound legacy in both domestic and foreign policy to his successor, Kostas Simitis. As I said: look at what Andreas did, not what he said.

The clear victory of Mr. Simitis in the recent elections not only confirms PASOK as the natural party of government in post-junta Greece, but it opens the road for him to build on Greece's role as a key player for the European Union and western democracy. Greece is uniquely equipped to play what I call a catalytic role in its region. Its geographical position in the European Union makes it an important bastion of the Union in the south-east. It flanks the former Yugoslavia, Albania and many former Soviet bloc countries, some of which aspire to membership of the European Union.

It is in the interests of the European Union that there should be peace, stability, political co-operation and economic development in that region. Greece is uniquely equipped to promote those aims. It is of the west, but it interfaces with the Levant. Its political institutions are the most vigorous and healthy in the region, and that, too, is due in no small part to the political genius of Papandreou in providing a focus for the previously splintered Greek left when he founded PASOK.

If any northern European eyes are raised at the modalities of Greek politics, they derive partly from the historical background to PASOK's foundation, to which I have referred, and partly from cultural differences. I predict, however, that, under Mr. Simitis, there will be a convergence of those modalities with those of the north, in the same way as there will certainly be economic convergence.

Those cultural characteristics are important. Far from pointing up the dangers of trying to integrate a semi-Levantine society into the western family of nations, they actually fit the Greeks to promote the interests of the west in their region. Their politicians understand the way in which politics is conducted in the Balkans, and their business men understand the way business is done. Being Greeks, they also have the necessary business acumen, and, given Greece's modern history relative to that of its neighbours, they have the experience. In many cases, they also have the capital.

In other words, the Greeks have the political nous, the acumen, the experience, the resources and, above all, the cultural understanding to serve as a know-how recsource for political and economic development in their region. They are equipped to do that, and they are doing it; hence the call in early-day motion 67 for Her Majesty's Government and the European Union to recognise and value Greece's role and support her in it. The same message goes to the United States of America.

In this speech, I am directing hon. Members' attention to Greece's enormously important geopolitical role for the west. That brings me to my final point, to which I have briefly alluded—Greece's relationship with Turkey.

I have presented Greece as a force for stability in its region, but that stability is threatened by the constant and increasing provocation to which Greece is subjected by Turkey. Turkish military aircraft overfly Greek airspace many times a day. They have no need to do so—they do it deliberately, and the risks are enormous. Young men fly those aircraft and the fear is that, one day, one of them will press the wrong button in error or out of frustration, and the possible consequences are unthinkable.

More recently, we have had the incident over Imia, which is clearly identified as Greek, not only on Greek, but on British and Turkish charts. In addition, there was the Gavdhos incident, when Greece's entitlement to Gavdhos was questioned. How can Turkey dispute Greece's claim to Gavdhos when the island of Crete lies between Gavdhos and the Turkish mainland? In fact, Turkey is attempting to subvert territorial dispositions that were made more than 70 years ago. Mrs. Ciller has referred to claims now on 1,000, now on 3,000, Aegean islands.

Turkey's methods are to challenge the validity of the internationally sanctioned treaties and agreements, and to back its claims with the threat of armed intervention. We need look no further than Cyprus to see the credibility of that threat.

However, I am not in this address linking the situation in Cyprus with that in the Aegean—although links could indeed be made—other than to say that it is difficult for relations between Greece and Turkey to be improved while the Cyprus situation remains unresolved. The tension between Greece and Turkey is centred on the Aegean, and the relations between Greece and Turkey must be improved, because they are both important to the west. As neighbours, they need to co-exist in harmony.

Kostas Simitis desires improved relations with Turkey. Indeed, one of his first pronouncements on taking office was to that effect and, within hours, he was facing a crisis over Turkey's occupation—

It being half past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Brandreth.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Does the hon. Gentleman wish to continue?

Mr. O'Hara: May I?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes. I had to cut the hon. Gentleman short to deal with a technical matter, but I do not want to cut short his speech if he wishes to continue.

Mr. O'Hara: I had almost finished my remarks.

I was saying that Kostas Simitis faced a crisis over Imia—I have mislaid my notes.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): While my hon. Friend finds his notes, may I say how interesting the House found his comments. I am sure that many hon. Members will agree with him, but would he comment on the role played by the Greek community in this country, certainly in business and economics, and not only in London but across the land? The links between Greeks and our communities are growing, and are already very powerful.

Mr. O'Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a long and honourable history of Greeks settling in this country; many generations of Greeks have enjoyed and fostered good relations with this country.

I repeat the request made in early-day motion 67 that the Government should value Greece's important geopolitical role. In considering relations between Greece and Turkey, we rightly pay great attention to Turkey's geopolitical importance for the west. I simply plead that Greece, too, has an important geopolitical role for the west in a sensitive part of the world. Its ability to carry out that role is hampered by the tension between it and Turkey. Its desire to converge economically with the European Union is hampered by its perceived need to keep building up its armed forces to match the build-up of the armed forces in Turkey.

For the sake of good relations between the two countries, and for the good of the west as a whole, I urge the Government to use all possible pressure on Turkey—if Turkey has disputes with Greece over territory in the Aegean, it should refer them to the Hague, and not constantly back them up with threats of military violence and brinkmanship. I am sure that I will receive a positive response from the Minister to that plea.

2.33 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. David Davis): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) for giving us once more an opportunity to focus on a relationship which is important to Britain and, I am confident in saying, important to Greece.

Hon. Members will recall that we last debated this subject in October 1995. This year, as last, the hon. Member for Knowsley, South has secured the debate with perfect timing, or at least almost perfect timing, given his earlier comments. That is because, as he has reminded us, at this time of year Greece, and friends of Greece throughout the world, commemorate the beginning of Greece's heroic defiance of Mussolini, with a "No" which resounded throughout Europe.

So the debate is timely, and it is a pleasure to salute once again in the House the strength and the bravery of Greece in those dark times, and to remember the months when Britain and Greece stood together defying the menace of fascism. There is much more that I could say about that important period, and, indeed, the hundreds of years of history which underpin the modern relationship between Greece and the United Kingdom, but the brevity of our debate requires that I speed on to the present. I want to concentrate on developments since our debate last year.

Nineteen ninety-six has been quite a year. At its start, we saw the retirement from the political scene of Andreas Papandreou, due to his then failing health. The impact which he had had over decades on Greek political life was emphatically demonstrated at his funeral in June, at which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment represented the Government.

January saw Mr. Simitis assume the position of Prime Minister of Greece. He was already a familiar face in Britain—he visited as minister for trade in 1994. He has frequently visited the United Kingdom ever since his time as a student at the London School of Economics.

We were keen to make an early start in doing business with Mr. Simitis's Government, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Athens on 20 February. By then, the new Greek Government were already having to deal with the unwelcome difficulties

[Mr. David Davis]

which arose out of events near the islet of Imia in the Dodecanese. That, and the wider problem of Greece's relationship with Turkey, continued throughout the year to pose a substantial and difficult challenge.

Hon. Members will understand if I devote some time to the difficulties between Greece and Turkey, as the hon. Member for Knowsley, South did. I do so, first, because it is an issue of concern to us as friends and allies of both countries; and, secondly, because it is impossible to ignore the stresses which this issue from time to time puts on the Anglo-Greek relationship. The hon. Member has already alluded to some of those stresses. I am glad that he did so, because, the more open and honest our reflections, the greater are our chances of success in agreeing with our Greek friends a constructive and co-operative approach to problem-solving.

There is often a temptation to ask, in the context of disputes such as these, "Whose side are you on?" The answer in this case, is that the British Government are on the side of stability. We naturally support respect for international law—in answer to the point that the hon. Gentleman made. We oppose categorically the use or threat of force. Within that framework, we support all efforts to reduce tension, resolve problems and promote a constructive and harmonious Graeco-Turkish relationship.

All European Union members agree that we have a common interest in strengthening the links between Turkey and the European Union. Failure to make progress on this would be bad news for the whole of Europe—not least for Greece—but there are differences of view between Britain and Greece about how the progress should be achieved.

Britain believes that we need to strengthen the links between Turkey and the EU. Greece has reservations about how far and how fast that process should go while serious bilateral issues between Greece and Turkey remain unresolved. This difference of views is not about support for one side or the other. Britain's policy has nothing to do, as critics sometimes say, with some equidistance between Greece and Turkey. It is about finding the best route to a universally desired goal.

We hope that honest disagreements about the best route can be explored through dialogue. They should not be allowed to affect our friendship. We look to Greece and Turkey to resolve their differences peacefully and in accordance with the principles of international law. We shall do whatever we can to support their efforts.

This year has also seen events in Cyprus which have deeply disturbed all of us who want to see a sound and sensible solution to that long-standing problem. As guarantor powers, Britain and Greece share a responsibility to work hard for a settlement, as does Turkey as the third guarantor power. It can only help progress to that objective if Britain and Greece can continue the constructive and thoughtful dialogue that we have had over recent weeks. I note in particular here the very helpful discussions that Sir David Hannay had during his two recent visits to Athens since his appointment.

Last year, I expressed the hope that we would see further progress in Greece's relations with her Balkan neighbours. I am delighted that this year has indeed built on the important interim accord between Greece and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia. While problems undoubtedly remain, Greece's importance as a focus for trade and stability in the Balkans should not be underestimated. The hon. Member was quite right to emphasise that.

I believe that the future of our relationship with Greece lies not in problems but in opportunities, and I am sure that an energetic and imaginative pursuit of those opportunities will help as we co-operate to solve the problems.

In practice, what does that mean? In April this year, Prime Minister Simitis visited Britain for the first time since he assumed office. He and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed then that, as old and familiar friends, Britain and Greece should be doing more to exploit the potential of that friendship in practical and productive ways.

I am glad to tell the House of one example of that practical co-operation. Next week, a mission from the Greek construction industry will visit Britain to identify areas where its members can work together with British partners. They will meet representatives from more than 50 British construction and building materials firms. I cannot say whether they will literally be building bridges; but I very much hope that they will do so in the symbolic sense.

The visit demonstrates our commitment to developing jointly with the Greeks a programme to increase trade in all areas, working to ensure not only that we co-operate in new fields but that we develop and support areas in which there are more mature commercial links.

This has been a year in which the pace of visits and in-depth contacts between our Governments has picked up. In addition to the visits that I have mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster visited Athens in April. In addition to the visit of Prime Minister Simitis this year, I am glad to tell the House that we shall in the next few weeks be seeing Mr. Pangalos, the Greek Foreign Minister, here in London at the invitation of my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

We want to take advantage of that visit to help to launch a new and dynamic phase in Anglo-Greek partnership. I see no reason why, as we look back on a time when Britain and Greece stood proudly together, we should not also look forward to a future of exploiting the true potential of our long association.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 4 November 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEATH OF A MEMBER

Madam Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the death of George Barrington Porter Esq., Member for Wirral, South. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will join me in mourning the loss of a colleague and extending our sympathy to the hon. Member's family and his friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

Youth Councils

1. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to set up youth councils in Wales. [278]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jonathan Evans): None, but the Welsh Office funds the Wales Youth Agency, which is working collaboratively with local authorities and key local agencies to encourage and inform the development of effective local youth councils throughout Wales.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer and that encouragement. I gather that in Barry, for example, an embryo youth council is already being enthusiastically supported by the Welsh Development Agency. Given that we are hearing from all sides that, in spite of best efforts, young people are still often apathetic and ignorant about the political process, will the Minister assure the House that his Department will do all that it can, both in support of the Wales Youth Agency and in other ways, to ensure that every opportunity is given to young people in and out of school throughout the Principality to learn that politics can be good for one?

Mr. Evans: As one who joined the Young Conservatives at the age of 15, I endorse the hon. Gentleman's latter sentiment. I thank him for his remarks about the Wales Youth Agency. It is right that the Welsh Office funds it. He will know that the United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance's document, "Agenda for a Generation: Building Effective Youth Work", is to receive its all-party Welsh launch in the House later this afternoon. I intend to be present at that launch, and I hope that that is the encouragement that he is looking for.

Mr. John Marshall: Does my hon. Friend agree that young people in Wales and elsewhere are interested in policies that are relevant to their future, such as greater choice, lower taxation and a strong defence, and that only one party is willing to put forward those policies?

Mr. Evans: I very much endorse my hon. Friend's observations, which would apply to the entire population. It is clear that the involvement of young people with a number of organisations during the formative years can play an important part in developing good programmes for good citizenship. The Welsh Office is supporting that through the provision of £761,000 this year for 17 national youth organisations and for the Wales Youth Agency itself. I regard that work as supplementary, in a sense, to the important considerations to which my hon. Friend has drawn the attention of the House.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I, too, will be at the launch this afternoon. Does the Minister recognise that the youth service—voluntary and statutory—plays a vital role in offering young people practical advice and guidance, imbued with moral purpose and direction, reflecting on their rights and duties as individuals, co-operating with others to create a new civic society in place of our present stressed and fractured one, in which, unfortunately, they are much more likely to have had experience of criminality, drugs and violence than people of my generation? Does he intend to do anything about that by bringing forward proposals to help the Wales Youth Agency and youth organisations and workers?

Mr. Evans: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for what I have said in relation to the launch this afternoon of the paper to which I referred. It is not good enough to say that such activity is the responsibility only of central Government. I have described the support that we are giving to the Wales Youth Agency and the 17 national youth organisations and the rest of it, but the hon. Gentleman's friends in local government also have a responsibility. It really is not good enough to mouth such words in the House when Welsh youth services do not get the support that they are entitled to expect to receive from Welsh local authorities.

Local Government Responsibilities

2. **Sir Wyn Roberts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to enhance the responsibilities of local authorities. [279]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. William Hague): Last month, following wide consultation, I announced measures for cutting central controls and extending the influence of local government in Wales. That initiative has been widely welcomed.

Sir Wyn Roberts: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is considerable scope to build constructively on the relationship between the Welsh Office and the local authorities; that there is a challenge to the new unitary authorities to show their worth nationwide; and, finally, that his approach offers a better path to devolution than the mishmash of policies offered by the Opposition?

Mr. Hague: Yes, I agree with my right hon. Friend. The measures announced last month give local government more responsibilities, and I am prepared to

go further if that will improve the quality and responsiveness of local services. Councils have been asked to supply new ideas for cutting central control and devolving functions by 20 December this year. I look forward to receiving more ideas. As my right hon. Friend has pointed out, that is real and worthwhile devolution to true local government instead of the creation of a whole new tier of administration, bureaucracy and elections, as favoured by some Opposition Members.

Mr. Rowlands: Is it not already difficult enough to fulfil the responsibilities of local government, given the existing finances? If there are further cuts in local government finance, schools could close and teachers could be made redundant; already, residential homes are being closed. Will the right hon. Gentleman stand up in the Cabinet and support those essential services instead of cuts in inheritance duty and capital gains tax?

Mr. Hague: Local government in Wales was allowed to increase its spending by more than 3 per cent. last year and 87 per cent. of that money is provided from central Government. That is a much higher proportion than is the case in England. I am considering the representations made by local authorities ahead of this year's spending settlement, but there is no reason why local authorities should not be able to fulfil their responsibilities.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My right hon. Friend hinted a moment ago at the proportion of money that is given by central Government to local government in Wales. Will he give us the equivalent figure in England, and does he believe that devolution would be a good deal for Wales if Wales ended up getting far less money from central Government?

Mr. Hague: The comparison for England with the 87 per cent. figure that I quoted for Wales is 79 per cent., and that makes a large difference to the figures. It should be a source of some concern in Wales that, if ever there were to be established—heaven forbid—a Welsh Assembly, the financial priority that is given to Wales might continue no longer. Welsh local government should also be concerned that the kind of package that I have announced, which will give more responsibility to local councils, has received little, if any, welcome from Opposition Members, who would rather centralise power in an assembly than give it to local councils.

Mr. Ron Davies: When the assembly is created, it will be with the will of the people—perhaps the Secretary of State should reflect on that. Meanwhile, I wish to question him on matters for which he is currently responsible. Given reports over the weekend of his support for caning, does he have any plans to restore to local government the power to reintroduce physical beating of schoolchildren? How does he personally feel about being a member of a Government who, after 17 years, have created such an alienated and divided society that Back Benchers such as the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) apparently believe that order can now be restored only by spanking schoolchildren and shooting burglars on sight? Does the Secretary of State share those views and, if he does not, will he make it clear that they are extremist views that will never be part of mainstream politics in any decent society?

Mr. Hague: The hon. Gentleman is well out of date in attributing to me any of the views in the Sunday morning newspapers. As I made clear in some of those newspapers and on television yesterday, my view is that this is a side issue and that the Education Bill will include the measures necessary to improve discipline in our schools. I also made it clear that it is time for everyone, including members of all parties, to give credit to the thousands of teachers and the tens of thousands of pupils—many of whom I have had the privilege of seeing—who are doing a tremendous job in the schools of Wales. The measures in the Bill are necessary to build on that, and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman supporting them.

Dr. Spink: Knowing, as I do, how much my right hon. Friend believes in accountability, may I ask whether he agrees that introducing another level of government in Wales would reduce, not increase, accountability?

Mr. Hague: Another level of government would certainly confuse accountability and the electorate, and would lead to endless buck passing between one layer of government and another. That is something that we must avoid.

Transport Policy

3. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to issue his transport statement; and what arrangements will be made to canvas opinion in Wales before doing so. [280]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Gwilym Jones): We intend to issue our new policy statement within the next few months. It will take account of the many representations we have received during the transport debate.

Mr. Anderson: Again on the subject of accountability and fooling the electorate, does the Minister accept that his party labours under special disadvantages in Wales because the Secretary of State—in whose name the statement will be issued—does not represent a Welsh constituency and because his party has been almost wiped out in local government in Wales? Rather than imposing a statement on the people of Wales, would it not be proper to consult widely among those who do their best to represent the people of Wales?

Mr. Jones: That was a pretty poor supplementary question from the hon. Gentleman, who may be frightened to debate the transport policy statement when we issue it. I invite him to take his chance then.

Mr. Alex Carlile: In preparing the statement, will the Minister take into account the strongly expressed opinions of more than 6,000 of my constituents that the Welsh Office should replace the "junction of death" at Sarnybryncaled on the A483 near Welshpool with a roundabout, following five fatalities and numerous serious injuries at the junction? It is time for action—will the Welsh Office act?

Mr. Jones: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman, whose concern I well appreciate, for that question; it was most appropriate that he informed me of his intention to raise this important matter here. Reports from our agents, Powys county council, have informed us of two accidents

at the junction. As a result, we are taking forward work involving changes to the layout and new signing, and we are requiring an investigation to be held into the desirability of a roundabout at that location.

Mr. Llwyd: Does the Minister realise that the minimum passenger requirement for the north Wales to Crewe service will now be three services a day as opposed to nine, as at present? What kind of transport policy is that?

Mr. Jones: It is a new, much better transport policy, because there has never been a minimum requirement before now. We have debated that matter in relation to the south Wales railway line, where private operators have provided more than the minimum number of services that they were set. The new operators will be looking for opportunities to improve and expand transport services in a way that has never been done before. British Rail has merely presided over a decline for the past 60 years.

Mr. Hanson: Will the Minister consult local authorities and the Department of Transport on the desirability of assessing the need for a rail link to Manchester airport, something for which many local authorities in north Wales and, indeed, England are now pressing?

Mr. Jones: I welcome that suggestion, and I look forward to the new rail operators—who have a much more open and positive approach to such possibilities—taking that forward. Prism, the new railway operator in south Wales, is looking at the possibility of a link to Cardiff international airport.

Voluntary Sector

4. **Mr. Michael:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met representatives of the voluntary sector in Wales to discuss future development of the sector. [281]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: I met representatives of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action on 21 August and addressed its annual general meeting on 26 September.

Mr. Michael: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Is he aware of the increasing demands on the voluntary sector in Wales and of the complications arising from local government reorganisation? Is he aware, for instance, that the Welsh Office guidelines provide for strategic development bids of up to £200,000—in the case of South Glamorgan county council—against bids from the voluntary sector of £4 million? What can he do to provide some stability both for local government and for the voluntary sector, given the increasing demands on both?

Mr. Evans: Through the Welsh Office, the Government have been providing significant sums to Welsh organisations. We provided about £24 million in direct and indirect grants to the voluntary sector in 1994-95; I have not yet had the figures collated for the current financial year, but I do not expect them to be all that different. In fact, I am well aware of the concerns outlined by the voluntary sector in particular about no certainty in relation to what the funding arrangements are, as a result both of the devolving of significant funds to local authorities and of local government reorganisation. That requires a partnership approach, on the part of local government as much as on that of the Welsh Office.

Mr. Richards: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Labour-dominated Conwy county council is planning to discontinue its funding of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action? Will he bear that in mind during the local government settlement and will he examine closely the financial irregularities of the council, which is fast gaining a reputation as the Lambeth of north Wales?

Mr. Evans: I am greatly concerned to hear that information. Most Members of all parties recognise the work that is done by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and would wish to see it supported by local authorities. I note, for what it is worth, that in a paper produced by the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), shadow Minister for the voluntary sector, it is asserted that his party's policy is that voluntary organisations should be essential partners. That message should also be learnt by local government.

A55 Road Building Programme

5. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the decision to fund the A55 road building programme across Anglesey through the private finance initiative and to delay the commencement until the autumn of 1998. [282]

Mr. Hague: Since the decision to progress the scheme under the private finance initiative was announced on 10 July 1996, 26 representations have been received.

Mr. Jones: Is the Minister aware of the great concern on the island about the decision to progress the scheme under PFI and to delay the commencement of the road building programme until autumn 1998—a delay of about 18 months? Is he also aware that that means that the people of Anglesey have to ask the Secretary of State another question. He says that he is seeking private finance, but how much confidence can that inspire, given that public money had already been allocated for the scheme? He told us that he had seen contractors about a possible initiative. How many of those contractors expressed an interest? Does he expect the people of Anglesey to put up with two more long summers of delays on the road? Can he do anything to bring the start date forward?

Mr. Hague: I expect strong interest from the industry in this major construction project; it is too early to say precisely how much, because it has not yet been advertised. The most important point is not the start date but the completion date. As the hon. Gentleman will know, because he has been advised of it already, the completion date for the whole scheme right across the island, under design, build, finance and operate will be approximately the same as it would have been under the more conventional financing route.

I share the determination of people on the island to ensure that the road is built and improved, as almost everyone agrees that it should be. We have a way to do

that while making more resources available faster and transferring the risk to the private sector, and all hon. Members should welcome that.

Health Authorities (Funding)

6. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many health authorities in Wales have registered their concerns about the level of their funding in the current financial year. [283]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: On 16 October, my right hon. Friend met all five health authority chairmen in Wales and they briefed him on many matters, including the current financial position.

Mr. Ainger: Does the Minister share the view of one senior health service executive in Wales that the current financial position and the position that the service will face next year are horrific? Does he accept that trusts and hospitals throughout Wales face a stark choice this year—and possibly next, if his Administration are still there? The health service faces serious underfunding coupled with an overspend, and the only choice that trusts and hospitals have is to cut patient services. Does the Minister accept, as the Secretary of State apparently does, that there is a financial crisis in the health service? What does he intend to do about it this year?

Mr. Jones: Yes, this Administration will still be here this time next year. No, I do not accept the premise that the hon. Gentleman put forward on behalf of an anonymous health service employee in Wales. None of the health authorities in Wales—except Dyfed Powys, and he well knows the arrangements that I have already put in hand for that—projects a cash overspend.

Mr. David Evans: Is the Minister aware that in 1979, under the last Labour Government, all capital projects were abandoned because the International Monetary Fund was running our affairs and all hospitals were closed, thanks to the National Union of Public Employees and the Confederation of Health Service Employees? Is he further aware that nurses' pay fell by 23 per cent. because inflation was running at 26.9 per cent? Is that what the nation can expect if that lot over there ever come to power?

Mr. Jones: Yes, yes and yes. The Opposition deserve to be reminded—my hon. Friend is right to point it out—that the only Government in our history to cut spending on the national health service was the Labour Government of the 1970s. Such is the regard that the Opposition try now to profess in a different way. Anyone with doubts about whether they would still treat the NHS in Wales as a political football should look at how they do not give sufficient priority to our schools in Wales.

Mr. Gareth Wardell: Following the Calman-Hine report on cancer services and the submission to the Minister of a report by Professor Cameron of the University hospital of Wales, can the Minister tell us from which trusts health authorities should cease purchasing cancer services and to which trusts those contracts should be moved?

Mr. Jones: As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, those are matters that are taken, and will be taken, forward by the health authorities as commissioners and by the relevant trusts. That process will continue.

Mr. Morgan: Do not those reports of deficits and overspend constitute an open-and-shut case of Government dishonesty in their financial dealings with the NHS? Why do the Government persist in cooking the books by getting all the health authorities and trusts to carry over their deficits into the next financial year, thereby lumbering the next Government with the problems of this one?

Mr. Jones: There is no question of lumbering the next Government because there will be a Conservative Government. We think long about all our responsibilities and seek to take forward the proper arrangements with the hospitals and health authorities to ensure that their finances are managed in the best possible way and that, as far as possible, they are spent where they matter—at the bedside.

Bilateral Trade (Far East)

7. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to visit the far east to discuss bilateral trade. [284]

Mr. Hague: A Welsh Office-led trade delegation is due to visit Japan next March. Visits to Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines are also planned in the next 12 months.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my right hon. Friend think that he would have had as much success in attracting companies from the far east to Wales, and to Newport in particular, if employment law in the United Kingdom was determined not in Westminster and in Cardiff but in Brussels, as the Labour party would wish?

Mr. Hague: No, I do not. Britain's employment laws and flexible labour market are one of the attractive features of the United Kingdom for overseas investors, on top of a more advantageous tax system, an excellent industrial relations record and a Government who welcome free enterprise and investment. Added together, those factors mean that we are the most successful economy in Europe in attracting inward investment.

Mr. Wigley: Hon. Members in all parts of the House will agree that the WDA is a vital body in developing trade and industry with south-east Asia and elsewhere. Will the Secretary of State therefore say what on earth is going on in the WDA? The chief executive has apparently been transferred to Greenwich on a three-month sale-or-return basis, like some second team Manchester United footballer being transferred to York City. If Mr. Hartop is up to the job, should he not be working every hour available to get the jobs needed in west and north

Wales? If he is not up to the job, why has he been given a three-month reprieve so that he can come back if he does not make it in Greenwich?

Mr. Hague: I can tell the hon. Gentleman what is going on in the WDA—it is having an extraordinarily successful year and an acting chief executive with 12 years' experience has been appointed during that period. I can also tell him—I shall in any case be announcing it in a written answer at 3.30 pm—that I am increasing the WDA's base programme for this financial year from £120 million to £157.1 million, which is an increase of £25 million in central Government provision and nearly £12 million in the receipts that the agency can generate. That is a tribute to its great success this year and to the extent of our commitment to the agency's work.

Mr. Llew Smith: Instead of prioritising a visit to the far east, will the Secretary of State give priority to keeping a commitment he gave to meeting the Heads of the Valley standing conference to discuss unemployment? Does he also realise that if he gave priority to that visit, the savings involved would help him to curb public expenditure?

Mr. Hague: I would consider any request for a meeting, but I am pleased to be able to say that unemployment has been falling throughout most parts of Wales for a long period—unemployment in Wales is now lower than in Germany—and that is a tremendous success. It is one of the things that has happened as a result of our success in attracting inward investment and encouraging home-grown companies to succeed in Wales, and that includes part of the valleys. I certainly want to consider all initiatives to continue that progress and will consider any requests for a meeting.

Mr. Ron Davies: The Secretary of State surprised us with that announcement of a winter supplementary estimate. As I understand it, he is proposing to restore to the WDA money taken in cuts imposed by his predecessor about two years ago. Perhaps he will confirm that he is announcing changes to the current year's provision rather than to next year's. Will he confirm a point put to him this afternoon—that he is now in direct conflict with the WDA, the board having told him that it cannot make the appropriate contribution to economic regeneration next year, in line with the requirements of his published strategic guidance? Is that not the ultimate political hypocrisy—this afternoon, as on previous occasions, the Secretary of State publicly claiming credit for the work of the agency while privately conspiring to sabotage its future?

Mr. Hague: Only the hon. Gentleman could say that I was sabotaging the future of something when only a few minutes before, I had announced that I was increasing its budget by £37 million. I am sorry that I surprised him. Obviously I did and he did not have time to rewrite the whole of his question. I was talking about the current year with the figures I just announced. We shall come to next year's figures in my public expenditure statement next month.

I am certainly not in conflict with the board of the WDA. I work closely with the chairman and I had a constructive meeting with the whole board a few weeks ago, and there could not be any conflict about future year's programmes before we have decided what they are to be.

Inward Investment

8. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the principal reasons why overseas investors have chosen to invest in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [285]

Mr. Hague: Companies regularly tell me that they invest in Wales because of the quality of the work force, the competitive conditions and the excellent economic outlook. We have created an environment for success, which both inward investors and home-grown companies recognise.

Mr. Whittingdale: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Government on their success in creating the conditions that have led to companies choosing to invest in Wales and the resulting creation of thousands of jobs. Is it not the case that the qualities and attractions that he has described would be totally undermined by the new taxes, burdens on employers and strikes that new Labour would bring to Wales?

Mr. Hague: My hon. Friend is right. We have had an excellent year for inward investment in Wales. So far this calendar year, there have been over 100 inward investment projects, large and small, bringing or promising 13,500 new jobs, with £2.3 billion of investment. I announced two further projects last week and hope to have further good news to announce this week. That good news will continue, provided that the policies that have brought it about continue. My hon. Friend was right to point out the dangers of the European job-destroying social chapter and the policies of higher taxation that would obviously accompany Opposition Members into power. Only if those things can be avoided can we continue to build on that excellent record.

Mr. Denzil Davies: I understand that, on Wednesday, the Secretary of State will come to my constituency to visit a car component factory that relocated to Wales from abroad many years ago. When he goes to the factory he will see that the Llanelli area now has several excellent car component firms. Will he confirm that the time is now right for Llanelli to have a car assembly plant—a major inward investment to take advantage of those firms?

Mr. Hague: I am looking forward to visiting the firm in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency on Wednesday morning. It is part of Wales's ever-growing success in automotive components. There are now 20,000 people in Wales working in automotive components businesses and that number is climbing all the time. I would certainly welcome further additions to the total and further additions that broaden the industry, and I shall make every effort to bring that about.

Local Government Finance

9. **Mr. Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met leaders of Welsh local authorities to discuss the forthcoming local government financial settlement. [286]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: On 23 September 1996.

Mr. Murphy: Is the Minister aware that the constant underfunding of our local authorities, including this year's

settlement, has meant that our schools are starved of cash and that the south Wales fire authority is in the deepest financial crisis? Despite what has been said this afternoon, and bearing in mind the fact that the forthcoming settlement will be the last one made under a Conservative Government for many years to come, will the Minister lift the dreadful burden from Welsh local authorities so that they can deliver the services that are needed so desperately by the Welsh people?

Mr. Jones: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already reminded the House how great an increase local government in Wales had this year. What the hon. Gentleman is complaining about is decisions made by councillors—usually Labour councillors—in Wales. They are the ones who determine how much is spent on our schools and fire brigades and it is their priorities that should be held up and examined by the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Raymond Powell: Will the Minister tell the House and Bridgend council why, this year, there has been a £6 million reduction in the estimate of the funding that the council needs to carry out the services that it inherited as a result of the Government's diktat that there should be a unitary authority? Is he aware that the council has closed the Ogmore swimming pool in the Ogmore valley and the Ogmore residential school in Ogmore-by-Sea and that it has taken a number of other decisions as a result of the cut in funding? If the Minister is to decide what the council will receive next year, I hope that he will consider what was left out this year. In addition, will the Minister consider that teachers in Garth primary school teach classes of 39 pupils? That is not what we expect and it is not what we will have when the Conservatives get out and a Labour Government is elected.

Mr. Jones: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is falling into the usual trap of dwelling on local authorities' wish lists and their typical wish to be high spenders. That is the problem that he is referring to. The simple facts of the matter are that Welsh local government has had, and is spending, more this year than it was able to spend last year. What the hon. Gentleman should question is the priorities that councillors—usually Labour councillors—have applied when deciding where to spend that money. We have encouraged them to spend it on education and social services. The hon. Gentleman should question where they actually spent it.

Secondary Schools (Spending Per Pupil)

10. **Sir David Knox:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much was spent per pupil in secondary schools in Wales in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what this figure was for 1978–79 at constant prices. [287]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The provisional figure for net funding per pupil in local education authority maintained secondary schools in Wales for 1994-95 was £2,264 at constant 1994-95 prices. The equivalent figure for 1979-80, the earliest year for which comparable information is centrally available, is £1,474 per pupil at constant 1994-95 prices.

Sir David Knox: Does my hon. Friend agree that those figures hardly sustain claims of cuts in education? Does he think that that increase in funding has been accompanied by a comparable increase in standards?

Mr. Evans: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that one clear focus of Government policy on education in Wales has been to ensure that we drive up standards. The latest general certificate of secondary education and A-level results in Wales show that we are making significant progress. The figures also reveal not only an increase of 53.6 per cent. in real terms in spending per secondary school pupil in Wales, but an increase of 48 per cent. in spending on primary school children. As my hon. Friend has made absolutely clear, that fact must be judged against the charges that we sometimes hear from the Opposition.

Mr. Barry Jones: Will the Minister help Flintshire local education authority by enabling it to opt out of the unpopular nursery voucher scheme? In that way, he could assist secondary education, because everyone in Flintshire believes that the voucher scheme will be wasteful, chaotic and rather expensive.

Mr. Evans: Not for the first time, we hear from the Opposition that they speak for every person in Wales. In fact, they have discovered at previous national elections that their optimism in that respect was misplaced, as it will be again.

Housing

11. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many units of housing were completed by housing associations and local authorities in Wales during 1995–96; and what is the total number of applicants on housing waiting lists. [288]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The figures are 3,802 and 164 respectively, reflecting the policy of making housing associations the main provider of new social housing. Waiting lists are kept by the individual housing providers. Information is not held centrally.

Mr. Williams: Will the Minister look into the problems of one of my constituents, Mrs. Tattersall of Llandovery, who has been on the housing waiting list for five years? She has seven children and lives in a three-bedroom semi-detached house. Four boys share one bedroom and their ages range from 10 to 18; the two girls share the second bedroom; and the infant sleeps in his mother's room. The living room, which has to serve eight people, is 12 ft by 11 ft. The conditions are frankly 19th century.

In April, I raised the problem with my local authority and the housing association, but when I checked in October I learnt that it had still not been solved. In fact, two of the teenage children had nervous breakdowns this summer, unquestionably because of the appalling overcrowding. The Welsh Office received a copy of my latest letter about the problem on 13 October. Will

Ministers look into the appalling problems of that family, which has been badly let down by the housing association and the local authority?

Mr. Evans: That account is hardly a good advertisement for Welsh local government in Labour party hands, is it? Since Housing for Wales was established in 1988, some 27,000 additional homes have been provided in the Principality—because of that initiative and investment of £1.2 billion from the Welsh Office. Furthermore, the hon. Gentleman's local authority has received £6.8 million to fund its housing association grant programme in 1995-96. The hon. Gentleman should be pressing his local authority a lot harder than he appears to be doing.

Mr. Rogers: Why does not the Minister do what he suggests, and press local authorities and others to provide him with housing waiting list figures? I find it absolutely disgraceful that the Welsh Office does not know the combined waiting list in Wales. Those figures are held by the housing associations, and the Minister has said that he has now made them primarily responsible for the provision of social housing, so why on earth does he not simply write to them to ask how many applicants there are?

Mr. Evans: Given the number of years the hon. Gentleman has been in the House, he must know that it is Government policy to ensure that the prime provider of social housing should be housing associations, but that local authorities play a key role in relation to the allocation of social housing. He will also know that local authorities across Wales tend to adopt different approaches in relation to the compilation of figures on housing need.

Mr. Rogers: How many are on the waiting list?

Mr. Evans: It does the hon. Gentleman no good to go in for histrionics designed to cloud the responsibility of his own local authority.

Tree Planting

12. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to continue with initiatives encouraging tree planting in the Principality. [289]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: We shall continue to encourage tree planting in Wales and we aim to increase the woodland area by about 50 per cent. by the middle of the next century, subject to the necessary changes to the common agricultural policy.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I warmly welcome the woodlands initiative, which presumably reflects the community forest projects in England. Recognising that the annual National Tree Week occurs at the end of this month, will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to encourage local authorities, individuals and organisations to play their part in tree-planting schemes, and draw to their attention the expertise that exists in local authorities for advising on the right species of tree to be planted at the right time in the right place?

Mr. Evans: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his work in this area. He is an acknowledged expert and takes a greater interest in the matter than hon. Members on the Opposition Benches. I have asked the chief conservator of the forestry authority in Wales to chair a small group to consider how best to implement the recommendations which, as my hon. Friend knows, were contained in a report commissioned by the Welsh Office two years ago—"The Way Ahead for Welsh Forestry". The chief conservator is to report to me before the end of the year with his suggestions for changes and more details of the opportunities for the development of forestry in Wales.

ATTORNEY–GENERAL

Lenient Sentences (Appeals)

32. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Attorney–General how many cases with unduly lenient sentences he has referred to the Court of Appeal in each of the past four years. [270]

The Attorney–General (Sir Nicholas Lyell): My right hon. Friend and I referred 32 sentences to the Court of Appeal in 1993, 50 in 1994, 81 in 1995 and 49 so far this year. The court has increased sentence in 161, or 84 per cent., of the cases so far heard.

Mr. Hanson: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for those figures. Will he agree to undertake an early review of the criteria for determining what constitutes an unduly lenient sentence? He knows of the case in which a person was fined £200 at Chester Crown court for an indecent assault on the eight-year-old son of constituents of mine. My constituents feel that that sentence was not acceptable or a severe deterrent or form of punishment. The Attorney-General refused to refer the case to the Court of Appeal. A review should be undertaken into what constitutes unduly lenient sentences.

The Attorney–General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for referring to that case, about which he has written to me. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General and I considered the case carefully. The Court of Appeal has held that an unduly lenient sentence must be one that falls outside the range of sentences properly available to a trial judge. In all the circumstances, we did not consider that that sentence met that criterion.

Mr. Waller: In view of the success of the system for referring unduly lenient sentences to the Court of Appeal, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that many people want an extension of that system rather than some of the mandatory sentences included in the Crime (Sentences) Bill which is to have its Second Reading this afternoon? In the case, for example, of someone convicted for the second time of rape, would it not be appropriate to refer the matter to the Court of Appeal if it seemed that a sentence of life imprisonment was necessary for the protection of the public, but that sentence had not been imposed?

The Attorney–General: My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will shortly outline the details of the Bill. To an extent, the two systems run in harness. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for welcoming the system

of referring unduly lenient sentences. Particularly in relation to third-time burglars, the two systems will work well in harness if the House gives the matter its approval.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Does the Attorney-General agree that the guideline cases that the Court of Appeal has issued have been an entirely appropriate way of dealing with sentencing? Does he further agree that the Government have failed to find one instance in which they can criticise the Court of Appeal for the severity of sentences which it has declared to be appropriate, both for serious and less serious offences?

The Attorney–General: If the hon. and learned Gentleman is approving, as I believe he is, the system of referring unduly lenient sentences and the opportunity that system gives the Court of Appeal to lay down guideline criteria for sentences, I agree with him that it is extremely valuable. If, however, he is making points relevant to the debate about to come, I have no doubt that he will make them more fully then.

Mr. Harry Greenway: Is my right hon. and learned Friend satisfied that juveniles sentenced to be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure for murder will be so detained and not released back to the community—if at all—before serving long sentences and before being thoroughly reformed?

The Attorney–General: My hon. Friend's question falls outside the area of competence of my Department; but such cases are extremely carefully and professionally reviewed before my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has to consider them. I think that my hon. Friend can be satisfied as to that.

Mr. Hoon: Does the Attorney-General agree that one reason for the number of references involving lenient sentences is the failure of the Court of Appeal to set out comprehensive sentencing guidelines for judges and magistrates? Is it not time for the criminal division of the Court of Appeal to be given a proactive, consultative role so that the court does not depend on the particular case appealed against but can instead develop guidelines for all the main categories of criminal offence?

The Attorney–General: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box, but I am afraid I cannot agree with his serious point. I believe that the opportunity afforded by normal appeals against what are regarded by defendants as over-severe sentences, coupled with the opportunities afforded by my hon. and learned Friend and I referring to the Court of Appeal what we consider to be unduly lenient sentences, gives the Court of Appeal a full opportunity to lay down guidelines for sentences. I do not think that needs extending by a sentencing commission or something of that sort—which would seem to underlie the hon. Gentleman's question.

33. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Attorney–General what is his policy in respect of referrals arising out of lenient sentences. [271]

The Solicitor–General (Sir Derek Spencer): In deciding whether to refer a case to the Court of Appeal, we apply the test laid down by the court—whether the sentence is not merely lenient, but outside the range which a judge could properly pass. We may also refer a sentence where it is appropriate to give the Court of Appeal the opportunity to reconsider sentencing guidelines.

Mr. Spring: What sort of cases have been referred and seen to be most useful in that referring process? Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the power which has been vested in this instance is most welcome to the public but was, characteristically, opposed by the Labour party?

The Solicitor–General: My hon. Friend is quite right. When the Bill was proceeding through the House, one Labour Member—I shall spare his blushes—said that it was a cruel and heartless power, but that did not prevent him from writing to us when we were considering a rape case, encouraging us to refer it to the Court of Appeal. Since he wrote in confidence I shall naturally respect that confidence.

We have referred 74 cases of robbery, which is 26 per cent. of the total; 64 cases of offences under section 18 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, which is about 23 per cent. of the total; 42 death by driving cases, which is 15 per cent.; and 31 of rape, which is 11 per cent.

Crown Prosecution Service

34. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Attorney–General what improvements have been made to the Crown Prosecution Service over the past year. [272]

The Attorney–General: Principal Crown Prosecution Service initiatives in the past 12 months include the setting up of the CPS inspectorate and close co-operation with the police through joint performance management to improve the handling of cases at all stages, including the timeliness and quality of police files.

Mr. Mackinlay: Does the Attorney-General remember 18 January 1993, when his colleague the Solicitor-General told the House about the number of cases forming the backlog at the central criminal court? What is the backlog of cases at the central criminal court today?

The Attorney–General: I do not know the answer to that question. If the hon. Gentleman tables a question to my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor, he will have directed it in the right direction.

Mr. Jenkin: Has my right hon. and learned Friend considered giving extra powers to the Crown Prosecution Service, most particularly powers for it to negotiate a sentence or fine directly with potential plaintiffs in front of a court, rather than having to go through the technical process of going to a court so that a sentence can be delivered? Would not that short-circuit some of the backlog in the courts?

The Attorney-General: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting question. That type of plea bargaining goes on in the United States in very serious cases, but I have not considered it, and I do not think that anyone has considered it in relation to the run of about 1.3 million cases prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service before magistrates courts.

Criminal Trials

35. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Attorney–General what representations he has received concerning the length of time taken between arrest and conviction of criminals; and if he will make a statement. [273]

The Solicitor–General: Following a number of representations, my right hon. and learned Friends the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney-General have set up a review—announced on 15 October, and to report by the end of January—to identify means of expediting the progress of criminal cases.

Mr. Barnes: Are not the present arrangements pretty miserable for everyone concerned? They are miserable for victims because they must relive their case in court and hang on and on until the case comes up, suffering during that time; and they are miserable for people on remand—helping to clog up prisons—some of whom will be determined to be innocent when the case reaches court. Is not it therefore beyond time that this review was concluded and the material submitted? The Conservatives have had 17 years in which to act.

The Solicitor–General: The hon. Gentleman appears to overlook the fact that, in most Crown courts, the waiting period for trial is shorter than it was some time ago. He has also overlooked several initiatives that have been taken jointly by the police and the CPS to speed up cases in magistrates courts. Recently, we have instituted pilot projects in which lawyers have been placed in police stations to give advice straight away, piloted a system for proof of minor road traffic cases at first hearing, and reduced paperwork in expected pleas of guilty in magistrates courts.

Crown Prosecution Service

36. **Mr. Sweeney:** To ask the Attorney–General what steps he is taking to improve the efficiency of the Crown Prosecution Service through the use of information technology. [274]

The Attorney–General: The Crown Prosecution Service is currently a key participant in pilot projects at Ipswich and Southampton which provide an e-mail link to the courts, the police, the probation service and legal practitioners to improve communication and reduce paperwork.

Mr. Sweeney: I am grateful for that good news about the pilot project. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that information technology has great potential to improve communications between all agencies involved in the criminal justice system, to save unnecessary adjournments and generally to help all the parties to obtain better service from the system?

The Attorney-General: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I have just seen the e-mail project at Ipswich; it shows how extraordinarily valuable that piece of technology is to a service that deals with several other agencies. It is now possible for the Crown Prosecution Service to raise any number of points with the police or the courts and receive in minutes an answer that would otherwise involve dictating letters, getting them typed, getting them faxed, sending them, waiting for the post and waiting for letters to come back, be processed, registered and read. The whole process can be shortcut so that what probably took days now takes minutes. I commend that impressive project.

Scott Report

37. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Attorney–General if he will make a statement on implementation of reforms recommended by Lord Justice Scott. [276]

The Attorney–General: On the recommendations for which I have departmental responsibility, I informed the House on 17 June that, as from that date, the role of the Attorney-General would include superintendence of those Customs and Excise prosecutions relating to defence exports and sanctions infringements that require evidence of deliberate evasion. The public consultation that I announced in February on public interest immunity has been concluded, and I hope to announce the Government's conclusions soon.

Mr. Smith: The Government promised to report to Members of Parliament on the politically controversial use of public interest immunity certificates to suppress politically embarrassing information. When will that report be made available, and what is the reason for the delay?

The Attorney–General: I hope to produce the report soon. I want to correct the hon. Gentleman—I am sure that, when he reflects on the matter, he will know that I am right to do so. Such certificates have never been used to suppress material information. There is no instance of that happening. It is about time that that old canard—if that is a parliamentary word—was knocked on the head.

Orders of the Day

Crime (Sentences) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment that stands in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown).

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The key provisions of the Bill were set out in the White Paper "Protecting the Public", which I published earlier this year. They are designed to improve the protection of the public against serious, dangerous and persistent offenders, and to increase public confidence in the sentencing process. They are important and radical measures that target, in particular, violent offenders, sex offenders, drug traffickers and domestic burglars.

The proposals in the Bill address real problems in our criminal justice system. They will introduce the biggest step change in our criminal justice system this century. They will make a vital contribution to the fight against crime. Victims and the public are firmly at the top of the agenda, as they should be.

We have consulted widely on the key provisions of the Bill. They have been welcomed by the public, and have the support of the police. Serious offenders cause harm, misery and distress to tens of thousands of victims every year. It is the duty of Government to do all that they can to protect the public from such offenders. It is the duty of Government to do all that they can to ensure that offenders will be properly punished. Those who persistently offend should know with certainty that they will face a stiff penalty if they offend again. The main provisions in the Bill will help the Government to fulfil that duty.

The public also have a right to know that the prison sentence that is passed by the court is the sentence that will actually be served by the offender. Under the present early release arrangements, that is far from the case. Under the present arrangements, a majority of prisoners are released after serving only half their sentence. The public, and victims, neither understand nor approve of that. The provisions in the Crime (Sentences) Bill will bring greater transparency to the sentencing process. They will ensure that the prison sentence passed by the courts matches much more closely the term that is served by the prisoner.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): In respect of that so-called honesty in sentencing, will my right hon. and learned Friend explain to the House what has happened to cause the abandonment of a policy that the Government adopted, after careful review, only five years ago?

Mr. Howard: If my hon. Friend looks back to the Criminal Justice Act 1991, he will find that it was a step in the right direction. It significantly increased the proportion of the sentence passed by the court that is actually served by prisoners. It increased it from a third to a half: the proportion of a third having originated in the Criminal Justice Act 1967, which was passed when the Labour party was in office.

If my hon. Friend goes back over the history of the matter, he will realise that the 1991 Act was a step in the right direction. We are building on that, and are now providing a greater consistency between the sentence passed by the court and the sentence served.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. I fully support everything that he is trying to do and I am sure that he will be successful.

I point out that, as yet, there is no effective or adequate deterrent for a large group of miscreants, many of whom are young. I advise my right hon. and learned Friend that I shall seek to bring forward an amendment to make corporal punishment available to the courts. We know very well that the Opposition—that make-believe party of law and order—are unlikely to want to debate the issue. However, it is quite proper that those people and the problems that they cause should be debated on the Conservative Benches, if not by Labour Members.

Mr. Howard: I am afraid that I cannot follow my hon. Friend down that route. It may be correct to debate the matter, but I am told—it was before my time—that the sentence was not used long before it ceased to exist in 1948 because it was generally considered to have little effect.

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn): Let us be clear. The Secretary of State will recall that, when the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Mr. Marlow) raised the issue in a similar debate, the right hon. and learned Gentleman made it categorically clear that he opposed the reintroduction of flogging or birching by courts. Will he confirm that view?

Mr. Howard: I thought I had. In case there is any doubt, I certainly do confirm it.

Part I of the Bill introduces mandatory prison sentences for certain serious offenders. Clause 1 requires the courts to impose a life sentence on anyone aged 18 or above who is convicted for a second time of a serious violent or sexual crime such as attempted murder, manslaughter, rape or serious wounding. Those offenders should only be released if, and only if, it is safe to do so. The automatic life sentence will ensure that that is the case.

The courts will determine at the point of sentence the minimum term of imprisonment that must be served for purposes of retribution and deterrence, but release will not automatically follow the completion of that term. It will depend upon a satisfactory risk assessment by the Parole Board. If the Parole Board considers that the offender represents a risk to the public, he or she will be kept in prison—if necessary, indefinitely. Those released will be on life licence and subject to recall at any time.

The need for that provision has been questioned, but the case for it is overwhelming. In 1994, 217 offenders were convicted of a serious violent or sexual offence, having been previously convicted of at least one similar offence. Of those 217, only 10 received a life sentence. The others had to be released at the end of their determinate sentences, even if everyone involved knew

that they were likely to offend again. That is a completely unacceptable state of affairs and I am determined to remedy it.

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): How many of those cases did my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General appeal against?

Mr. Howard: I shall supply my right hon. Friend with that answer in due course. The difficulty is that my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General had to take decisions against the existing background and guidance of sentencing practice as set out by the Court of Appeal. The thrust of my proposals is that existing practice in relation to serious violent or sexual offenders does not meet the case in terms of protecting the public, for the reasons that I have explained.

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): Pursuing the point made by the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) a step further, can the Home Secretary name a single case upon which the Court of Appeal failed to act in an appropriate manner following a reference by the Attorney-General?

Mr. Howard: The hon. and learned Gentleman misses the point. In every case where someone has committed two serious offences of that kind, he should not be released until there has been an assessment of risk. It will still be for the court to assess how long he should serve for retribution and deterrence. If the risk assessment is met satisfactorily at the end of that period, the person concerned will be released. If it is not, he will remain in custody. That is how it should be, for the greater protection of the public.

Sir Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): Will my right hon. and learned Friend inform the House whether any of the 217 offenders who were released at the end of their determinate sentences committed further murder or rape offences?

Mr. Howard: A number did. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office will provide the exact number when he winds up the debate.

Mr. Robert Jackson: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way again. I shall not trouble him again, but this is a convenient moment to make my point. His proposals will effectively abolish the distinction between a sentence for murder and a sentence for a second-time offence in the relevant categories. Is not there a risk that that will give an incentive to someone committing such an offence for the second time to commit murder?

Mr. Howard: I do not think that that would be the consequence. My hon. Friend is not entirely right; there will still be distinctions in procedures between the mandatory life sentence for any single act of murder and a life sentence for a second serious sexual or violent offence. Life imprisonment is already the maximum sentence for several offences. If my hon. Friend's argument was right—I have explained several times in detail why I do not believe it to be right—it would apply to all offences with statutory provision for a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The argument has been rejected by the House in a number of contexts on several occasions.

Under clauses 2 and 3, the courts will be required to impose minimum prison sentences on anyone aged 18 or above who is convicted for a third time of trafficking in class A drugs or of domestic burglary. A sample of domestic burglars convicted in the Crown court in 1993 and 1994 showed that the average prison sentence for a first-time offender was 16.2 months. After three or more convictions, it was 18.9 months. After seven or more convictions, it was barely higher, at 19.4 months. Some 28 per cent. of offenders with seven or more convictions were not sent to prison. On hard drugs, a recent sample showed that the average sentence for a third conviction for trafficking in class A drugs was just over four years.

We need to change the terms of trade against such career criminals. The Bill provides for a minimum prison sentence of seven years for drug trafficking and of three years for burglary. The courts will have discretion to allow a small discount of up to 20 per cent. off the mandatory minimum sentences for offenders who are ready to admit their guilt and offer a timely guilty plea. The court will be able to set the mandatory sentences aside only if it considers that there are exceptional circumstances. The judge must then explain those exceptional circumstances in open court. My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General will be able to refer cases to the Court of Appeal if he thinks it appropriate.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): The Home Secretary has acknowledged that his proposals will result in a large increase in the prison population, with an associated increase in costs. Why does he think that that is a better way to deter crime than putting the money into crime prevention?

Mr. Howard: I do not believe that those are alternatives. We take crime prevention extremely seriously. The police take it seriously and spend a good deal of the £6 billion a year that we provide on crime prevention. In addition, £240 million is spent on crime prevention from other Government budgets. I accept that it is important to take crime prevention seriously, but serious, persistent and dangerous offenders need to be in custody so that the public can be adequately protected from their activities. That is the reasoning behind the measures in the Bill.

I shall give way to the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), but then I must make some progress.

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): The Home Secretary has just reminded the House that clauses 1, 2 and 3 refer to "exceptional circumstances". Will he give the House some examples of what he has in mind?

Mr. Howard: There could be a number of such exceptional circumstances. I shall give the hon. Gentleman one example.

Sometimes, someone appearing before a court gives the police exceptional help, which enables them to bring a number of other serious criminals to justice. That is an important factor, which I would regard as an exceptional circumstance justifying the passing of a sentence shorter

[Mr. Howard]

than the minimum mandatory length. The proposals have been widely welcomed by the public and the police; they are important measures. My aim is to bring them into force at the earliest opportunity.

Part II reforms the arrangements for the early release of prisoners. Our aim is greater honesty and transparency in sentencing. The term of imprisonment served by the offender should closely match the sentence passed by the court. At present it does not.

The present arrangements were introduced in the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and they were a move in the right direction. They increased the time that the prisoner must serve from a third to a half, but that does not go far enough. The public are rightly outraged when they learn that a burglar sentenced to one year is out of prison in six months or that a rapist sentenced to eight years is out in four. The new early-release arrangements will ensure that the term of imprisonment imposed by the court matches much more closely the term actually served. They will also ensure that any release before the end of the sentence will have to be earned, not awarded automatically.

Mr. Gary Waller (Keighley): As I understand the position, sentences may be rather shorter than they have been in the past because we shall have honest sentencing. However, is it not a fact that until now, the Parole Board has been able to consider, when assessing a prisoner's suitability for release, factors such as his medical and psychiatric condition, the possible risk to victims or potential victims, his insight into his offending behaviour and its effect on victims, and the realism of his resettlement plans? None of those factors, but only the narrow factor of his behaviour inside prison, will be able to be considered in future. Some of the most violent and most dangerous prisoners behave very well in prison, but could be a danger to the public. In reality, will not the proposals increase rather than lessen the danger to the public?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend leaves out of account the new supervision arrangements in the Bill. At the moment, paradoxically, for the reasons given by my hon. Friend, those who are the greatest risk to the public get the least supervision when they leave prison. The proposals will significantly increase the amount of supervision that the most dangerous prisoners receive. The present parole and automatic early release arrangements—

Mr. Straw: I assume that the Home Secretary is referring to those who are given indeterminate sentences. Will he confirm that for the majority of prisoners, who are not affected by the provisions for repeat burglary or drug dealing, under his proposals there will be less time under supervision than under the current arrangements?

Mr. Howard: One cannot make an overall comparison because the time under supervision will vary, to some extent, from case to case. However, my point to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mr. Waller) is valid, in that because of the very factors referred to by my hon. Friend, the most dangerous offenders—those who pose the greatest risk to the public—get the shortest period of supervision when they leave prison under the present arrangements. We shall provide alternative supervision arrangements, as I am about to explain, which will, in most cases, increase the amount of supervision that serious and dangerous criminals receive.

Under the Bill, on release from prison, all prisoners sentenced to 12 months or more, including those who serve their full term, will be subject to a period of post-release supervision equivalent to 15 per cent. of their sentence, and not fewer than three months. The more serious the offence and the longer the prison sentence, the longer the period of supervision. If the offender breaches the conditions of supervision or reoffends, he or she will be liable to a further term of imprisonment.

In the case of sex offenders, the period of post-release supervision will be extended unless the court considers that the exceptional circumstances of the case do not warrant it. Under the Bill, anyone released from prison after serving a sentence for a sexual offence, whatever the length of that sentence, will be subject to a supervision period of 12 months or 50 per cent. of the sentence, whichever is the greater, unless there are exceptional circumstances. The courts may direct a longer period of supervision, up to a maximum of 10 years, if they consider that that is necessary to prevent further offending by the offender and to secure his or her rehabilitation.

Conditions of supervision may include a requirement not to communicate with the victim, not to reside at a particular address, not to contact a named individual and not to work with children. Offenders who breach their conditions of supervision will be liable to a further period of imprisonment up to the outstanding period of supervision.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): How does the Home Secretary reconcile what he has just said—that in most cases the Bill will provide more rather than less supervision—with his claim that it will be cost neutral for the probation service?

Mr. Howard: We have to take into account the overall provision. The Bill would place some extra burdens on the probation service, but it would remove others. I said, not that the Bill would provide longer supervision, but that there would be longer periods of supervision for the most dangerous offenders who pose the greatest risk to the public. The most important factor is the protection of the public.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Will the Home Secretary confirm in a straightforward answer that, if the Bill becomes law, most prisoners serving discretionary sentences—not sex offenders—such as those serving a three-year sentence imposed now, will serve less time in prison if they behave themselves there as a result of the combined effects of clauses 9 and 21, and that they will receive less supervision than before? If the right hon. and learned Gentleman has read his Bill and taken legal advice on its meaning, he can reach no other conclusion.

Mr. Howard: That does not necessarily follow, but no doubt it will be examined carefully in Committee when we consider the precise terms of clause 21.

The risk presented by sex offenders varies considerably, but it is clear that, in many cases, sex offending escalates to more serious offences and, once a pattern of sex offending is established, the risk of

reoffending persists over many years. The public deserve protection from such offenders. Long periods of post-release supervision can help to provide that protection, as well as the opportunity for offenders to deal with their offending behaviour through participation in treatment programmes.

The proposal for extended periods of supervision of sex offenders was set out in the consultation paper "Sentencing and Supervision of Sex Offenders", which I published earlier this year. It received overwhelming support, and the Bill will give effect to it.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Let me return to the point that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson). If it is true that the Bill will result in less supervision, surely the public should know that. Why did the Home Secretary say that it was a matter for hon. Members to debate in Committee? We should know now whether that is the case. Will he tell us what the position is? Will the Bill lead to a reduction in sentences and, in certain cases, a reduction of supervision? Will the Home Secretary answer yes or no?

Mr. Howard: I thought that I had made the position perfectly clear. The Bill will lead to a reduction of supervision in some cases, particularly for offenders who pose least risk to the public. The paradox of the present arrangement is that those who pose least risk to the public get parole and have a longer period of supervision than they will have under the Bill. However, those prisoners, by definition, pose least risk to the public. Those who pose most risk to the public will have a longer period of supervision and that is exactly as it should be.

Mr. Straw: May we clarify matters and confirm that among those who pose least risk to the public, according to the Home Secretary, are robbers, burglars and first-time rapists?

Mr. Howard: We are discussing only those who gain parole at the earliest possible opportunity under the present arrangements. The criteria for granting parole were accurately described by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley in his earlier intervention. Those who get parole at the earliest possible opportunity are those who, by definition, pose the least risk to the public. Under the Bill, they would get less supervision. The other side of the coin is that those who are most dangerous to the public and who pose the greatest risk would get longer periods of supervision under the Bill. That is what any rational person—and Opposition Members do not appear to come into that category—would expect.

Sir Donald Thompson (Calder Valley): Are we not seeing what we have been seeing for the past 15 years? Despite Opposition Members' protestations that they want to be tougher and do more against criminals, once the legislation is in front of them, we get silly, clever, half-baked lawyers' points.

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If one asked any member of the public who ought to get the longer period of supervision on release from prison, those who are the greatest risk to the public or those who are the least risk, one would get the answer that those who are the greatest risk to the public ought to have the longer period of supervision. That is not what happens now, but it will as a result of the Bill.

Part II includes important new provisions concerning the crediting of remand time against sentence. Those provisions are intended to simplify the law—which again originates from the Criminal Justice Act 1967—which has proved very difficult for the courts to interpret and the Prison Service to apply.

In August, the divisional court upheld my view that periods spent on remand by those serving consecutive sentences should count once, and once only, towards the prisoner's sentence. It has also considered the issue of remand time in relation to concurrent sentences on four separate occasions over the past 15 years. The court has upheld the practice of the Prison Service on each occasion, but the complexities of the 1967 Act continue to give rise to difficulties, and another case is currently before the court.

Clause 7 is intended to put matters beyond doubt. It gives effect to proposals that were set out in the White Paper "Protecting the Public", which was published in March. Under clause 7, the court will specify when passing sentence exactly how much remand time should count towards the sentence. For the first time, it will also be open to the court to decide not to count remand time in full—for example, to take account of time wasting by the defendant. The Bill includes power for rules to be made setting out the principles to be followed by the court in relation to consecutive or concurrent terms of imprisonment. Those provisions are designed to simplify that difficult and complex area of law.

Part II also makes provision in relation to the release of certain life sentence prisoners. It introduces new arrangements for the release of offenders serving a sentence of detention during Her Majesty's pleasure, which is the mandatory sentence for young people who are convicted of murder. The Bill provides for the Parole Board, rather than the holder of my office, to determine when those detained during Her Majesty's pleasure are safe to be released once the tariff has been served. The power to set the tariff in such cases remains with the Secretary of State. The provision does not affect the arrangements for adults convicted of murder.

The provisions in part III are designed in particular to increase the range of sentencing options that are open to the courts in respect of certain kinds of offender: fine defaulters, persistent petty offenders and mentally disordered offenders. For the first time, the courts will be able to impose a community service order or a curfew order, enforced by electronic monitoring, as a penalty for fine default. The number of people in prison for not paying a fine has fallen by around 60 per cent. in the past year, but more can be done. In our view, the courts should have available to them a range of options for enforcement of fines and punishment for default, and the Bill provides for that.

In future, the courts will have to consider the use of a community service order or a curfew order before imprisoning for fine default. The sanction of imprisonment will be retained for those who are neither prepared to pay their fine nor comply with a community penalty. The new powers will ensure that a custodial sentence is not imposed where other sanctions can be

[Mr. Howard]

used. The powers will be introduced by way of pilot projects in the first instance, with a view to full implementation as soon as it is practicable to do so.

The Bill allows the courts to use community service orders and curfew orders for persistent petty offenders. Under present legislation, such offenders will usually be fined. The courts have few other options available to them. If, however, an offender already has outstanding fines, a further fine may serve little purpose. The courts need a wider range of powers to deal with such offenders. The Bill provides for that.

The Bill also provides for the abolition of the requirement for an offender to consent to the imposition of those community sentences that require it. That will end the current impression that offenders can dictate to the courts what kind of punishment they receive, simply by withholding the necessary consent to certain community sentences.

Part III of the Bill also makes new provisions in respect of mentally disordered offenders. In particular, it gives the courts the power when passing a prison sentence to attach a direction of immediate admission to hospital. Existing arrangements for the sentencing of disordered offenders require the courts to choose between punishment and treatment. The court may impose a hospital order instead of a prison sentence. In the great majority of cases, that is appropriate, but it means that the offender will be discharged as soon as his or her treatment is completed, regardless of how serious the offence was.

If a prison sentence is imposed instead, the court has no guarantee that the offender will receive treatment. The new hospital direction provides that guarantee. It will help the courts to deal more effectively with some of the most difficult cases that come before them. Those may be cases in which the court cannot be sure that treating the disorder will reduce the danger of reoffending, either because the disorder may prove to be untreatable or because the offending may not have been caused by the disorder. Such cases are small in number, but they are among the most difficult before the courts. Initially, the hospital direction will be made available for offenders suffering from psychopathic disorders, but our aim is to make it available, by way of an order-making power in the Bill, for all mentally disordered offenders.

Finally, the Bill provides for new arrangements for the transfer of prisoners and for supervision within the United Kingdom and the islands and for the repatriation of prisoners to the UK. Such arrangements already exist, but the provisions in the Bill provide for a more effective and clearer system.

Those are the main provisions of the Bill before the House today, but I should inform hon. Members that I propose to table amendments in Committee to give effect to three other important proposals which are, like those I have already described, intended to strengthen and improve the criminal justice system.

First, I propose to extend the range of penalties available to the courts, by allowing them to make wider use of disqualification from driving as a punishment for offending or fine default. At present, that penalty is limited to driving offences or serious offences that involve the use of a car. In future, the penalty will be available for any offence.

Secondly, I propose to make curfew orders, with electronic monitoring, available for juveniles below the age of 16. At present, the courts may only impose a requirement for young persons in that age group to stay indoors during the hours of darkness, and the courts may do so only as a requirement of a supervision order and without electronic monitoring. The new powers will allow the courts to impose a curfew at any time of day, backed by electronic monitoring. Those powers clearly have a role in keeping young offenders off the streets or away from particular places and out of trouble. I want the Bill to provide for that.

Thirdly, I propose to remove the restriction on the naming of juvenile offenders. Those who offend, whatever their age, should be made to face up to the consequences of their behaviour. Local communities have a right to know who the offenders are. In future there will be no automatic restriction on the naming of any juvenile offender. The youth court, as well as the Crown court, will be able to decide whether the name of the young person should be made public.

The proposals in the Bill are clear and consistent. They are the proposals that I first set out in detail seven months ago. The president of the Police Superintendents Association said that it is in "the national interest" that the proposals become law as quickly as possible, yet the Opposition have steadfastly refused to support them. They started by trying to ridicule the proposals. The hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) called them a farce and the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said that they were daft.

So farcical and daft were the proposals that they produced a frenzy of subterranean activity from the Opposition. That culminated in the publication of Labour's alternative proposals, five months later, which gave us a clear idea of what a Labour crime Bill would look like. The truth is that it would not be worthy of the name. There would be no honesty in sentencing; automatic early release from prison would continue; there would be no stiff minimum sentences set down by Parliament for professional house burglars; and there would be no minimum sentences for dealers in hard drugs. The Opposition like to pretend that they support automatic life sentences for second-time serious offenders, but the truth is that there are fundamental differences between our proposals and theirs. Labour's proposals leave out repeat violent offenders altogether. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) has said:

> "Offences of a sexual nature should be distinguished from other violent offences".

As far as Labour is concerned, the public do not need greater protection from repeat armed robbers and the like.

Let me give one example of why we need automatic life sentences for those convicted of a second sexual or violent offence. In 1978, in the central criminal court, a man was convicted of robbery using an imitation firearm. He had stolen £3,000 from two elderly ladies and was given an eight-year sentence, which was lowered to four years on appeal. Within a few weeks of his release in 1979, he committed another armed robbery. His accomplice murdered an elderly lady, while he pistol-whipped her husband. He received six years for manslaughter, armed robbery, wounding with intent and aggravated burglary. On his release in 1983, he committed a spate of armed robberies. Convicted on eight counts, he

received a 12-year sentence. Given home leave at the end of his sentence, he failed to return to prison and committed a series of armed robberies. In 1992, at St. Albans Crown court, he received 14 years for his crimes.

Under our proposals, that man would have got life automatically after his second conviction. He could have been kept in prison, his dreadful crimes could have been prevented and the public could have been protected. Under Labour, there would be no such protection, no extra safeguards against violent criminals and no measures to deal with a man convicted of armed robbery, who, on his release from prison at the end of his sentence, went on to rape. That is the reality behind Labour's slogans on crime.

Opposition Members are fond of saying that Labour has become the party of law and order. However, they fail to understand that one becomes the party of law and order not simply by calling one's party that, but by supporting tough law and order measures. That means voting for those measures in the Lobby, in Committee, on Report and on Third Reading, both here and in another place. That is something that the Labour party—new or old—has consistently failed to do.

When he was shadow Home Secretary, the Leader of the Opposition dismissed my 27-point plan as a "gimmick", and refused to support the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. He voted against reforming the right to silence, claiming that

> "Any reasonable person could see that that approach is open to potential injustice."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 1994; Vol. 235, c. 43.]

Recent Home Office research has shown that the number of suspects refusing to answer police questions has almost halved since we reformed the right to silence. Under Labour, that change would be reversed and hardened criminals would be able once again to stay silent, secure in the knowledge that their silence would remain a secret.

Mr. Straw *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Perhaps he will tell us when Labour changed its mind. When did he decide to abandon the policy of the Leader of the Opposition?

The provisions in the Bill, and those that I intend to add to it, are important and radical measures. They will improve the protection of the public, help to deter offenders, give the courts a wider range of powers to deal effectively with offenders who come before them and bring greater honesty and transparency to the sentencing process. They have been widely welcomed by the public and have the support of the police, and they deserve support from members of all parties in the House. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.8 pm

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn): As the whole country now knows, the Government's record on law and order is the worst of any Government since the war and is worse than that of any other major western country. Since 1979, recorded crime has doubled, and the number of people convicted or cautioned for those crimes has fallen. Under the Conservatives, there is much more crime and many more criminals getting away with it.

The Secretary of State often claims that his overriding concern is the safety of the public, so why do people today feel so unsafe? Why—as last Friday's poll in *The Times* showed—have law and order and crime and punishment now become the issues of greatest concern to the British public—more even than the state of the economy or the crisis in the health service? The reason for that record level of public anxiety about crime is that the British people have lost confidence in the Government's ability to fulfil the first duty of any Government: to protect the safety and security of their citizens.

A significant part of the Bill is concerned with crimes of a serious sexual or violent nature, with drug dealers and with the scourge of domestic burglary. Let us examine what has happened to those crimes and to the victims of those crimes over the past 17 years.

In each case, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of crimes committed, and an absolute fall in the number of people convicted of them. The number of rapes recorded has increased fourfold since 1980, yet the proportion resulting in a conviction has fallen so much that a rapist now has four times the chance of getting away with his crime that he had when Labour left office.

Crimes of violence have shot up. For every one street robbery—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that Conservative Members think that that is funny. I am telling the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold) that the proportion of people convicted of rape has dropped from 37 per cent. of the number of recorded rapes in 1980 to 9 per cent. in 1994, and he thinks that it is funny.

For every street robbery that took place when Labour was in office, five take place today. The Home Secretary likes to boast about how everything has improved in the past few years, but he should remember that, in the five short years between 1989 and 1994, the number of violent crimes recorded went up by a quarter, but the number of convictions for those crimes fell by a third.

The police, Customs and Excise and the other agencies involved continue to do an excellent job in drug seizures and the arrest of drug traffickers, but the prospects must appear extremely depressing to them. The number of those known to be addicted to hard drugs has more than trebled since 1987.

Even if no violence is perpetrated during the course of a burglary, victims and their families feel violated; the anxiety and strain can last for years. Two or three decades ago, burglary was something that generally happened to someone else; today, it is a commonplace experience, and the poorest people are most likely to be the victims. The number of recorded burglaries has increased by 121 per cent., while those who commit the crime have three times the chance of getting away with it under the Tories than they did under Labour.

Mr. Howard: If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the proportion of criminals escaping conviction, why do he and his party consistently vote against every measure, such as the reform of the right to silence, that we introduce to increase the proportion of criminals being convicted?

Mr. Straw: I shall come in a moment to the Home Secretary's record of voting for measures that he is now opposed to, but what he says is in any case quite untrue—one can never take his statements seriously.

[Mr. Straw]

Since 1979, there have been 33 criminal justice measures—we are now dealing with the 34th—and we supported 23; we voted on reasoned amendments on Second Reading for four; and we opposed five. On the right to silence, the Home Secretary knows that the argument was not about whether the so-called right to silence was applied, but about how that was to be done, and that we resolutely supported the royal commission's recommendations.

Behind the Government's appalling record, in which five robberies take place today for every one under Labour, there is a human story: the story of people who, in the past 17 years, have had to change the way they live in order to cope with the epidemic of crime and disorder. Primary age children are no longer left out of sight, and rarely go to school by themselves. The elderly refuse to answer their door after 7 or so in the evening. Nearly half our women are frightened even to walk down the street in their neighbourhood at night.

There can be no better evidence of the failure of the Government's policies on crime than the need for yet another criminal justice Bill. If the Conservative party had met its promise on law and order, Bills such as this would not be necessary. After all, this is the 34th criminal justice Bill since 1979, each one made with the promise that it was a lasting solution to the problem of lawlessness and would turn the tide on crime. Each Bill came with a boast by its sponsoring Minister that he had found the final answer to crime.

As I pointed out in the debate on the Loyal Address last Monday, no coherent strategy has underpinned any of those Bills. No sooner is one put into effect than we have another to overturn it. Six months ago, the Home Secretary told readers of *The Sun* that the present sentencing system was a "farce" and a "mockery". He was right about that, but he foolishly failed to acknowledge that he is responsible for the farce and mockery. He agreed it in Cabinet and voted for it in the House; it is only five years old.

All the propositions to which the Home Secretary now takes such exception are in the 1991 Act: the current system of parole; almost total judicial discretion; no fixed minimum sentences. They are all contained in the 1991 Act, for which the Secretary of State voted. As a leading Member of the Cabinet, then as now, he voted for that Act on the basis that it would last.

The then Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Mr. Patten), did not understate the Government's view of the historic importance of the 1991 measure. He said:

"The Bill marks a watershed in the future of the criminal justice system by this radical and reforming government of the past 11 years and it will see us through into the 1990s and the next century".

The next century? A significant part of the 1991 Act did not even last two years. Now a large part of what was left of the 1991 Act is to be ditched by the Home Secretary, with no apology and no shame. Is it any wonder that the public no longer trust a Government whose senior members can no longer trust themselves to make good judgments and stick to them?

Mr. Marlow: The hon. Gentleman said how concerned he is—and I am sure he is, as we all are—about women who feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods and about elderly people who are frightened of opening their doors at night. They are fearful because of a lot of mindless thugs, hooligans, bullies and vandals who set upon them. There is no deterrent for such behaviour at present. I will be seeking to table an amendment to discuss and perhaps bring forward corporal punishment. Why does he oppose that?

Mr. Straw: Because it will not work. Everyone with any sense, including the Secretary of State, knows it cannot possibly work. The hon. Gentleman should examine the history of flogging and birching. It was abandoned in 1948 by all-party agreement because it palpably did not work. If he wants to do something about the epidemic of youth crime, he should support our proposals for a root-and-branch reform of the youth justice system.

I was reminding the House of what the right hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon said about the importance of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. However, we should not have been surprised by the inadequacy of the Home Secretary's political skills and administrative judgment. As Minister for Local Government, he said that the Bill that introduced the poll tax

"was as important in its own way as the great Reform Bills of the nineteenth century".

[*Laughter.*] I am glad that he can see the joke. Why trust him now when he came out with that rubbish then?

I was indebted to the 1991 edition of the Conservative campaign guide for the ringing words of the right hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon about the historic importance of the 1991 Act in taking us through into the next century. Other gems are to be found in that great document.

The right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) will remember page 498, as he authorised its publication. In 1991, Labour was concerned, as it still is, about the lack of consistency and progression in sentencing. We proposed machinery to deal with that, but we were voted down by the Government. Why? According to the guide, because Labour's proposals would have denied the courts

"the discretion they need if they are to deal adequately with the wide variety of criminal acts that come before them".

The guide stated that that

"illustrates Labour's traditional mistrust of the judiciary and provides Labour with an institution to shackle them to a rigid penal system".

Let me examine in detail the "farce and mockery" of the present sentencing system and the Secretary of State's proposals for putting right the gross errors of the present system, for which he was responsible.

First is consistency. We are fortunate that our lay magistrates and professional judges are people of the highest integrity and dedication. They seek to apply the classical principles of sentencing set out by Lord Justice Lawton in the leading authority of Regina v. Sargeant. He said that those principles were of

"retribution, deterrence, prevention and rehabilitation"

and that, while

"the courts do not have to reflect public opinion, on the other hand, courts must not disregard it".

Despite that, the public believe that too often courts impose sentences that fail to match the gravity of the crimes committed.

There is an explanation for the widening gap between the reality of sentencing and the public perception of it; it is to be found in the huge variations in sentencing practice between different courts for similar offences. That lack of consistency is reinforced by the absence of any clear system to ensure consistency between courts and progression as offenders reoffend, or to ensure that magistrates and judges are kept properly informed of the outcome of the sentences they impose.

Magistrates courts deal with 19 out of 20 criminal cases, and about one in 13 of those convicted of an indictable offence in such a court receive immediate prison sentences, but the chance of such a sentence being issued in any one court varies by a factor of ten. At one end is Staffordshire Moorlands court, where one in six defendants before the court for an indictable offence end up with a prison sentence—at the other is Maidenhead in Berkshire, where the chance is not one in six but one in 66.

When such figures were put to the Secretary of State during an interview in "Constabulary" magazine, he justified such variations by defending the judicial discretion of local magistrates, saying:

"Our justice is local justice and there will be variation from place to place".

I want justice to be locally tailored, which is one reason why we are convinced of the need to have locally accountable Crown prosecutors in place of the present, monolithic nationalised system; but those huge variations in local sentencing practice are based not on any explicit local sentencing policies but on the chance of who sits on the bench, and on local habit.

Although the variation in sentencing practice in otherwise similar Crown courts is narrower than that for magistrates courts, it is none the less marked. Among level 3 courts, for example, which deal with bulk crimes like burglary, a defendant at Hereford Crown court has almost twice as much chance of receiving an immediate prison sentence as a defendant at Woolwich Crown court.

One of the main criticisms made of the 1991 legislation by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) was that it failed to deal with unacceptable discrepancies in sentencing.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Will the hon. Gentleman accept from me, as the honorary recorder of the city of Hereford, that the justice meted out there is of the highest quality?

Mr. Straw: I am glad to know that. Defying the Liberals' reputation for softness on crime—I hope that this comes as no embarrassment to the hon. and learned Gentleman—he is party to a court that has the toughest record of any level 3 Crown court in the country. Sixty seven per cent. of the defendants receive an immediate custodial sentence, compared with 38 per cent. of those who appear at Woolwich Crown court. Is the hon. and learned Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) a recorder in Woolwich?

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): In London.

Mr. Straw: He may well go to Woolwich too, as I shall explain—the reputation of the hon. and learned Gentleman goes before him.

One of the main criticisms of the 1991 Bill levelled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook was that it failed to deal with "unacceptable discrepancies" in sentencing. Our proposal for machinery to achieve consistency was rejected out of hand by the Government on the now laughable grounds that it would produce

"the dead hand of conformity"—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 7 February 1991; c. 721.]

and

"end up like the experience in the United States."—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1990; Vol. 181, c. 232.]

The Government have failed, however, to acknowledge the scale of the problem of inconsistency in sentencing, which has done so much to damage public confidence in the sentencing process.

I do not believe that the Court of Appeal is beyond criticism, either. It could and should have been far more pro-active in issuing detailed sentencing guidance, as the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), when he was Home Secretary, expected it to do in his White Paper. The court has done so for some offences, notably rape, but not for many others. Professor Andrew Ashworth of King's College London has commented that most of the Court of Appeal's

"decisions on domestic burglary are a veritable wasteland in terms of guidance."

The lack of consistency between courts is also compounded by a lack of progression or severity in sentencing as persistent offenders come before the courts again and again. Indeed, nowhere has there been a greater switchback in policy than here. The 1991 Act actually prohibited courts from taking account of previous convictions. The then Home Secretary, David Waddington, now Lord Waddington, justified that prohibition on these bizarre grounds:

"If an offender has already been punished for a previous offence it seems unfair and unjust to punish him twice over by increasing the penalty for a subsequent offence".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1990; Vol. 181, c. 141.]

In February this year, the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), gave me parliamentary answers to questions relating to custodial sentences which I found astonishing—so much so that I had the statisticians of the House of Commons Library check them for special factors, although they could find none.

The figures showed that, for domestic burglars given custodial sentences, the term of imprisonment stayed the same at 15 months whether for a first, second or third conviction; whereas for class A drug dealers, the average sentence length for those sentenced to imprisonment on a third conviction was, at 30 months, two months less than for those sentenced on a first conviction.

Remarkably, the Bill does almost nothing to address the problems of consistency, and will impact on progression only on a third conviction of domestic burglars and drugs dealers. In practice, the proposals will have little if any impact on consistency between courts in respect of those subject to automatic life sentences, because the minimum period for retribution and deterrence—the tariff—will continue to be set by the trial judge.

The need for consistency and progression applies to all offences and at every point in the offender's criminal career. Our answer to those problems is that the Court of

[Mr. Straw]

Appeal should be given a clear statutory duty to lay down detailed sentencing guidelines for all the main categories of offence, and to prescribe those without having to await the chance of a specific appeal.

The Secretary of State's traditional reaction to any proposal that is not his own is to dismiss it—even if, later, he has to adopt it. Thus has he scoffed and sneered at our proposals for sentencing guidelines. In doing so, he is scoffing and sneering not only at us, but at his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. In the White Paper entitled "Crime and Punishment", we find that the Scottish Secretary has signally failed to adopt the Home Secretary's proposals on repeat burglars, and has instead adopted our proposals. In paragraph 8.19 of that White Paper, sentencing guidelines are given pride of place. In our view, those are needed south of the border as well, and we shall pursue that matter in Committee.

As I have made clear repeatedly, there is no issue between us and the Government on the Bill's overall aims of achieving clarity in sentencing, securing better public safety and ensuring tough sentences for repeat burglars and drug dealers. Other proposals in the Bill also have our support, including alternatives to prison for fine defaulters, changes in arrangements for juveniles detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, and calculations of remand time. We also want to see improvements in the provision for mentally ill offenders. For those reasons, we shall, as I made clear last week, ensure that the Bill gets its Second Reading. We shall aim to improve it in Committee.

There is an issue between us, however, over the methods which the Secretary of State has chosen to adopt. First, let us consider so-called honesty in sentencing. Lord Taylor, when he was Lord Chief Justice, referred to the current sentencing system as a "charade". Last week, I said that the system amounted to a "benign deception" of the public.

It is the victims or their relatives who suffer most. An offender who is given a sentence of four years will typically serve only two years. With time spent on remand, he may be out after a year. Our answer to this is simple: tell the truth about each sentence. A four-year sentence would properly be called a two-to-four-year sentence. In addition, in every case, the trial judge should state the earliest release date, to take account of time spent on remand. That calculation of the earliest release date will be made much easier by the sensible clarification of the law in clause 7. But, sadly, as we heard during the speech of the Secretary of State, his approach is far from simple.

Mr. Alex Carlile: He has not read the Bill.

Mr. Straw: That is absolutely true, and as he tread water while sinking fast it became patently obvious that he had not read key sections of the Bill.

The White Paper published by the Secretary of State stated that the sentence passed by the court

"should mean what it says".

To achieve that, however, the right hon. and learned Gentleman proposes to throw out the baby out with the bathwater, and then turn the bath upside down.

Parole for prisoners serving fixed terms will be abolished. Good behaviour will earn six days a month off, up to 20 per cent. of the sentence, while those sentenced to 12 months or more will be supervised by the probation service for a period equivalent to 15 per cent. of their original sentence. That is hardly simple.

I have yet to hear any convincing answer from the Secretary of State to the damning criticism of the method he proposes from his own former Minister with responsibility for prisons, the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd). He said last week that those proposals

"will not achieve greater honesty in sentencing, and ending parole will leave the public less well protected."—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 365.]

Let us take one example of a prisoner sentenced to three years. Assuming good behaviour, under the current system he would be released after 18 months; supervised for a further nine months; and at risk of serving the remaining nine months of his sentence if he then reoffended. The Secretary of State is emphatic, and so are the terms of clause 21, that none of the changes should affect the actual length of time that someone serves in prison. Under his arrangement, however, someone currently sentenced to three years, who would get out after 18 months with good behaviour, would have to be sentenced to 22½ months in order to earn his 20 per cent. discount, which meant he also got out after 18 months. My hon. Friends can see that the system is extremely simple, as the Secretary of State has said.

Under the Secretary of State's proposal, the prisoner will only be under supervision, and at risk of return to prison, for a further three and a half months. Under the current system, that prisoner, once he had got out after 18 months, would be subject to supervision for nine months and would be at risk of going back into prison for a further nine months. Under the Secretary of State's proposed system, a prisoner would come out after 18 months and be subject only for a further three and a half months to supervision and remain at risk of being returned to prison. Where is the sense in that?

As the Secretary of State trod water and tried to read the Bill as he spoke on it, he tried to argue that reduction in supervision would affect only those who pose the least danger to the public. I note that the right hon. and learned Gentleman nods his head, so at last we have a clear admission about who it is he believes do not pose a danger to the public.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Muggers.

Mr. Straw: Yes—the people who are committing knife crimes on the underground, about which the *Evening Standard* has written today. That list will also include robbers and domestic burglars. According to the Secretary of State, all those people pose the least danger to the public. *[Interruption.]* That is what he has said, and those are the people who will be affected by the provisions. Those people pose a danger to the public, and they deserve the supervision provided by the current system.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman is being preposterous. First, all those in the categories that he has identified would, if they are repeat offenders, be covered by the minimum mandatory sentence which we propose and which he opposes.

Mr. Carlile: No.

Mr. Howard: Yes, all of them if they are repeat offenders.

As for supervision, I repeat what I said earlier: anyone with a grain of common sense would want to secure that those who pose the greatest risk to the public, and who do not get parole under the present system, would be subject to the maximum supervision, while those who pose the least risk to the public should be subject to less supervision. That is exactly what the Bill provides.

Mr. Straw: I notice that, through all that bluster, although the Secretary of State described my comments as preposterous, he did not describe them as wrong, because they are right.

The Secretary of State knows that the system that he is about to establish will produce circumstances that put the public at greater risk from burglars and robbers. It is no good his talking about the arrangements for third-time repeat burglars and robbers: we know how those will impact on the situation. With regard to first-time or second-time burglars and robbers, his proposals for supervision and for arrangements for putting those people at risk of imprisonment if they reoffend are much more lenient than the current arrangements.

Mr. Carlile: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what the Home Secretary has just said—to the effect that, under the Bill, repeat muggers would have to serve mandatory sentences—is just not right? The only robbers who are covered by repeat sentences under the Bill are those who, at some time during the commission of the offence, had in their possession a firearm or imitation firearm. That does not deal with knifepoint robberies or handbag snatching from old ladies. Can the hon. Gentleman think why the Home Secretary has seen fit to tell the House a version of the Bill that is not in the Bill?

Mr. Straw: I know that the hon. and learned Gentleman has a high regard for my powers of perception, but the one thing that I cannot do, for which I apologise, is to explain to him why the Home Secretary says something that is patently untrue.

The *Evening Standard* today writes about the epidemic of knifepoint robberies on trains. Such offenders would have less supervision and an increased chance of reoffending without any risk of being returned to prison than under the current arrangements.

Mr. Howard: If the people referred to on the front page of the *Evening Standard* today committed a serious wounding with their knife—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]—they would clearly be covered by my proposals for an automatic life sentence for those who commit serious violent offences. They would not be covered by any Opposition proposal, because the Opposition have no such proposal. One must consider the detail of the offences that people in those categories have committed.

Mr. Straw: The Secretary of State is right about one thing: we must certainly consider the detail. I would advise him to study the detail a little more before he stands up and makes a fool of himself again.

Mr. Robert Jackson: Before the debate turns into a Dutch auction, may I say that I find it extraordinary that there are more people serving life imprisonment in Britain than in the rest of the European Union? If the hon. Gentleman were Home Secretary, would that number rise or fall?

Mr. Straw: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman. I shall do my best to give a serious answer to a serious question: there is no way that a Secretary of State could answer that question, because the number of people convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment is a function, first, of the police in catching and apprehending criminals, and, secondly of the courts. Where the courts pass such sentences, the House must ensure that adequate prison accommodation is available.

A remarkable feature of the proposals from the Secretary of State is that they are so complicated that, even if they are passed, they cannot come into force for three years, whereas under our proposals, honesty in sentencing could be achieved as soon as the Bill becomes law, without the safety of the public being compromised.

As I also made clear last week, the public must be protected from people such as repeat rapists. It is unsafe to set a release date for such people at the time they are sentenced. Instead, it is entirely correct that a judgment about their release date should be made by the Parole Board after the tariff has been served, and then only when the board judges that release is likely to be safe. This proposal has our positive support, for those convicted of rape or of serious sexual offences, or cases involving homicide attempts or solicitation.

I am concerned that the list of offences in clause 2(5) may be too broad—in particular, with the inclusion of section 18 wounding. The law relating to section 18 is wholly unsatisfactory, as the Law Commission has repeatedly pointed out; and the range of conduct covered by this section is extremely wide.

The Secretary of State got terribly excited about this reservation of mine last week, as if the fact that I might have a genuine doubt about one of his propositions was proof at last that I was soft on crime. Before he chides me now for daring to have a doubt, I could equally well ask him why he chose to draw the line in his way—why he chose, for instance, not to include robbery with a knife in the list of "trigger" offences. The line must certainly be drawn somewhere, but I see no reason why we should not have a serious adult discussion about where to draw it.

Before the right hon. Member for Fareham leaves the Chamber, I should like to point out that, in last week's debate, he expressed support for a greater use of determinate sentences, but added that they were being called life sentences to sound fiercer—although the greater honesty that is much spoken of these days would demand another name. I agree that there would be nothing fixed about these sentences; nor, save in a tiny minority of cases, will the prisoner be in gaol for the whole of his natural life. Would it not therefore be more honest to tell the public the truth: that these are indeterminate, reviewable sentences, with a fixed minimum set by the trial judge, not Parliament, and a reviewable release date thereafter to be determined by the Parole Board?

[Mr. Straw]

Let me now deal with the proposals in respect of domestic burglars and drug dealers. In 1991, the hon. and learned Member for Burton, Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee, gave the House the benefit of his considered view on automatic fixed minimum sentences:

"I do not like minimum sentences . . . Speeches calling for minimum sentences have always been resisted over the years. Governments have resisted the idea of going down this slippery slope because if one case is allowed as an exception it becomes difficult to refuse other cases".—[*Official Report*, 20 February 1991: Vol. 186, c. 311-12.]

Now the Secretary of State and the Government are sliding down the slippery slope at breakneck speed. Last week, the Secretary of State told the House that it was completely untrue that his original sentencing proposals had been ditched. As ever, he protests too much. I have with me two documents—one, the Crime (Sentences) Bill; the other, the speech that the Secretary of State made to the Conservative party conference in October 1995.

In his 1995 speech, the right hon. and learned Gentleman's answer was simple: there would be stiff minimum sentences for burglars and drug dealers who offended again and again. There was not a word about exceptions; indeed, the word "exceptions" appeared nowhere in the speech. Even the background notes attached to the press copies of the speech were emphatic—offenders over 18 who had already been convicted of three such offences would face a stiff minimum sentence. There were no ifs or buts about it.

That was when the Secretary of State was at the top of the slippery slope. Then the Treasury, the judges and his more fair-minded colleagues started to push. The fact that completely fixed minimum sentences could lead to guilty criminals walking free from court started to dawn on him, so by April the Secretary of State had passed the sign on the slope marked "genuine, very special, occasional, quite unforeseeable circumstances".

Today, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is even further down the slope. All the qualifications have now gone. Under the Bill, the courts are to have wide discretion, related to the offender as well as to the offence, not to apply the fixed minimum if a court is of the opinion that there are exceptional circumstances in favour of not doing so. And there will be a 20 per cent. discount for a timely guilty plea. That is a world away from the Secretary of State's 1995 conference speech.

Mr. Donald Anderson: My hon. Friend will probably recall the 1990 White Paper which proceeded the 1991 Act, in which the Government said:

"The courts have shown great skill in the way they sentence exceptional cases".

Would my hon. Friend like to speculate on what has happened between then and now to explain why the Government have lost faith in the courts?

Mr. Straw: The Government have panicked about their appalling record on law and order, and are desperately trying to regain public support. But their every move loses them more public support.

Mr. Howard: As the hon. Gentleman is making entirely unfounded allegations about changes of position, may I ask him about his announcement a few moments ago that his indeterminate sentence would apply to offences of attempted murder? That is not to be found in any of his documents or previous statements, which have been confined to sexual offences. When did the hon. Gentleman decide to make this U-turn? Could he perhaps refer us to any of his earlier documents that included attempted murder?

Mr. Straw: I told the Secretary of State just now that he ought to apply himself to the detail before standing up again. I am afraid that he did not take my advice, and he is wrong again. I shall turn up the reference for him as soon as I sit down; I made exactly this point in the speech on the Loyal Address last month.

Listening to the breathless tones of the Secretary of State, one could be forgiven for thinking that all the measures in the Bill would start to operate as soon as they became law. But the Secretary of State did not bargain for other members of the Cabinet. If I may let my hon. Friends into a secret, the Home Secretary may not be popular with the public, but that is as nothing compared with the hostility that he now arouses among his Cabinet colleagues, who these days spend more time briefing against him than they do even against the Prime Minister. Most of all, he cannot convince his predecessor, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

So the proposal in the Bill designed for the biggest headline will not operate this year, next year or the year after. Indeed, no third-time persistent burglar could in practice receive a so-called fixed minimum sentence under the Bill until the dying days of the next Parliament, in the year 2001. No wonder, as the public learn the truth about this Secretary of State and his policies, that confidence in both of them is falling to record lows.

Although the Bill contains some improvements, it does not begin to measure up to the problems faced by the British public after 17 years of Conservative rule. There are no proposals to deal with the most glaring faults of the current system: the gap between crime and convictions, the desperately needed reform of the Crown Prosecution Service, the desperate need to put in place fundamental reforms of the youth justice system. The Secretary of State seems blind to the fact that almost all the 55,000 adult prisoners began their lives of crime as juveniles. Almost alone, he and the Minister of State defend the current system of youth justice, although, as our paper published in June shows, that so-called system is wasteful, ineffective and replete with delay.

There is nothing, moreover, in the legislative programme to harness local communities and their representatives to fight crime in partnership with the police, and there is no strategy to deal with the plague of disorder on our streets which so undermines people's quality of life. No wonder even those on the right hon. and learned Gentleman's side are deserting him. The right hon. and learned Member for Putney has accused him of losing the plot—of having been outflanked by Labour on law and order.

The Secretary of State has been abandoned by the public, by the professionals, by the victims—and now, even by the police. *The Times* of last Thursday carried the headline "Police jeer Minister as he defends Howard's law and order record". The article went on to say that the Minister of State was jeered and booed by police officers

as he tried to defend the law and order record of the Home Secretary. "Tried but failed"—a fitting epitaph for a failing Secretary of State.

4.48 pm

Mr. Douglas Hurd (Witney): I am amazed, although I have listened to him before, that the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) should think that that kind of speech will impress the House, his constituents or anyone else's. It was highly politicised. Our constituents do not think about crime, criminals or criminal justice in those terms, but he set those issues in a certain political context, from which lessons may be drawn.

The Bill, and measures contemplated on firearms, knives, stalking and perhaps other issues, are sometimes portrayed in the press as though they were stages in a desperate race for votes—the assumption being that the public believe that every potential weapon should be outlawed, that every offender should be sent to prison, that the only good sentence is a long sentence and that it is the job of a politician to come as close to that ideal as possible.

If that is the race set by the media and some sections of opinion, my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will not and cannot enter such a race in such crude terms. In any such race with the Labour party, he would suffer under an inescapable handicap. What he proposes must be workable. He is the Home Secretary; he carries the responsibility. The hon. Member for Blackburn is irresponsible.

That was not always so on the Labour Benches. The Labour party used to contain a tradition of liberal thinking on penal matters. In my time, I occasionally found that tradition extremely irritating. Earlier, when the Attorney-General answered questions, we were reminded of the Labour party's record in resisting the Conservative Government when we proposed the prosecution's right of appeal against lenient sentences. I believed that the Labour party was wrong about that and several other measures in my time, but we recognised that as part of a consistent tradition.

All that has been thrown to the winds by the hon. Member for Blackburn. His stand is now entirely wayward and unpredictable. He tries to pretend to the public that he is the terror of the criminal classes. I am waiting for him to tell us before too long that, after much thought and careful research, and probably nowadays a little prayer, he has found the answer to prison overcrowding—to hang offenders outside the prison gate. Nothing that the hon. Gentleman did would surprise us now.

Actually, common sense—and, I believe, the latest opinion research—suggests that there is not much profit for any of us in treating those matters as a race for votes. It must be right and in the public interest for the House and the other place to consider the proposals for a major criminal justice Bill on their merits.

The operation of our criminal justice system is not in the hands of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary alone or of the Government. Under our British system, it is in the hands of a variety of people—chief constables, the Crown Prosecution Service, judges, magistrates, prison governors, probation officers and others. Under the British system, none of them is a creature of the Government. The House has given them all separate responsibilities and a degree of autonomy. Criminal justice measures will not work unless those people work them. That means that they must be listened to—I emphasise that—although their voice is not decisive. In the end, Parliament must decide.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary, and any Home Secretary, has the right and duty to propose changes in the light of experience—experience of what reduces crime and what does not. It is nonsense to suppose that there is a final answer, and that an incoming Home Secretary, or any Home Secretary, will be for ever content with the criminal justice system. As long as there is crime, and as long as there is fear and anxiety about it, he must constantly seek ways to improve matters. What at one time appeared workable and adequate may no longer be so. What at one time appeared impracticable, not workable, may become so. It is wrong for the hon. Member for Blackburn to make purely partisan points as though, at any one time, anyone could claim that the position is final.

However, Parliament needs to consider carefully what will work in the long term. Let us face it; at present, the House is not very good at legislating, for various reasons. The quality of legislation coming out of Whitehall is low. The number of Government amendments—I am not talking about the policy changes that my right hon. and learned Friend mentioned, but the number of corrective Government amendments—is high. The House is not very good at improving legislation during its passage—anyone who has sat in a Standing Committee as a Minister or as a Back Bencher knows why.

The Bill should, therefore, be carefully examined, and my right hon. and learned Friend has undertaken that it will be. Two questions, both of which have been mentioned, arise for examination in Committee. I welcome the fact that there is phrasing about discretion given to the courts to set aside the new mandatory life and minimum sentences in genuinely exceptional cases. The hon. Member for Blackburn characteristically mocked that provision, but it is a sensible, commonsense provision. It does not negate the principles that my right hon. and learned Friend spoke about in the autumn of 1995. Nevertheless it is important to get the phrasing right and to ensure that it is, in the practitioners' view, an adequate way of remedying those proposals to prevent possible injustice. Proper phrasing of that provision, which occurs three times in the Bill, is important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mr. Waller) mentioned honesty of sentencing. There is strong pressure on judges to make sentences longer, and my right hon. and learned Friend would acknowledge that, today, he somewhat added to that pressure in some of the things that he said, yet under the heading of honesty in sentencing, so that his proposals work without placing an even greater burden on prisons, he is requiring the nominal sentences pronounced in court to be shortened so that they are closer to the realities that he is producing under the heading of honesty in sentencing.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend really believe that judges have got that message? It is only fair that it should be repeated; otherwise, that expectation will be proved fallible because of the strong pressure on the judiciary to introduce longer sentences.

The Prison Service is the hidden public service. I have worked closely with several Prime Ministers, but I have never known a Prime Minister to visit a prison. I may be

[Mr. Douglas Hurd]

wrong, but I do not believe that they have. The Princess Royal visits prisons; I do not know of another member of her family who does.

Yet any criminal justice policy rests on prison for serious offenders and, understandably, my right hon. and learned Friend, for reasons that he explained, proposes to place greater weight on them. Not many right hon. or hon. Members have taken a consistent interest in prisons. I am afraid that I have not. My right hon. Friends the Members for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) and for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) do, and the prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone (Miss Widdecombe), certainly does. She and others have been stalwart in their work to keep prisons secure and, as I once said, to ensure that they are decent but austere.

I am delighted that slopping out has ended. I am delighted with the progress that my right hon. and learned Friend reported this afternoon in keeping fine defaulters out of prison; he proposes to take that further. All that and much else is good news.

Much has been written about the purpose of prison; I cannot go into all that now. One purpose is to punish—Conservative Members have no problem about that. Another is to deter, although that depends, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) said, on the likelihood of detection. The higher the likelihood of detection, the greater the deterrence of a prison sentence. I shall dwell for a second on the third purpose of prison—to incapacitate the criminal.

If we lock up more burglars for longer, they are not capable of burgling while behind bars, so our streets and homes are safer while they are there. That is a significant short-term gain. When their sentences expire, more burglars will enter prison as they are sentenced, under the new arrangements, for longer, but more burglars will leave prison. There will be an increased flow of released offenders on to our streets. Will those people go straight, or return to crime?

In the medium term—not in the short term—whether prison works depends not only on the length of the sentence, but on what happens in the prison. Exaggerated hopes about that have been associated with Lord Longford, but there is a realistic ambition at the centre of any criminal justice proposals. The Director General of the Prison Service, Mr. Tilt, has made an admirable start with his responsibilities. He recently made a fine speech to the Howard League for Penal Reform. He strongly rejected as simply untrue the implication that

"all prisoners are nasty, evil, vengeful, unrepentant".

He went on to say that the

"purpose of the prison service should be to provide as much assistance as possible to get them settled back into the community, thereby providing additional protection for the public."

I underline the phrase

"additional protection for the public".

We are not talking about what might be called progressive waffle. The case for training, probation, work and education in prison is the case for the future protection of the public, and that case is directly relevant to the Bill.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hurd: No, I am coming to a close, and I know that many hon. Members want to speak.

If that case is neglected because of financial difficulties due to the needs of new prisons, and if the finances available are swallowed up, it is possible that our prisons will turn out more accomplished criminals, and that the purpose of the Bill will, in the medium and long term, be frustrated.

My right hon. and learned Friend has often emphasised the importance of the victim—as others did before him, but he has played a great part in that—and that is entirely right. I have never understood why the victim is thought to have benefited when we make a mess of treating the offender. The victim of the past offence does not benefit, and offences may be committed in the future as a result.

Earlier this year, there were alarming reports of cuts in the prison education programme. It was said that 60 per cent. of prison governors were planning cuts from 0 per cent. to 83 per cent. I have talked to my right hon. and learned Friend. He kindly saw me about this matter: he was fully seized of the problem and had some reassuring comments. Some figures were issued in September. Could we have tonight, or as soon as possible hereafter, up-to-date figures on the quantity and quality of education, the strength of probation staff in prisons and the time that prisoners spend locked in their cells?

My right hon. and learned Friend, on behalf of the Government, is entitled to introduce the proposals, because this is not a subject on which anyone can at any time rest content that everything has been done. Parliament is obliged to scrutinise the proposals with care, but please let us not forget the prison system on which they put greater weight. If the foundation of that part of the system were to collapse or disintegrate, that would disgrace our society, and we could add to the dangers facing the public while we claim to reduce them. One of the main aims of policy should be to support my right hon. and learned Friend, the Home Office and the Prison Service in maintaining and advancing prison standards.

5.2 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): We have just heard a reasoned and reasonable speech from the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd). I could not help musing that it was the voice of a different age of Toryism. It was the voice of someone who listens to the Howard League for Penal Reform, and who accepts that the classic aims of sentencing include something called rehabilitation.

I see no mention of rehabilitation in the Bill, which is only about banging up the criminal. That may make the pulse of Tory conference delegates run faster, but it provides no long-termism, in the sense implied by the right hon. Member for Witney. Potential victims may benefit if prisoners are helped to adjust to life outside; for example by examining their relationships with their families. We will fail in many cases, but at least the effort should be made.

My first reflection is that sentencing policy and prisons should be discussed in a reasoned and civilised way. The right hon. Gentleman made a magnificent speech in that respect, but that is a world away from the proposals of the Home Secretary, whom he assayed to support. The lesson for the House is that we should not seek to discuss sentencing policy as we approach a general election, because it has the tang of conference rhetoric about it, and because of the absolutes that result from that. That is one

of my fundamental objections to the Bill, and to the rhetoric being used in other areas, in which the right hon. Gentleman had a distinguished role and which we cannot discuss rationally at present.

The newspapers at the weekend referred to the Government's proposals and their consultative document on changes in industrial relations law. That area of policy should also be discussed coolly in terms of its likely effects, following consultation between the relevant social partners, as I believe they are now called, yet the Government are producing a consultation paper designed for the headlines as part of an election campaign. The consultation proposals have been repudiated by the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress. They were not designed to bring greater peace to industrial relations.

I fear that the consultation paper on changes in employment law, and these proposals following the White Paper published earlier this year, can be seen only in the context of a general election. That is perhaps the first lesson that we should learn. Please, no debates on sentencing during an election campaign.

There is much confusion about the changes that have occurred since the more civilised time when the right hon. Gentleman was in charge of home affairs and then of foreign affairs. We have had the 1990 White Paper and the Criminal Justice Act 1991. In the summer, I accused the Home Secretary of being the Pol Pot of British politics. He wants us to return to year zero. He wants us to ignore the fact that the Government have a record: they have massive form, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) showed so well in his speech.

Our constituents are worried about the doubling of crime since 1979. The Government want to forget about that. They want to forget the philosophy of the 1990 White Paper and the 1991 Act. We are having to restart. As my hon. Friend said, even though the Minister who introduced the 1990 White Paper talked about preparing the foundations for the next century, today the Home Secretary said that the Bill is the greatest "step change" in criminal sentencing policy this century, and that these are giant steps. I believe that this particular giant step will last an even shorter time than the giant step that was fanfared in the 1990 White Paper.

There is clearly a fundamental change. Rarely have a Home Secretary's proposals been so rubbished by a former Lord Chief Justice as they were on 23 May, in the other place, when Lord Taylor of Gosforth said:

"Turning to the White Paper, I venture to suggest that never in the history of our criminal law have such far-reaching proposals been put forward on the strength of such flimsy and dubious evidence. The shallow and untested figures in the White Paper do not describe fairly the problems the Government seek to address. Still less do they justify the radical solutions it proposes."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 May 1996; Vol. 572, c. 1025.]

The Home Secretary tried to find a platform of research on which to base his proposals. He used three research studies that he claimed supported his deterrence arguments. One was a study by the professor of jurisprudence at Sheffield university in a book written in 1980. That pillar was totally demolished when the learned professor said:

"What he"—

the Home Secretary—

"said was a complete misrepresentation of what I had written in my book. What he said I had actually supported I had not supported in any way in my book."

For their second pillar of research—and the second leg of the tripod upon which the Home Secretary relied—the Government turned to Ros Burnett, head of the probation studies unit at the centre for criminological research, Oxford university. That author also disputed the Home Secretary's use of her findings. The research was founded on a very flimsy basis. Therefore, one must ask: what has gone wrong with the practice over time?

The Government certainly have form. They should seek to avoid the arrogance of power and look at the mistakes that have been revealed by experience and practice since the 1991 Act and—as the right hon. Member for Witney said—learn from them. The Government should not try to follow irrelevant foreign precedents and they should not seek to devalue the judges and imply a lack of trust in our judiciary.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Did the hon. Gentleman notice that the Home Secretary referred three times to the views of senior police officers in his speech, but conspicuous by their absence were the views of the judiciary, the Law Society, the Bar Council and the probation service?

Mr. Anderson: It does no good wholly to reject the views of so many practitioners. They could explain the realities of sentencing policy better than those who make eloquent speeches to party conferences. I urge the Home Secretary to read and re-read—in a certain spirit of humility—the speech by the former Lord Chief Justice in the May debate in the other place. Even at this late stage, he must consider whether he might be mistaken.

My second reflection concerns the political background to the Bill. As I have said, it clearly results in short-termism regarding the human costs and ignores the rehabilitation aim. It also ignores the likely effect on the probation service and fails to examine the financial costs. For example, the Government assume in their costings that the deterrent effects of mandatory sentencing will

"reduce the requirement for prison places by 20 per cent."

That assumption is repudiated by Lord Windlesham, a former chairman of the Parole Board, who said that the bulk of crimes, even at that grave level, are committed on the spur of the moment,

"on impulse or under the influence of drugs or alcohol".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 May 1996; Vol. 572, c. 1029.]

The Government's estimates must be viewed with considerable caution.

My third reflection is that the proposals regarding mandatory minimum sentences are flawed. They are likely to cause considerable injustice in practice. I shall take as an example domestic burglaries and the proposal of a three-year minimum sentence, without early release or parole, for three domestic burglary offences. A further offence of domestic burglary would automatically incur at least another three-year sentence.

In my practice—I confess that it is a little while ago—I represented professional country house cat burglars and the village idiots, to whom things seem to happen, who break into people's houses. The notorious country house burglar may have at least a dozen offences which can be dealt with at one hearing and, for the purposes of the Bill, would represent one offence. The village idiot who puts his hand through an open window and steals a milk bottle

[Mr. Anderson]

also has one strike under the proposals. On a second occasion, he might blunder drunkenly into the private quarters of a public house and steal—

Mr. Walter Sweeney (Vale of Glamorgan): Would not that situation be covered by the provision that three strikes would apply at final sentencing unless there are exceptional circumstances?

Mr. Anderson: The hon. Gentleman, with his usual perspicacity, has anticipated my remarks about exceptional circumstances.

I shall continue my example of the village idiot to whom things happen. On a third occasion—perhaps five years later—he may again blunder into the private quarters of a public house and steal an ashtray. That is the third strike for the purposes of the Bill. After that period of juvenile turbulence, he may marry, settle down and have children. Some 20 years later, he may enter a public house, get drunk and commit the same sort of offence, at which time—whatever his circumstances, whatever time has elapsed, whatever his family or job circumstances and whatever the effect on him and his life—he must be imprisoned for three years.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) asked about exceptional circumstances. The judiciary faces a problem in that regard. If it acts restrictively in terms of exceptional circumstances, the proposal will have no real effect, but if it interprets exceptional circumstances in a liberal manner, the hon. Gentleman—and no doubt members of the public—will accuse it of driving a coach and horses through the intention of the legislation. The judiciary cannot win either way.

The Government have not helped the situation. In the White Paper, they talk about "genuine exceptional circumstances", but in the explanatory and financial memorandum in respect of clause 16 they refer to "wholly exceptional circumstances". What is the difference between "exceptional circumstances", "wholly exceptional circumstances", "genuine exceptional circumstances" and "occasional, quite unforeseeable circumstances"? The judiciary needs some clear guidance.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the use of the phrase "exceptional circumstances" in relation to suspended sentences has caused maximum confusion, inconsistent decisions by judges up and down the country and led judges to fail to pass suspended sentences when they would otherwise have done so?

Mr. Anderson: Yes, and that is the case with similar phrases in respect of breathalysers and other matters. Contrary to the Home Secretary's claims, there is no clarity and honesty in sentencing in these proposals.

The Home Secretary ignores one fundamental point: he is removing judicial discretion. That will not work, and it will create injustice in many cases. Contrary to his claims, it will reduce public confidence in the whole judicial system. The Government have provided no clear explanation for their volte face since the 1991 Act. The Bill is flimsily researched and relies on foreign examples that are neither good nor relevant.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn argued so persuasively, there are a number of other and more effective ways of dealing with an acknowledged problem. It is clear that the legislation will fail. If the House were to adjudicate in a dispute between the Home Secretary and his few supporters and the distinguished people working in the judicial field—including the former Lord Chief Justice—on whose judgment would we rely? I think that the question answers itself. If I were in an American courtroom drama, I would say, "I rest my case."

5.19 pm

Mr. Kenneth Baker (Mole Valley): The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) has a deep knowledge of the criminal mentality, drawn from his previous experience. I shall comment later on his interesting speech.

The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) commented on my time as the chairman of the Conservative party. I did not expect that to be referred to. He referred to the Conservative campaign guide, which I published—it is a good source book for British politics—and said that I was to be held responsible for everything in it.

Mr. Alex Carlile: The poetry is better.

Mr. Baker: Yes, the poetry is also good. If my successors as Conservative party chairman are to be held responsible for everything appearing in the Conservative campaign guide, it will be a target-rich area for the Opposition for some time.

The hon. Member for Blackburn chided my successors and predecessors as Home Secretary for bringing in so many changes to the criminal justice system—34 changes since 1979, I think he said. Such changes are natural. It is highly unlikely that any criminal justice system will be perfect at any given moment. It is not in tablets of stone and should be subject to constant review and modification, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) said.

The Home Secretary has been criticised for many things, but he is certainly entitled to bring in such proposals as he thinks will be effective. The prime responsibility of the Home Secretary is the integrity and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. Introducing such a Bill is a reassertion of his responsibility to the House and to the public—a responsibility which the judges do not share.

The first three clauses of the Bill introduce mandatory sentences. It is argued that the proposals will deter criminals. All hon. Members agree that we must have effective measures to deter violent and dangerous criminals. We also all agree that convicted violent and dangerous criminals should spend a greater time in gaol.

Sentencing will play a part in the motivation of a habitual criminal, but the probability of detection and arrest are likely to be more compelling when he decides whether to commit a crime. The evidence from America, where mandatory sentences have been more widely used, is, at best, not proven. Some say that such sentences are ineffective and potentially dangerous. It was pointed out earlier that, if a rapist or someone engaged in a violent crime knows that he will get life because the sanction of a mandatory life sentence has been extended to a second

rape or violent crime, he might decide to kill his victim, who is likely to be the main witness against him. What is there to lose? There is also some evidence—although I do not put so much credence on this argument—that some juries have been reluctant to bring in a guilty verdict when the mandatory life sentence is inevitable.

I understand the Government's desire to give a clear signal that such criminality should be stopped and that the public should be protected, but the provisions, particularly those relating to clause 1, must be carefully monitored to ensure that they do not have an unwanted and unpredicted perverse effect.

Sir Ivan Lawrence: What evidence is there from any area of criminal law that offenders will take tougher action if there is the suggestion that a tougher sentence will be imposed? When we increased the sentence for going equipped with a gun to commit crime, I spoke against the proposal on the basis that, as there was no difference between life imprisonment for killing and life imprisonment for carrying a gun and committing armed robbery, there would be a temptation to kill. I was wrong. There has been no known case of killing to avoid capture. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has pointed out time and again, there is a difference between the life sentence for someone who murders and a life sentence for possession of a gun. What is the evidence?

Mr. Baker: I was the Home Secretary who introduced the measure to which my hon. and learned Friend refers. I remember him arguing against it. He cannot be sure that there will not be such a case in the future just because there has not yet been one. It could happen. I accept that there is a difference between a mandatory life sentence and a discretionary life sentence for a series of offences. I am about to deal with discretion, which is highly relevant to clauses 1 to 3. In view of his previous comments on various measures, I may take my hon. and learned Friend with me on this.

I was glad to see the provision in the first three clauses that mandatory sentences need not be imposed if there are "exceptional circumstances". The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) has said in the past that such a provision can be variable. However, I am glad that the Home Secretary has made that provision, because it allows judges to exercise some discretion, which is important. The clauses would be unacceptable without that discretion.

When, as Home Secretary, I administered the system of mandatory sentences for life prisoners, I found the matter to be a good deal more complicated than the simple assertion that life should mean life. I remember one case in which a criminal was convicted of a murder and received a mandatory life sentence. The judge wrote to me asking for the shortest sentence possible that lay within my discretion in setting the tariff because there was considerable provocation, including abuse over a number of years and that the prisoner should therefore not serve a long prison term. In effect, the judge was saying that a mandatory sentence was not appropriate. I suspect that there will be many such cases and judges will exercise the discretion allowed under clauses 1 to 3, as they should.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witney said that, as debate on the Bill proceeds in the House and in the other place, the definition of exceptional circumstances will become a little clearer. One example was given by my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary in reply to an intervention this afternoon.

The three clauses mark a considerable departure from past practice. Their effect should be monitored carefully. It would be appropriate for the Home Secretary to issue a report each year on sentencing under the three clauses. The cases can be itemised and the success or failure of the policy can be measured in relation to what happens to the offenders who have been so sentenced. The report should be a public document made available to the House.

On remission and the policy of honesty in sentencing, it is clear from the White Paper and the Bill that there will be a greater connection between the sentence announced by the judge and the time served by the prisoner. That is welcome. When I was Home Secretary I started to make some improvements on that. Under the system existing at that time, prisoners served only one third of their sentences. We increased that to 50 per cent.—more for certain cases.

Under the new proposals, less remission will be earned as a result of good conduct—the Home Secretary said that about 20 per cent. of the sentence could be earned in that way. The White Paper said:

> "The Government does not expect these proposals to result in a general increase in the period of time offenders serve in prison: the courts will be expected to take into account, when passing sentence, the abolition of parole and the changes in early release arrangements."

As has been made clear today, someone who was sentenced under the current arrangements to 10 years and served six years would, under the new arrangements, be sentenced to eight years and serve the same six years. Those figures are approximate.

It is not only implied, it is made clear in clause 21 that the Bill will result in judges being expected to give shorter sentences. I suppose that that is a sort of honesty in sentencing.

I warmly welcome clause 30, which will ensure that fine defaulters and people who dodge paying their television licence will not spend a week, 10 days or a fortnight in prison; this reform is long overdue. Four years ago, there was an attempt to deal with fine defaulters, but it was abandoned a little too early. Clause 30 is another way in which to deal with the problem and I strongly support the Home Secretary in what he seeks to do. Such people should not be in prison. My right hon. and learned Friend suggests community service and compulsory attendance at an attendance centre instead.

I warmly support that proposal, but it is a very expensive policy indeed. My right hon. and learned Friend cautiously says that there will be trial projects. He is wise to say that because to have effective community service, which is not an easy way out—people should not be able to say, "I'm out of it and I do not have to worry very much"—one needs to have the administration, organisation and follow-up to chase people whose whole job in life is evasion of one sort of another. It is an expensive system, but an effective one. It is clear, however, that as in the policy of honesty in sentencing, the Treasury's hand can be clearly detected in this part of the Bill.

I also warmly support the extension of supervision of sex offenders after they have been released. Again, that reform is overdue and is very welcome.

[Mr. Baker]

One of the problems of our prisons, to come to that subject as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney did, is that they are now full; they are much fuller than they were when I and my right hon. Friend had responsibility for the Prison Service. It is interesting that in the period 1993-95, the proportion of those in gaol for violent crimes fell although there was a 20 per cent. increase in the prison population. That shows that many more people are going to prison for much less serious crimes and are staying there for a longer time.

That point leads me very much to support the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney. The Prison Service is one of the most difficult services to run. It is even more difficult to run when it is virtually bursting at the seams, as it is at the moment. I believe that the Woolf report, produced during my time as Home Secretary, is the best report on the management and conduct of prisons since the war. I was able to secure from the Treasury considerable sums to implement the recommendations of that report, including the ending of slopping out. Prisons should be austere places, but there should be no purpose to humiliate prisoners by such practices.

The Woolf report also recommended positive regimes. If one goes to prisons—I probably visited more prisons than any of my predecessors—what strikes one is that most of the prisoners are totally inadequate people. They are failures in life and failures in crime. Our prisons are full not of professional criminals but of professional prisoners who go back again, again and again. What characterises prisoners more than anything else is that they are ignorant and badly educated, many of them are virtually illiterate and hardly any of them have any skills or training which they can apply when they are released.

When we are examining sentencing policy or debating prison policy in the House, it is important to remember that about 99.8 per cent. of prisoners today will one day be released. They will come back to our towns, our streets, our communities and our constituencies. We must try to ensure that when they do that, they will not immediately take up another life of crime and commit more criminal acts.

One way in which to help such people is to give them the skills to allow them to acquire even the humblest job. I very much hope that that side of prison management will not be neglected. I know that it will not be neglected totally, but I also know only too well that there are priorities in the Home Office budget. I believe that there should be greater emphasis on what we can do to try to make prisoners more effective when they are eventually released.

5.33 pm

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): I beg to move, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give the Crime (Sentences) Bill a Second Reading, because it fails to establish a system of sentencing which adequately protects the public and ensures the rehabilitation of offenders and the alleviation of crime; fails to address the decline in conviction rates and will undermine the securing of convictions in certain cases; will require the building of 12 new prisons which will divert funding from essential law and order services including policing and crime prevention; undermines the doctrine of the separation of powers and fetters the proper role of judicial discretion; will damage the process of parole leading to a greater risk to the public; fails to seek long term reductions in youth crime as a primary aim of policy; and fails to seek restorative justice and the incorporation of victims into the justice system."

We have just been treated to a wise and perceptive speech from the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). I can assure him that that speech, his excellent recent anthology of poetry and his writings on his favourite author, G. K. Chesterton, are far more appealing and shed far more light on the world than his campaign guide which we are all prepared quietly to forget.

From the right hon. Members for Mole Valley and for Witney (Mr. Hurd), both of whom are distinguished former Home Secretaries—perhaps at one time they were senior prefects of the present Home Secretary—we heard interesting and subtle reports. To distil the assessment of the Home Secretary by the right hon. Member for Witney into one word, it might be "trying". For the right hon. Member for Mole Valley, in two words, it would probably be "very trying".

The right hon. Member for Witney was, of course, right to say—I share this view—that we should not reduce the criminal justice system, this important aspect of home affairs which concerns how we deal with crime, to electoral slogans. We should be having an intelligent debate not just in the House, but in the country. In that intelligent debate, there should be three aims. First, we should try to ensure that there is less crime. Secondly, when crime takes place, we should try to ensure that it is better detected. Thirdly, when it is detected, we should try to ensure, for the reasons given so eloquently by the right hon. Member for Mole Valley, that the punishment which is rightly given to those who commit crime is effective.

The effectiveness of punishment is not to be measured, save in the most serious cases, by its length. The effectiveness of punishment is to be measured by how that prisoner behaves—I speak of the 98.8 per cent. of prisoners who are released. I refer to the time when the prisoner ceases to be a prisoner and when he comes back to the community in which he lives. It is to be measured in the results of that imprisonment and in the extent to which the prisoner is able to lead the life of an honest and decent citizen.

Mr. Sweeney: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Carlile: I will give way in due course.

The Refreshment Department has, on the ground floor, one very popular item which is often bought by visitors whom we take around the House. It is smooth, it has striped bars on it—the bars, incidentally dissolve in the mouth—it rattles noisily in the tin—

Mr. Straw: Humbug.

Mr. Carlile: As the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) says, it is House of Commons humbug. I must tell the Home Secretary that the Bill contains—this is the only thing that marks it out from other criminal justice proposals—more political humbug than any other proposal in the past 80 years.

We all recall that the Home Secretary has the advantage of being a son of the great south Wales town of Llanelli. As he wriggled when questions were put to him during

his speech, I began to wonder why he did not have a great career as a centre three quarter, wriggling his way through the opposition for the great rugby team from that town.

When one examines the provisions of the Bill and considers what was presented as, or purported to be, the Home Secretary's explanation of them, it becomes clear that he does not understand what is in his own Bill. Let us start with the real effect of the sentencing provisions. Clause 21 is absolutely clear. It refers specifically to section 33 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. It says that, if the Bill is enacted, the judge will pass a sentence which will be, in the case of a sentence of under four years, the sentence that would have been passed before the Bill less one half.

When a three-year sentence would have been passed today, under the Bill, the judge will be obliged to pass a sentence of 18 months. We know not what the public perception will be when sentences are halved. Although I subscribe to honesty in sentencing, this is not the way to achieve it. I much prefer the 18 months to three years option suggested by the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw).

Mr. Straw: The position is even more complicated. Under the Bill, a trial judge who previously would have passed a sentence of three years to ensure that, with good behaviour, a prisoner would serve 18 months, would have to pass a sentence of twenty-two and a half months on the basis that, with good behaviour, the prisoner would earn a 20 per cent. discount and thus would serve 18 months. I bow to the hon. and learned Gentleman's superior knowledge in such matters, but that example illustrates the complexity of the issue.

Mr. Carlile: According to my reading of the Bill, which I have been advised is correct, the position is worse, because the judge will have to pass a sentence that allows for both the full discount currently available.

The sentence has already been reduced from three years to 18 months. Under clause 9, an 18-month sentence will have nine assessment periods of two months each of which will impose considerable bureaucracy on the prison service. If the prisoner keeps his nose clean and does the washing-up when he is told and scrubs the floors with a little more energy, he will earn 12 extra days off in each of those assessment periods. That means that he will get 108 extra days off, or about three and a half months.

Under the Bill—if it is passed—a person who today would be sentenced to three years and would serve 18 months will be sentenced to 18 months and will serve less than 15 months. That comes from a Home Secretary who says, "Prison works and so does honesty in sentencing. We are going to be tough with crime."

Perhaps the Home Secretary will tell us how he justifies making a substantial reduction in the sentences that he, as a Conservative Home Secretary, would recommend for offences of robbery, burglary, assault, theft and a whole panoply of other crimes, including indecent assault. The Home Secretary cannot get away with saying that it is a Committee point, although he tried to do so a little earlier. It is not: it is a point of principle that arises from the Bill and that he has never been brave enough to reveal to the British public, although he should have done so.

My hon. Friends and I can only vote against a Bill that does the disservice to the British public of reducing the severity with which ordinary offences are addressed—not by the courts, as the courts do not want those changes, but by the Government.

Not only is the Home Secretary reducing sentences, but he is reducing supervision and demolishing the parole system. Today I received a copy of the press release that was issued by the Parole Board on the publication of its most recent annual report. It was a matter of total surprise to me that the chairman of the Parole Board made sure that it arrived today. He has helpfully reminded me, as I remind the House, that

"during 1995-96 over 95 per cent. of parolees completed their licence periods without reoffending;

since the parole scheme began in 1968, less than 10 per cent. of parolees have been reconvicted during the first six months after release, compared to 30 per cent. of nonparolees—i.e. at one-third the rate;

since 1968 35 per cent. of parolees have been reconvicted two years after release, compared to 55—60 per cent. of nonparolees."

Not only is the Home Secretary reducing sentences, but he is also doing away with an effective system of parole that protects the public—as those statistics show—and includes clear and well-understood provisions for the recall to prison of people who are in breach of their parole.

Where parole is not involved, clause 12 provides that offenders sentenced to 12 months or more would be supervised on release for a period representing 15 per cent. of a sentence, subject to a minimum of three months. That would greatly reduce periods of supervision on release. For example, under current arrangements an offender released from a three-year sentence after 18 months is then supervised for nine months followed by a further nine-month period at risk of serving the remainder of the sentence if he reoffends.

What does the Home Secretary propose to do to that useful period of extended supervision? Under the Bill, if the same offender was sentenced to three years—which he would not be, of course—and then earned the full discount, he would be supervised on release for five and a half months, followed by an at-risk period of less than two months. The net effect would be that the supervision period was more than halved. Therefore, the Government would have halved the protection of the public.

Furthermore, the categories of offences covered by clause 1 are bizarre. The Government have decided that it is a political or ministerial decision as to what constitutes a particularly serious offence. The Home Secretary is guilty of the fundamental and constitutionally unacceptable error of interfering in the discretion of judges and attacking the very root of the separation of powers that is and has been so important to the smooth functioning of our society throughout modern times. How on earth can the Home Secretary justify saying that a robbery with an imitation firearm that is not used—by definition it cannot be, although it can be extremely frightening—is a qualifying offence for a life sentence, or a two-and-out totting up life sentence? However, a robbery at knifepoint, which is equally terrifying, does not qualify for such a sentence. Where did they get their categories?

How on earth can the Home Secretary justify categorising every offence of manslaughter in the same way? Perhaps he has forgotten his early days at the Bar,

[Mr. Carlile]

before he became a distinguished planning silk when, rumour has it, he would occasionally penetrate the portals of Ealing magistrates court and the odd Crown court. The right hon. and learned Gentleman nods in agreement. Let me remind him that some manslaughter offences—and they are common—occur as a result of a disagreement—often in or outside a public house—and one blow which, had it not resulted in death, might not have given rise to a prosecution, or at worst would have attracted a charge of common assault. Such an offence would be categorised as manslaughter because it resulted in death. The sentences for those offences are quite short—usually less than three years. As far as I know, the Government have never criticised such sentences. Such offences come as near to a criminal accident as it is possible to imagine. The Home Secretary is saying that that is in the same category as an offence of manslaughter committed by someone who stabs his victim 40 or 50 times in a rage at a time when he happens, temporarily, because of his innate characteristics which make him dangerous, to be suffering from diminished responsibility as defined by the law. Such categorisation is bizarre.

The Home Secretary really should talk to someone sensible like the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, or Lord Taylor, the much-admired former Lord Chief Justice, or even Lady Thatcher's guru, the former Lord Justice Lawton, who, incidentally, does not have a reputation of being a softie. Given the experience of those of us who appeared before him, he certainly was not a softie. The Home Secretary should ask the opinion of those informed people. He should not substitute his own prejudice for their opinion. The Bill, and especially the provisions to which I have referred, are founded on the substitution of prejudice for informed opinion.

Mr. Howard: The hon. and learned Gentleman is entirely missing the point. The provisions will become relevant only if the manslaughter is the second serious violent or sexual offence or was the first offence and the offender commits a further serious sexual or violent offence. Furthermore, the judge will have the ability when sentencing to fix the tariff for the automatic life sentence. The tariff can be as low or as high as the judge thinks appropriate. If at the end of that period the offender satisfies the risk assessment, he will be released. The purpose of the provisions is to ensure that the public are protected because no one will be released until there has been an assessment of whether they still pose a risk to the public.

Mr. Carlile: That is honest sentencing? It is intellectual pyrotechnics. The right hon. and learned Gentleman really should sit down not with his own Front-Bench team but with some of the specialist commentators who have written about such items, such as David Thomas QC or, as I have said, Lord Bingham or Lord Taylor, so that he understands the consequences of what he is doing and the fact that he is introducing bizarre and inconsistent categories that will give rise to injustice.

I say to the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney), who tried to intervene earlier—I shall give way to him when I have finished this sentence if he wants me to—that his point about exceptional circumstances in the example of the village idiot who commits three burglaries carries no weight whatever, for there is nothing exceptional about the village idiot who commits three burglaries. There are no exceptional circumstances in that example. The Court of Appeal will interpret the law as we in this House lay it down to be. Faithful to its constitutional duty, the Court of Appeal will not pretend that exceptional circumstances exist where they do not.

Mr. Sweeney: The point on which I wanted to question the hon. and learned Gentleman is somewhat lost in the mists of time. I wanted to ask him why he believes that the significance of a long sentence lies only with the likelihood or otherwise of reoffending after the prisoner is released. Surely an equally valid reasoning for sentencing someone for a long time is to stop them reoffending while they are kept inside.

Mr. Carlile: That shows that village idiots do not only commit burglaries. I do not know where the hon. Gentleman has been for the past 20 years or so. He is a solicitor and I presume that he has read all the research—much of it from the Home Office and of very high quality—on the subject of deterrence, which I apprehend him to be talking about.

Mr. Sweeney: I have read evidence from the Parole Board.

Mr. Carlile: It is absolutely clear from all the research that has been done—including that from the Parole Board—that deterrence operates in certain cases, but usually only on people who commit crime who otherwise would not do so: the person in whom a crime is an aberration rather than a habit.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Ha!

Mr. Carlile: The hon. Gentleman scoffs from a sedentary position in his usual asinine way, but he ought to look at the research before doing so.

Furthermore, what will be the effect of the provisions? As—I think—one hon. Member has already said, there will be a greater risk of murder taking place because if somebody faces a life sentence, they will simply, if they are ruthless, do away with the evidence of what they are doing. There will be a reduction in guilty pleas because, if they can avoid it, people will not run the risk of being convicted—not for the second time but the first time—of a qualifying offence under clauses 1, 2 and 3.

There will be increased plea bargaining in order to try to reduce the level of offence at which conviction takes place. It is well known, as the Court of Appeal has said repeatedly, that plea bargaining has many dangers.

There will be more acquittals and perverse verdicts. Juries will be more reluctant to convict once they know that the offence will qualify, as a first offence, for a possible future two-and-out sentence. Even more to the point, they will be extremely reluctant to convict for the second time if the evidence is doubtful even to a scintilla and if they are told—no one can stop them being told—that there is a previous conviction for a similar offence. That is because in circumstances that they may wrongly perceive to be unjust—juries have their own perceptions

and they have been very different from the Government's from time to time—they will be reluctant to convict someone of a crime carrying a life sentence.

Sir Ivan Lawrence: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Carlile: If the hon. and learned Gentleman can restrain himself for a second, I shall finish the point. There will also, in my view, be an increased reluctance on the part of witnesses to give evidence. Witnesses sometimes are not half as vengeful as Governments or newspapers, which egg Governments on. For example, there will undoubtedly be an increased reluctance on the part of daughters to give evidence against their fathers, uncles or grandfathers—which is difficult enough to manage in court at the best of times—if they know the consequences that are likely to arise from it.

Sir Ivan Lawrence: I shall ask the hon. and learned Gentleman the same question as I asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). What evidence has he that juries will be more reluctant to convict a repeat rapist, a repeat seriously violent offender, a third-time burglar or a third-time drug trafficker?

Mr. Carlile: I can tell the hon. and learned Gentleman what the evidence is. He should ask those who had to conduct capital cases before the abolition of capital punishment.

Sir Ivan Lawrence: That is about hanging.

Mr. Carlile: If the hon. and learned Gentleman will listen, I shall continue. Of course there is a difference between hanging and a life sentence; that is self-evident. Senior judges who practised at that time are of the view, and I bow to it, that juries will be more reluctant to convict if they think that the consequences may be disproportionate to the evidence that they have heard. That is the point.

Mr. Howard: Has not the hon. and learned Gentleman overlooked the fact that in the vast majority of cases juries will be completely ignorant of the fact that a previous offence—or offences—has been committed which will bring the provisions into account?

Mr. Carlile: I am afraid that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has not been to the criminal courts for a very long time, or so it would appear. Has not he overlooked the fact that defence advocates will make very sure that juries know of the risk in an appropriate case?

Mr. Howard: Poppycock.

Mr. Carlile: It is not poppycock. The Home Secretary scoffs. I do not know when he last conducted a case of any seriousness in a criminal court, but I can tell him from practical experience that juries react far less strongly than many imagine to a defendant's record being introduced and, in many cases, defence counsel will not hesitate—and no one can stop them—to introduce the record for exactly the reasons that I have given. I emphasise, in any event, that juries will be reluctant to convict even for a first time in, for example, a manslaughter case when they know that that might mean that the defendant faces two and out in the future. The Home Secretary should have regard to that.

The Government have failed the country in the criminal justice system. Before the 1992 election, they promised a large number of additional police officers. After the 1992 election, they reduced the number of police officers.

Mr. Howard *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Carlile: The Home Secretary shakes his head, but I am stating statistical fact based on parliamentary written answers given by his Department to me this year. The Government have failed to recognise the cost-effectiveness of police officers. If we had another 3,000 to 5,000 police officers, they would be cost-effective. If all that a police officer achieves is to prevent the equivalent of one person spending a year in gaol, he has paid his salary for a year. The Government have failed to recognise those simple facts. *[Interruption.]* My party has made it clear that we want more policemen and if the Minister of State wishes to contradict that, let him contradict it now. He stays in his place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. I do not expect sedentary interventions, and certainly not from Members on the Front Bench.

Mr. Carlile: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hooligans are on the Government Front Bench tonight.

Furthermore, the Government have failed to attack the problem of youth crime. All they have done is to make gestures.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. David Maclean): The hon. and learned Gentleman asked me to contradict him and I will. The Liberal party policy paper "Tackling Crime Together" says:

"Putting more police officers on the beat will, likewise, have little effect in reducing levels of crime."

Mr. Carlile: If the right hon. Gentleman considers the policy passed by our party conference this year, he will see our commitment to thousands of extra police. He should be honest enough to look at our most recent statements of policy and not at consultation documents issued at an earlier date.

Furthermore, the Government have decided to do something which is fundamental and, in my view, unheard of. They will remove from judges a discretion which is properly theirs. Apparently, the Government have listened to some police officers—although not all, because police officers are not unanimous about their proposals, However, as has been said, the Government have failed to listen to probation officers, judges, solicitors, barristers or to prison officers. The Government are withdrawing probation officers from the prisons, which will become less efficacious places, and they have left us with a sorry political act in the Bill. We shall oppose that sorry political act tonight.

6.3 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (City of London and Westminster, South): The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) is not fighting the next election, and I do not

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

know whether we shall have the pleasure and privilege of hearing him speak again in the Chamber. I hope that we shall. This is an important Bill and an important debate and he has made a considerable contribution to it, not only in his speech but by tabling an amendment on which the debate can be conducted.

I shall be brief because voices much more learned than mine are waiting to speak. I have already had the privilege of hearing distinguished speeches from two former holders of the office of Home Secretary, and I look forward to hearing my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd). My constituency has a legal dimension as it contains the central criminal court, the law courts, two of the inns of court and the Law Society. I am not representing the judges tonight and I should say especially that I have not discussed the matter with my brother, who is himself a judge and who likewise declines to sit on applications for judicial review in cases in which I have been, in any way, part of the preceding controversy.

I come to the Bill without expert knowledge, but I must acknowledge a whiff of agnosticism. I realise why the Home Office and the judiciary approach such matters differently—my right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) mentioned the reason—but, as a Tory, I am uneasy when any Government and the judiciary are at variance. Therefore, I approach legislation that comes out of such an impasse with at least a tinge of scepticism. Cases that I might have raised—and I came to the House armed with examples—have been raised by others and I shall not simply rehearse and reiterate them.

I put to the House, as one who was once a Customs and Excise Minister, the case of the drug dealer who helps to roll up the whole of the team. That example was raised in an intervention by the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), and my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary said that it would be considered an exceptionality. When my right hon. Friend the Minister of State winds up, I hope that he will feel able to give us other examples of exceptionality, because I was encouraged to hear that the case of the drug dealer would be considered in that way.

It would also be helpful if my right hon. Friend the Minister of State explained specifically the faults, as the Government see them, of the proposition advanced by the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) for staged sentences. At first blush, such sentences appear to be transparent and not a million miles away from the briefing by the Law Society, which reached some of us today, in advance of the debate. I share too the query posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), in which he balanced the effect on the judges of not being trusted by the letter of the Bill with their being invited to reduce the prison population. I shall leave aside the question whether the current rising prison population is a function of reasonable judicial severity, rather than softness, but the coded messages may be wrongly read and the prison population may rise.

I have a couple of other case histories to enter into the filter of the Bill. The first is that of an inadequate youngster on drugs, perhaps around the age of 21, who acquires drugs and shares the cost of them by securing repayment from his friends. If such circumstances arose, I wonder whether the sentences proposed in the Bill would serve as a deterrent to a drug addict who was acknowledged to be inadequate. Secondly, grievous bodily harm with intent is not uncommon in a domestic context. A husband convicted in such circumstances and thereafter facing life imprisonment would be potentially liable to blackmail by his wife. Would the family be prepared to give evidence if life imprisonment were the consequence?

I repeat that I am agnostic about the Bill. I am entirely prepared for my right hon. Friends to prove my apprehensions unfounded, but I have quoted before in the House the observation of Sam Rayburn, the great Texan Speaker of the House of Representatives, that the three wisest words in the English language are "wait a minute". It would be churlish of me, in my present state of knowledge, to withhold my vote from my right hon. and learned Friend on Second Reading, but I shall vote with reservations. I have hinted at those reservations and I hope that they can be overcome.

I realise that by speaking in the debate I make myself liable to be sentenced to sit on the Standing Committee. Given my views, I am a genuine volunteer to sit on it. To my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mrs. Lait), from the Whips Office—this is the first opportunity that I have had to congratulate her on her pathfinding progress—I can say that I served as a trusty on the Standing Committee on the Housing Act 1996 in the previous Session, and I am happy to call my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Mr. Brandreth) as a character witness to my behaviour on that Committee.

At this moment in the Parliament, we have a particular responsibility to handle legislation responsibly. It may be that the former Home Secretaries who have spoken in the debate are also candidates to serve on the Committee but, on past form, that may not be the case. As the late Damon Runyon suggested, the race is not always to the fastest, nor the battle to the swiftest, but that is the way to bet. I have never served in the Home Office, and my offer to serve on the Standing Committee is as a man on a bus in my fairly legal constituency, headed south towards Clapham.

6.9 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I have an interest to declare, in that I am one of the parliamentary advisers to the Police Federation. Although I do not intend to refer to policing matters this evening, it is only right that the House should be aware of that fact.

The Government have laid before us their latest crime Bill, and have said all along that their intention is to protect the public. That, of course, is the right intention. Everyone expects criminals to be punished for their actions. However, I am not convinced that the Bill will achieve the objective, and the measures contained in it represent a radical change in sentencing practice. Indeed, they could be said to challenge the very premise on which our justice system is based—that punishment should fit the crime. That premise has meant that judges and juries have used discretion when pronouncing their sentences, and have been able to take account of the whole gamut of human experience and emotion when sentencing criminals.

There are many levels of guilt in society. A report by the Home Affairs Select Committee, "Murder: The Mandatory Life Sentence", published in December 1995, stated:

"All those who gave evidence to the Committee accepted that the crime of murder covered acts of a wide range of heinousness."

A cold-blooded act of terrorism is far removed from an act of mercy killing, and such differences in the levels of blame exist not only with murder. The professional drug dealer, with his international network of contacts and aliases, is a world apart from the pathetic heroin addict, pushing to a few people down the pub to fund his habit. One is driven by greed, the other by physical addiction. Yet under the Bill, both will receive the minimum sentence of seven years—there will be no discretion.

We need to be certain that we are doing the best thing to protect the public by removing discretion. Some would argue that the offences covered by the Bill—murder, manslaughter, rape and so on—are the worst kind, and that whoever commits them in whatever circumstances should receive the maximum penalty. However, we must consider the long-term effects of minimum sentences.

If we introduce minimum sentences as a result of pre-election party political wrangling, we shall do ourselves and the country a great wrong and open the door to minimum sentences for all offences. When that happens—as it will, if we start down this path—we shall be only one step away from the American system of plea bargaining, under which the defence and prosecution haggle like customer and market trader over a pre-packaged sentence that disregards the individual's personal circumstances.

It is not only the theory behind the Bill that is flawed. I am concerned also about the practical consequences of its implementation. What effect will it have on the courts? The Home Secretary appears to have modified his proposals to include an incentive to plead guilty, yet the problem is still there. Faced with the prospect of pleading guilty and receiving a life sentence, or pleading not guilty in the hope of walking away free on some intricacy of law or minor detail, criminals will plead not guilty.

In a speech at King's college, London, on 6 March 1996, the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Taylor, said:

"Minimum sentences are incompatible with an existing and important strand in our criminal law. The courts have long followed a policy of discounting sentences for timely pleas of guilty . . . Defendants who know they will receive a mandatory sentence of lengthy imprisonment, and even more so, a mandatory life sentence, are not likely to plead guilty".

It also concerns me, as it did Helena Kennedy QC, who had a letter published in *The Times* on 12 March, that

"rapists facing automatic life sentences will have no incentive to plead guilty. They will contest the most clear-cut cases, subjecting their victims to further humiliation and trauma".

Several women in the past few months have undergone traumatic trials in which defendants have represented themselves. We should be moving towards a justice system that provides greater protection for victims of rape, not one that encourages rapists to plead not guilty.

There is a danger that the courts will be clogged up by a string of not guilty pleas. The situation has been made worse by the inclusion of the words "exceptional circumstances" in the Bill. What are those exceptional circumstances? The Home Secretary could give but one example this afternoon. How broad are they in scope? Why is there no schedule to the Bill that gives examples of such circumstances? I fear that lawyers will baffle juries by arguing that, although their client may be guilty, he or she is guilty in "exceptional circumstances". Again, the processes of the courts will be slowed.

The House must ask itself what effect the provisions will have on offenders, as has been alluded to by a number of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). If a second offence of rape, grievous bodily harm with intent or armed robbery carries the same minimum sentence as the crime of murder, some criminals might be inclined to murder their victim. By doing so, they leave no witnesses. They can dispose of the body and think that they are more likely to get away with it.

The House must also ask what effect the measures will have on the prisons and the Prison Service. Our prison system is groaning under the weight of the current population, which has grown by more than 10,000 since January 1994. Only last week, Richard Tilt, the head of the Prison Service, suggested that "timeshare" prisons might be worth introducing, with prisoners working during the week and serving time at weekends. Are the public now to be protected only on high days and holidays? The measures in the Bill will increase the prison population by about 11,000, and I have seen and heard nothing that reassures me that the prison system will be able to cope with that increase.

There will be new prisons, we are told. But when, and who will fund them? Will the private finance initiative magic wand be waved to produce prisons overnight? I hope that, in winding up the debate, the Minister of State can assure the House that investors have been approached and are willing to build the prisons, because I know of no such company. A further concern is that the prisons are to be "privately staffed". To whom will the staff be accountable? Will it be the Government? Or the shareholders and managers of Prisons Inc? The question of accountability is extremely serious.

My final concern is similar to that which Lord Taylor had about the original White Paper, which he said was based on "flimsy and dubious evidence". I agree that there are many vague areas in the Bill. For example, the explanatory and financial memorandum states:

"The proposals in Part III on community sentences for fine defaulters . . . will be the subject of local pilot projects, which will provide a basis for assessing the cost effectiveness of the proposals".

The Home Secretary is usually keen on consultation, yet it seems that he now wants to legislate for the proposals and then carry out the pilot projects.

Where is the research to back the assumptions made in the Bill? The assumption that longer prison sentences are a deterrent to crime is far from the mark. It is the fear of detection, not the length of sentence, that will deter criminals who plan their crimes. The length of sentence is not considered by most criminals, who are opportunistic and impulsive, rather than calculating.

Findings published in November's *Criminal Law Review* undermined the Government's assertion that the Bill would provide greater protection for the public. The main finding of the study by Professor Hood is that nine out of 10 high-risk prisoners convicted of a violent or sexual offence would not be covered by the proposed automatic indeterminate life sentences.

[Mr. Don Touhig]

Such radical proposals should be based on lengthy and thorough research. We have not completed Second Reading, yet the Home Secretary has already announced that he proposes to make amendments in Committee. Measures such as this should be given detailed consideration by a law reform body; they should not be born of party political point scoring. The Bill is flawed both in concept and in detail. We must consider carefully its far-reaching consequences for our justice system before we allow it to become law.

Our criminal justice system must have the strength and integrity to outlive the Home Secretary, any Government and any pre-election banter. It is time that we stopped crying law and order and started putting some of our laws in order.

6.20 pm

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): The Bill is intended to provide better protection for the public, and nobody disagrees with that objective, although I share many of the concerns that have been expressed this afternoon by hon. Members of all parties; indeed, I have expressed many of them myself in earlier debates. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) made some extremely good points. I entirely agree with what he said about the length of sentence and its deterrent effect, or lack of it.

Before expressing my reservations about the Bill, I should like to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mrs. Lait), in her capacity as a Whip, that I am well and truly paired this evening and that I welcome her to her pathfinding place on the Treasury Bench.

The Bill, unlike myself and the hon. Member for Islwyn, assumes that longer sentences are especially effective deterrents and that criminals are calculators who examine the tariff before acting; common sense and bitter experience contradict that convenient assumption. Criminals rarely weigh the consequences of anything. That is especially true of persistent offenders who have been through it all before, some many times, and against whom the measures of the Bill are particularly directed.

The fact that offenders do not consider consequences is their problem, but it is also ours, because what can change their way of life is not length of sentence but what happens to them in prison and, just as importantly, how well they are supervised on release. Those points were made extremely well by my right hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Mr. Hurd) and for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker).

Some of my hon. Friends usually jump up at this point and say that it is plain that prison works, because the prison population has risen and reported crime has fallen. Crime statistics are a notorious quagmire into which some of the most seductive arguments can sink without trace, but one of the few clear facts is that reported crime figures began to fall not when the prison population had been increasing but immediately before it reached its lowest level for years, at the end of 1992. The figures have continued to drop, while the prison population has risen steeply; but now, with prisons overflowing, reported crime has apparently begun to rise again.

Perhaps prison has played a part in the falls in reported crime, which I hope will soon resume. As the Home Secretary says, prisoners inside are not outside committing crimes, but I suspect that prison is less important than improved policing methods and crime prevention initiatives, such as closed circuit television, for which he deserves great credit. He made it clear in the White Paper that he was targeting repeat offenders, and did not want an increase in sentences generally. He hoped and expected that the courts would cut the sentences handed down, so that those not subject to the mandatory sentences would serve no longer than they would have done under present arrangements.

Unlike the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile), I doubt whether the judges will oblige the Home Secretary. They know that, under the new arrangements, most offenders will not be considered at risk or be supervised as well as they are at present. They will feel the need to restore appropriate differentials between sentences. They will find it difficult to cut every three-year sentence to 18 months or so, in the face of public expectation that the new law means longer inside and taunts from the media and others that they have gone even softer. I have a great respect for judges, but I doubt whether they will remember exactly what sentence they would have imposed before the law was changed.

The prison population will thus get even larger, pre-empting huge extra resources that could be better spent on crime prevention, better policing and more effective programmes in existing prisons. As well as being, at great cost, a not particularly effective deterrent, mandatory sentences will undoubtedly cause injustice. The Government were right when they rejected the idea, on those very grounds, in their 1990 White Paper.

There is no justice in giving the same mandatory sentence to a hardened drug trafficker who extracts a fat living from the misery of others and to a teenage addict who again sells some of his supply to a fellow addict; seven years in prison may be too short for the former, but it is the wrong sentence for the latter.

The Bill allows for a lower sentence in "exceptional circumstances", and we have had some debate on that today, but I am certain that that will be insufficient, and that discretion needs to be widened to allow a judge to give a lower sentence when justice and the public interest require it. That need not mean driving a coach and horses, as referred to by the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), through the Bill, although it might make a substantial aperture. There is no reason why judges should not have guidelines or a menu of minimum sentences, and be obliged to give reasons in court whenever they depart from them.

I do not believe that mandatory sentences will make the public safer, but, like other hon. Members, I am sure that the abolition of parole will make them less secure. It is true that 35 per cent. of parolees are reconvicted within two years, but that compares with 55 per cent. of non-parolees. Parole is a qualified success, which, in its present form, dates only from 1992, and it should surely be developed and refined rather than dispensed with.

A system of time off for good behaviour, run by the prison authority, is not a satisfactory substitute. Many of the most evil villains are model prisoners, because they want to get through their sentence as comfortably as possible and resume their criminal career. It is often the immature but redeemable who give the trouble.

The possibility of parole is not merely an incentive to good behaviour; it is the Parole Board's job to look behind the good behaviour and assess motivation and intention.

The possibility of parole causes many prisoners to plan seriously for their release and to take steps to prepare themselves—something that they would not otherwise have done, and for the want of which they would be more likely to reoffend.

It is curious that the Bill would get rid of parole but still require the Parole Board to make sensitive and difficult judgments about when to release second-time violent offenders who, under the provisions in the Bill, would serve life. It is a pity that it is called life, as I said in an earlier debate, because the tariff recommended by the judge will almost certainly be the same as or less than the determinate prison sentence that he would pass under the present law.

Such sentences should be called what they are—open sentences—and they should be available for first-time violent offenders, too. I do not understand why prisoners convicted of serious violent offences should be released when they are clearly still dangerous. The merit of open sentences in such cases is that prisoners know that their release ultimately depends on them. They then have the most powerful incentive to develop the self-discipline and attitudes that will keep them from offending again.

I am sure that mandatory sentences are being over-promoted by the Bill because the Home Secretary is very conscious of the need to reassure the public about the Government's firmness in fighting crime, which I understand because he is right in his general concern. In doing so, he has, alas, made his policy less flexible than it should be, and it will thus be less effective and less just.

With this Bill, we will make the same sort of mistakes as we made in 1991, when we introduced unit fines. They worked quite well in the majority of cases, but in some they produced such ludicrous outcomes—and only a few instances are necessary for this to happen—that the scheme lost public respect and had to be abandoned. Much more seriously, there will be similar fallout from mandatory sentences, with a similar result.

The Criminal Justice Act 1991 also restricted judicial discretion and severely curtailed judges' ability to take previous offences into account. That also worked quite well most of the time, but, inevitably, in some cases it got heavily in the way of proper justice, and that clause was hurriedly and humiliatingly repealed, too. I hope that we will have the sense to row back sufficiently in Committee to avoid another such humiliating reverse, for if we do not improve the Bill, the subsequent Act will produce the hard, unjust cases that the public will rightly find unacceptable.

6.31 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): It is a great privilege to follow such an informed, interesting and important speech from someone who knows a thing or two about what we are discussing.

I listened carefully to the Home Secretary, who prayed in aid at least three times the support of senior police officers for the Bill. Conspicuous by its absence was any reference to the opinion of the judiciary, the Law Society, the Bar Council or the probation service. I assume that the police officer support was not unqualified, bearing it in mind that the Home Secretary was heartily booed at a recent conference.

I have listened carefully to all the speeches, and I was especially struck by that of the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker), who was firm in rejecting mandatory sentencing, as incorporated in clauses 1, 2 and 3. It was a powerful and persuasive speech by a former Home Secretary, who quoted from experience in other jurisdictions.

The Bill has as its core notion a version of the American "three strikes and you're out" laws that have so delighted the right wing in the United States. It is unfortunate, if understandable, that such matters should be brought to the Floor on the eve of a general election, because that acknowledges that the Government consider them vote winners.

I have no doubt that the public are heartily sick of crimes of violence, of burglary, and of people who sell drugs and trade in misery and death. That we should seek to address such problems is appropriate and desirable, notwithstanding the timing to which I referred. However, my concern is not with the principles that lie behind the Bill, which are laudable, but rather the chosen responses to those very real problems.

Let us consider the two-strikes law in respect of crimes of violence and rape. The previous and present Lord Chief Justices and several other members of the judiciary have expressed grave misgivings about applying mandatory life sentences in that area of law. They are highly qualified, articulate members of the judiciary, who are charged with dealing with and sentencing people on a daily basis. Before their appointments, they were proficient legal practitioners. Why is their expert opinion being brushed aside by the Home Secretary? Why cannot the Home Office listen to those who know about such matters?

The Home Secretary has taken legal advice many times in the past 18 months and has ended up on the wrong side of eight or nine far-reaching judicial decisions in the UK and European courts. Does the fact that he is not prepared to listen to expert advice result from the string of duff advice that he has recently received and followed? Perhaps that accounts for his deafness.

The views of the judiciary are made all the more potent by the fact that it would be the last body in the land to interfere with the legislature. Lawyers, perhaps more than anyone else, are acutely aware of the constitutional issues involved in so doing.

One difficulty with the Bill is that it creates a constitutional problem, because, under the division of powers, the legislature and judiciary must be separate and independent. That is a basic tenet of constitutional law, which is centuries old. It has been much written about by academics such as Professor Dicey. The protection of the people and the courts from undue political interference is a fundamental safeguard for society. Every despotism starts by trying to control the courts and lawyers. We seek to fetter the discretion of the judiciary at our peril.

Let us take the horrible offence of rape. We all agree that that is always a serious offence, but to impose mandatory life sentences on second offenders ignores the fact that, as with every sort of offence, there can be aggravating features such as physical or emotional injury, the use of a weapon, or cases where the offender was in a position of trust or entered the victim's home. Those and many other circumstances, if proven, make the offence an aggravated one deserving of a heavier penalty.

Under the Bill, that will not be possible, because, on second conviction, all defendants would be sentenced to life imprisonment. That is illogical and, I believe, unworkable. It is yet worse; as the Lord Chief Justice said,

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

if a defendant knows that he is facing life imprisonment, he may feel that his best recourse is to kill the victim. That was mentioned eloquently by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) and others.

The problem is real. Even if rapists are inhuman, as I believe they must be to commit the offence, like many other classes of offender they carry out a form of risk assessment. Common sense dictates that, when a criminal embarks on the commission of an offence, the chance of detection will probably be the most important factor in his mind; but the likely penalty will also be a factor. Academics in the field confirm that, and concur that the many members of the judiciary who have advanced that fear are correct that, far from protecting the victims of that disgusting offence, such penalties may even further imperil them.

Mr. Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman quote his sources for saying that experts agree with that? It seems to fly in the face of all the research that I have read about what is in the minds of rapists when they commit their horrible offences.

Mr. Llwyd: I have followed the arguments in the press on the subject. I refer the Minister of State to what Lord Justice Taylor was quoted as saying in a lengthy article in *The Times*, in September, I think. He certainly put that view. If I remember rightly, he quoted authority in that article. I will endeavour to find it and send the right hon. Gentleman a copy.

Although there should be consistency, which is why the Court of Appeal issued sentencing guidelines for a host of offences including rape, there can never be uniformity, simply because the circumstances of offences vary, defendants vary, the effects of the crimes vary, and so forth. It is a rigid approach of that nature that has brought the Child Support Agency into disrepute. So, try as one might, unless one is dealing with offences of absolute liability, there will be variations.

Why have the Government not learnt from the CSA experience and the farcical and patently unjust unit fines system, under which people throwing litter can be fined £1,200 if they are high earners, while those committing far more serious offences might be fined a nominal £50? Has that debacle not registered with the Home Office?

I acknowledge that violent crime is on the increase and that we urgently need to take steps. Indeed, recorded sexual offences increased by 9 per cent. from 1989 to 1994, but convictions fell by more than 40 per cent. The Bill will not deal with that problem.

If the two-strikes element becomes law, the defendant will surely be tempted to plead not guilty and face a trial as, in any event, his sentence would be life and he would doubtless feel that convincing a jury of his innocence was worth a try. That has been the result in other jurisdictions. My source is California, where there has been a huge increase in jury trials together with the attendant delay and cost as the system tries to assimilate the increase. In addition, there has been a stark increase in the number of people held in prison on remand. Those two factors are almost an inevitable consequence, and I ask the Home Office to think again.

Although I appreciate that appeals should always be available to defendants on civil libertarian grounds, I view clause 4 with considerable trepidation. Inevitably, there will be a vast backlog in appeals from those who might not readily accept legal advice and those who would try their luck, as it were, although I dare to suggest that they should not try their luck in the Court of Appeal with any sanguinity. We will create further backlogs, delay and cost. That is almost as inevitable as night following day.

Several hon. Members have spoken about prisons eloquently and with great experience. The subject deserves more, but I will restrict myself to a few remarks, as other hon. Members want to speak.

In the British Isles, the imprisonment rate is higher per capita than in any other European state, although evidence suggests that crime rates in other states are broadly similar. It is the approach to penal policy that is different.

Two years ago, the Home Secretary announced—via the then chief executive of the Prison Service—that a further five or six prisons had to be built in the next few years. After the ignominious end of Mr. Derek Lewis's career, largely because of political interference from the Home Secretary, that figure had to be drastically reviewed. The Home Office now advises us that the prison population—already a European record—is set to rise by 12,000 by 2011. The Home Office says that that underlines the need for 11 or 12 new prisons.

Mr. Richard Tilt, Director General of the Prison Service, was quoted in mid-September as saying that, if the incidence of imprisonment continued to increase at the present rate, we would need one new prison per week—an extreme view, perhaps, but it comes from a person who does know, or should know, what he is talking about.

I do not know whether the Government are thinking of transforming these ideas into a sort of prison-building centre of excellence, but there is certainly a lot of building work ahead. The big question is how much better off society will be as a result. Let us not forget that the prison budget is being cut by around 15 per cent.

I share the view expressed by several right hon. and hon. Members about the need to train prisoners. They should be given education and shown an alternative to a life of crime. If we do not do so, prisons are likely to become colleges of crime, where an inmate will do nothing but improve his criminal acumen or skills. Training is of vital importance generally, but of paramount importance with regard to young offenders.

Whatever the future for this unfortunate Bill, resources for prisons need to be secured and extended. I fear that the colossal prison building programme under consideration will mean that resources will be spread yet more thinly. That may well result in prisons being reduced to inhumane places, risking the security and safety of prison officers and, ultimately, of the public at large.

By profession I am a criminal lawyer, and I have visited several prisons frequently. Believe me, there is nothing more disconcerting or frightening than an overcrowded prison where there is nothing to do other than stare at the walls. Rehabilitation must be one of the ingredients of any civilised penal policy, so that the convicted prisoner comes out of the institution better qualified to take a meaningful place in society. Anything less will increase crime and worsen the already serious situation.

I am pleased by the Bill's reference to fine defaulters, and I welcome the fact that the Government have recognised the problem and are going to deal with it. I also welcome the Government's recognition of the need

to deal severely with drug traffickers. Those creatures live off the misery and suffering of others. They are a disgusting band of people, who need to know where they stand. Society rightly demands that they taste stern justice. I regret that that is not likely to be the way they are treated.

Mr. Richard Spring (Bury St. Edmunds): What is it?

Mr. Llwyd: I will come to that—I saw that question coming.

The Court of Appeal carefully lays down guidelines for sentencing. A far better approach would be clearer recognition of the fact that drug trafficking is at the upper end of the sentencing tariff. I endorse what the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who spoke for the Opposition, said about the Court of Appeal. It is an excellent idea, and I commend it to the Government. The potential risks and problems of the two and three strikes also seem to be relevant here.

I am interested that the Bill makes a definite attempt to subvert the independence of the judiciary and that it deprives judges—

Mr. Maclean: How does the hon. Gentleman square his last point, about telling the Court of Appeal to give drug traffickers sentences at the higher end of the scale, with his passionate plea—illustrated with excerpts from Dicey's "Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution"—for separate powers and the principle of not interfering with the judiciary?

Mr. Llwyd: It is not for Parliament to tell the Court of Appeal what to do, but a body could be set up including the Court of Appeal and given a brief to ensure that adequate sentences were passed. The whole point is that it is not for Parliament to decide—there would be a separate, free-standing body, not subject to interference from Parliament, that would advise on sentencing.

Mr. Maclean *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Llwyd: The Minister may laugh, but I think that mine is a perfectly reasonable suggestion, and I hope that it will be developed in the months and years to come.

It is interesting that the Government appear to want to deprive courts of their discretion, yet, on 3 November 1994, in answer to a written question about minimum sentences for selling class A drugs, the then Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mr. Forsyth), replied:

"None. The courts should be left to determine appropriate sentences in individual cases."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1994; Vol. 248, c. *1334*.]

I shall not use the hackneyed term "U-turn"—I have heard enough of that nonsense—but it astonishing that the views of the Home Office should be so different less than two years later. Perhaps the Home Secretary is not aware of the fact that judges frequently attend sentencing seminars nowadays. As a body, they are more in tune with today's society than they might have been, say, 10 years ago.

I repeat my representations about burglary. As one who was burgled last year, I should perhaps wring my hands with glee at the prospect envisaged in clause 3, but I do not. I do not do so, for reasons that have already been outlined—there is a minimal form of burglary of which the legal definition is "entering a property for an illegal purpose". That purpose need not be theft—a minimally illegal purpose will suffice. The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made that point.

I note the exceptional circumstances incorporated in each clause, but if those words are to accommodate some of my concerns and if they represent an attempt to reinvest judges with their all-important discretion, I have to ask what is the purpose of all this. That brings me back to where I started: the Bill is a sad, transparent piece of political posturing, and everybody should regard it as such.

6.52 pm

Sir Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): At the outset of my remarks, I must declare that I am a parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation of England and Wales. However, I do not propose to make any comments on the federation's behalf; I want to reflect the concerns of my constituents in Uxbridge about crime and punishment.

I say to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), who shares with me the honour of being an adviser to the Police Federation, that private prisons are accountable. They are paid for the work they do through the Home Office and, consequently, that expenditure is subject to scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee which has the power to follow public money wherever it is spent. I thought that it might be useful to mention that.

I have some hesitation in following the distinguished right hon. and hon. Members who have already participated in the debate, such as the former Home Secretaries, my right hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Mr. Hurd) and for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). I have listened with great care to the lawyers who have spoken about the difficult matters being debated today. I am not a lawyer and I want—if I can—to speak from the point of view of the man in Uxbridge High street.

It is beyond doubt that there is public dissatisfaction about what appears to the man in the street to be inconsistencies in sentencing in recent years. I know that responsibility for sentencing rests with the judiciary. My comments are, therefore, made with all due respect to the judges, who have such a difficult task to perform. They do so with the benefit of guidelines issued by the Court of Appeal; however, that court has been wary of giving the impression that its decisions are to be regarded as absolutely authoritative and has often stressed that each case depends on its own facts.

I was interested in the comments on sentencing made by the former Master of the Rolls, Lord Denning, in an article in the *Daily Mail* on 8 March this year. He said:

"It is absurd that a sentence of—on the face of it—three years imprisonment really means less than 18 months. It detracts from the authority of the court when everyone knows that a long sentence does not mean what it appears to mean."

That feeling is shared by the public, who are deeply worried about violent crimes, sexual crimes and domestic burglaries. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is right to try to address those issues and, if necessary, to introduce new ways of dealing with them, even if that means changing from the policy of four or five years ago.

[Sir Michael Shersby]

Magistrates, who also do a fine job, receive sentencing guidance from the justices' clerks who serve in their courts. They, too, have the same difficult task as judges in dealing with dangerous criminals.

In the past few years while I have been in the House, several changes have been made to the law, notably those in the Criminal Justice Act 1991. That Act incorporated significant changes to the approach to be taken by the courts when sentencing offenders, one aspect of which was that there was to be greater use of community-based sentences that would restrict the offender's liberty without the need to resort to a custodial sentence. In fact, the 1991 Act, as amended by the Criminal Justice Act 1993, provided that, with the exception of the penalty for murder, the court would not be able to pass a custodial sentence unless, first, it was of the opinion that the offence or combination of offences was so serious that only a custodial sentence would be justified and, secondly, when the offence was a violent or sexual offence and a custodial sentence was necessary to protect the public from serious harm.

What, then, has changed since the passage of the 1991 Act and the amending Act of 1993, which set out the criteria to be used by the courts when determining the length of custodial sentences imposed for offences other than those, such as murder, for which the sentence is fixed by law? The answer is that the public have become deeply concerned about repeat offences—those committed by individuals who have been released from prison and who have offended again—sometimes involving the tragic loss of life of the victim. There have been a number of high-profile cases in which murderers have killed again following release after serving a determinate sentence passed at the original trial by a judge who must have taken account of all the circumstances in the case.

This afternoon, my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary told us that, in 1994, of 217 offenders who were convicted, only 10 received a life sentence. Several of those 217 have murdered again. I look forward to hearing from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State how many of those 217 committed another murder or further serious offences such as rape. Such tragic cases, some of them involving the murder of innocent children following violent sexual assault, have been given considerable coverage in the press and on television. Such cases, and those involving women who have lost their lives following rape in the most harrowing of circumstances—and following great suffering—have angered the public and led to calls for changes in the law and greater transparency in sentencing.

There have been calls for such individuals not to be given their liberty, to prevent them from offending again. That issue is the crux of the Bill. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary must balance the law as it stands now with those undoubted tragedies and try to produce changes that will prevent such cases from occurring in the future.

I am quite sure that the judges who presided in the 217 cases to which I have referred had regard to the particular circumstances of each case when they passed a determinate sentence. The House and others must, nevertheless, face the fact that each of those offenders was able to offend again when he was released into the community having completed his custodial sentence. Under the proposals in the Bill, had those offenders who had committed violent and sexual offences been sentenced to life imprisonment, they would not have been released into the community until the Parole Board agreed to it on the basis of expert advice that they no longer constituted a danger to the public.

In short, the proposals mean that a significant number of victims would be alive and well today, and living with their families. They would not have suffered their terrible injuries or the traumatic effects of assault if the law prevented dangerous individuals from being released again into society on the basis of expert advice to the Parole Board. I invite the House to recollect some of the cases that each and every one of us has seen reported either on television or in the press. I invite it to recollect the terrible tragedy and shock inflicted on the families of the victims. I invite it to consider whether there is something that we can do to change current practice to ensure that certain people are not at liberty to offend again.

Clause 1 states that courts will be required to impose a life sentence on a person aged 18 or more who is convicted of a serious offence and who has committed another serious offence in any part of the United Kingdom, although not necessarily the same offence as that on which he was subsequently convicted. As a result, if the Bill becomes law, offenders who are sentenced will be required to serve discretionary rather than mandatory life sentences.

I was interested by what my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) said about terminology. He suggested that such sentences should perhaps be known as open sentences; they could be described as indeterminate sentences. At least they would have the desired effect. If the description is right, it might not have the disastrous effect, suggested by some hon. Members, of offenders deciding to murder rather than risk the possibility of such a sentence.

The procedure governing the tariff is also very important. It is intended that that procedure and decisions on release in such cases will be the same as those which currently apply to discretionary life sentences. That means that the trial judge will specify the tariff to be served for retribution and deterrence. At the end, the Parole Board will determine whether it is safe to release an offender, and Ministers of the Crown will play no part in the process. I believe that that meets the anxiety expressed by a number of judges and Peers, who are concerned about ministerial involvement.

I ask the House: what, then, is wrong with that procedure? What is wrong with arriving at a situation in which a substantial proportion of the 217 individuals whom I mentioned would not be allowed into society to offend again until expert advice counselled that it was safe for them to be released? We must consider those questions in our debate tonight.

We all know that domestic burglars have visited their misery on our constituents in increasing numbers in the past few years. In some parts of the country, happily, the incidence of burglary has decreased—thanks to the terrific efforts of the police to target that type of offender. My constituents ask me how it is that someone who has burgled again and again can receive what appears to be a comparatively light sentence. There is a lot to be said for

the public having a clear idea of the custodial sentences for someone who engages in repeat burglary. That lack of knowledge must be tackled if the confidence of the public is to be retained.

How many burglars will go to prison for three years when the Bill becomes law? It is difficult to be precise, but if we consider the studies that have been carried out into the age of offenders and the frequency with which they offend, we might get some idea. The age of criminals is not known until they are caught, so the only regular relevant information is based on the age of those who are found guilty by the courts or cautioned by the police. Those figures may not be representative of all burglars, and the age distribution of those who are not caught may differ from those who are.

Of the 45,800 individuals found guilty or cautioned for burglary in England and Wales in 1995, 3,800, or 8 per cent., were between the ages of 10 and 13; 13,900, or 30 per cent., were between the ages of 14 and 17; 9,200, or 20 per cent., were aged between 18 and 20; and 18,900, or 41 per cent., were aged 21 or more. If the Bill becomes law, 28,100 burglars over the age of 18 will be at risk of receiving a mandatory three-year custodial sentence if they are convicted of two other domestic burglaries. However, 39 per cent. of all those convicted or cautioned for burglary in 1995 were below the age of 18, and would therefore not be subject to the mandatory sentence. We must bear that in mind when we debate the matter.

I welcome the curfew order, accompanied by electronic monitoring, to which my right hon. and learned Friend referred. I also welcome the proposal to name offenders under the age of 18, which would have the desirable effect of making their names known in the community in which they have committed their offences. I also agree with those hon. Members on both sides of the House who have referred to the need for rehabilitation. That has a vital role to play in ensuring that people do not offend again and again after serving their custodial sentences.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) spoke about mandatory sentences for those engaged in the business of destroying the health and the lives of the people of this country, many of whom are young. Many of my constituents would agree that it is about time that we had a seven-year mandatory sentence. The courts have discretion not to impose the mandatory sentences, but they must state their reasons.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy and my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham referred to the trade in drugs by young people, some of whom are inadequate and find that that is the only way in which they can earn enough money to live on. Many of those young people trade in class A drugs—heroin, for example—which, if taken by other young people, can ruin their lives permanently. We must give the courts a powerful sentence to deter those who organise the trafficking in drugs, and we must deter those who too easily and casually sell on their drugs to classmates and other young people at dance halls and elsewhere. Once they do so, those youngsters are hooked, their lives start to go down the slippery slope and they are ruined and damaged. People who have faced that terrible problem in their own families will recognise that stern deterrent action is necessary.

I welcome the extension of the Attorney-General's powers to refer to the Court of Appeal sentences that he considers to be unduly lenient and failures by the court to impose life sentences as required by clause 1 or the minimum sentences required by clauses 2 and 3. The power exercised by the Attorney-General to challenge what he believes to be lenient sentences has, in general, been successful, worked well and gained public confidence. It is right that that should be extended by the Bill.

I will support the Bill tonight. It may well be improved in Committee, and the Home Secretary has stated his intention of tabling amendments to improve and extend its provisions. I rest with the simple proposition that the people of the United Kingdom expect Parliament to take action to deal with the changing circumstances faced by all of us as citizens, which result in people being murdered, raped and having to suffer the consequences of the distribution of class A drugs. There is no automatic or easy solution, but my right hon. and learned Friend and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State have tackled a difficult situation with courage. The Bill should receive a Second Reading and be given careful consideration throughout its passage through the House.

7.12 pm

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate and to follow so many important speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. We have heard distinguished comments from former Home Secretaries and a former Minister with responsibility for prisons. I noted their words of caution.

I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby) and the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke). I am in the same club: I have no particular expertise on the matter but readily recognise the views that they expressed.

I know from Sherwood and from Nottinghamshire that many ordinary people are worried to death about what they perceive to be a relentless increase in crime. In Nottinghamshire crime has risen by 108 per cent. over the past 17 years. During that period the number of uniformed police officers available for duty has risen by just 2.8 per cent.

We had a debate earlier about the effectiveness and value of the police. The fear of crime is sometimes more disabling than the crime itself. That fear, especially among women and the elderly, can be alleviated by the presence of the bobby on the beat. I hope that whatever else may be the result of the Bill and its financial consequences, more money can be made available to put the bobby back on the beat to offer that reassurance.

The incidence of various categories of serious crime has risen in Nottinghamshire over the past decade. The number of cases of attempted murder, conspiracy to murder and incitement to murder stood at 14 in 1985. In 1995 that figure had increased to 106—an increase of about 700 per cent. The number of rapes committed in Nottinghamshire has risen from 33 in 1985 to 122 in 1995—an increase of almost 400 per cent. Drug trafficking offences have gone from 90 in 1985 to 380 in 1995—an increase of more than 400 per cent.

The Home Secretary's prescription is to advocate and impose severe sentences. His argument is that severe sentences act as a deterrent: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." I am not convinced that that is the total answer. A deterrent has a part to play, but there is more

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evidence that an increased chance of getting caught is linked to a fall in crime. People are deterred not by the sentence that they may face some time in the future, but by the sure knowledge that they will be apprehended.

It grieves me enormously that out of every 50 crimes committed in Nottinghamshire and throughout the country, only one ends in a conviction before the court. That is a criminals charter: a 2 per cent. chance of being convicted. We must do better than that. Before ensuring that people are punished, we must ensure that they are caught.

Alongside the desire to apprehend offenders, other programmes must be put in place. Deterrents and prisons have their place, but so do other measures, such as crime prevention. Local authorities, the police and voluntary organisations should work more closely together to tackle crime. We should work hard on young offenders. It is important to intervene quickly and positively when young people begin to get into trouble, to nip the offending in the bud and get them through the court system as quickly as possible. The juvenile justice system is fractured and needs radical overhaul.

We must tackle drugs. The Bill contains provisions for that, but there are other ways of approaching the problem. I was delighted that the Prime Minister came to Nottinghamshire last Friday to learn about a project called DARE, which is run by Nottinghamshire constabulary in association with Nottinghamshire county council and others. The project works with young people at school from an early age to tackle the pernicious effects of drugs. This is what the Prime Minister said:

"I think that DARE is wonderful. Drugs are very dangerous and people are often led to believe that some soft drugs are not too bad—most people started on something soft. It is important that we learn about drugs and are all able to say no."

He concluded by saying that the project had an important message to give.

So as well as sentencing people who traffic in drugs we need to put in resources lower down the scale. We need to ensure that projects such as DARE, which runs as a pilot scheme in Nottinghamshire, are set up across the country.

I wish to highlight a number of aspects of the Bill. I was interested to note that the Home Secretary spent so much time talking about sexual offences against children, as did the hon. Member for Uxbridge. In this respect the proposals in the Bill are useful and far reaching. Such offenders should go to prison for a long time; more importantly, they should come out on licence subject to proper supervision. The Bill must not stand alone, however. It must operate alongside the Police Bill and any forthcoming legislation on paedophiles. The Bill, with its emphasis on punishment, deterrence and supervised licence, is not enough in itself.

It can be difficult to gain a conviction in a case involving sexual offences against children, because the latter often have to give evidence against the perpetrator, who is often related to them—a father, an uncle or someone else in the family. I hope that the Pigot committee report, which advocates better protection for children giving evidence in court, will be implemented soon.

I also support the excellent work of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. It does a great deal of work towards the prevention of such crimes and the rehabilitation of offenders. The NSPCC could perhaps become involved in after-care and monitoring and in persuading people to avoid these terrible offences. That being so, we must ensure that bodies like the NSPCC are properly resourced to do the job.

This is a very costly Bill. In Committee and, I suspect, in Cabinet tomorrow when spending plans come under scrutiny, comparisons between the expenditure involved in this Bill and other spending priorities will have to be made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) mentioned rape, an offence which also features in the Bill. Like him, I am extremely concerned about the harrowing experiences undergone recently by victims of rape in the witness box. There has been talk of early legislation to improve matters. It is quite wrong, once a victim has been through such a wicked ordeal, to subject that victim to cross-examination by the alleged perpetrator for hours and sometimes even days.

My fear is that because the Bill imposes a life sentence for second offenders of this type, more victims will be subjected to such cross-examination. Perhaps we should pause to think about that rather carefully.

Clauses 1 to 3 impose fixed sentences for certain serious violent and sexual offences and for burglaries, all of them on people above 18. I want to press Ministers on this point. Perhaps we should allow an element of discretion when it comes to young people who committed their first offence when under the age of 18. Someone who committed a serious offence at 10 or 11 might then be punished, do his time and make amends—only to reoffend as an adult. As the Bill stands, he would then be given an automatic minimum sentence. Perhaps some sort of discount should be introduced to reflect the fact that the earlier offence was committed by someone who was under age.

At a number of points in clauses 1 to 3, the Bill includes the phrase:

"unless the court is of the opinion that there are exceptional circumstances which justify its not doing so."

I pressed the Home Secretary earlier about that. He offered the example of exceptional circumstances applying when the person in the dock had co-operated with the police in such a way as to lead to the conviction of others. Like other hon. Members, I believe that there is a strong case for giving the courts some discretion, and I hope that the use of "exceptional circumstances" will be explored further. The difficulty of course is that the more they are allowed, the more the tariff becomes inoperable.

Is it right, for instance, that a small-time drug addict who shares drugs with his colleagues and friends should automatically be given a seven-year sentence, alongside a drug baron who directs a big trafficking operation? Equity is at stake here.

Another positive feature of the Bill is that it permits fine defaulters to serve community sentences instead of prison sentences. Such people could get a great deal out of doing supervised work in the community. I hope that this will resolve the problem of people being sent to prison for not paying fines for not having television licences. In 1994 there were 730 such people in prison, of whom 243 were women. It is estimated for 1995 that the figures were again 730 and about 230 respectively. Some of those women live in stricken circumstances with young

children. It is crazy to lock them up for nine or 10 days—the current mean—for not paying the licence fee. I am therefore delighted by the change proposed in the Bill. It is of course a matter for magistrates courts to deal with, but I know that many magistrates strongly believe that a change was overdue.

What effect will the Bill have on the Prison Service? The service is in significant difficulty. It is confronted with a 13 per cent. budget cut. Some prison governors are running down the use of their prison education departments, and the support available for probation services in prisons is declining. Meanwhile, the number of people in prison is increasing. In 1993, there were 40,000 people; last week, reportedly, there were 57,000. Richard Tilt, Director-General of the Prison Service, suggests that the trend of increase might be 1,000 people per month. He is already talking about time shares and weekend prisons.

The Bill will have far-reaching consequences for the Prison Service—consequences perceived only dimly at the moment. The Bill's financial memorandum says so. The Home Office suggests that there will be 11,000 extra prisoners during a 12-year period as the Bill's effects work through. That alone will create a need for 12 additional prisons, at a cost said to be between £375 million and £435 million—of course, that is the Home Office's assessment of the cost.

I read in detail the White Paper that preceded the Bill, entitled "Protecting the Public", and noted in it a claim that the Bill's deterrent effect would reduce the need for prison places by 20 per cent. I am not convinced that the Bill will have such a strong deterrent effect, and I am anxious about the reduction in remission that is contained in the Bill. The Bill's financial consequences might in fact be far more serious than the financial projections suggest.

I am worried about the consequences of courts reflecting in their sentencing pattern the openness and transparency proposed in the Bill, and that a three-year sentence will in effect become an 18-month sentence. That may be the effect of the present arrangements, but when the public realise it, courts and judges will be strongly criticised in the light of current opinion. It will be very difficult for judges to explain to the public that prison sentences will be cut in half.

I am therefore sceptical that the Bill's effects will match the projections in the financial memorandum. I envisage even more overcrowded prisons, with even greater potential for riots. Most worryingly, I envisage prisons becoming dysfunctional places. People need to be deterred and to be punished, but people also need rehabilitation, and I am extremely concerned that prisons will be unable to perform any of their rehabilitative roles.

Prison building has local effects as well as national ones. A prison is now being built in my constituency. The Lowdham Grange borstal has been knocked to the ground and a new Lowdham Grange category B prison is being built. There is good local understanding of the need for that prison; because there has been a prison establishment on the site before, people have been able to tolerate it. The tradition is there.

I hope that the Home Office will confirm tonight what the Prison Service told me informally—that the new prison will retain the name Her Majesty's prison, Lowdham Grange. There is some anxiety that a new name will be given. Overwhelmingly, people in that part of Nottinghamshire want to stick with the tradition and with the name.

Although there is understanding about the need for the prison, I am afraid that there is no understanding of some of the consequences. The new owners and their agents have been careful about access to the prison. A scheme was proposed that would stop traffic problems for people who live on Old Epperstone road. I was delighted with the scheme, as were local people. We are amazed that Nottinghamshire county council has unilaterally prevented that scheme from proceeding. The only crumb of comfort is that we now have an assurance from the county council that, if the council's traffic scheme does not work, new additional alternative remedial measures will be taken. I say this in the context of a Bill that argues for 12 extra prisons.

The people of Lowdham, of Nottinghamshire and of the entire country are worried about crime. They believe that something needs to be done. It is important that we tread this path carefully and thoughtfully, and that our work is well researched before we start.

It has been claimed that the Bill is open and transparent. We need to ensure that it can be that, so I hope that we devote time and attention to the Bill and do not rush it for political motives before the general election. This country's strong tradition of balancing the will of Parliament with the need to respect the rights of the courts is the cornerstone of what we stand for. The Bill risks destroying that cornerstone. I hope that the Ministers who have listened to the debate will heed the voices of caution and proceed carefully.

7.37 pm

Mr. Walter Sweeney (Vale of Glamorgan): I support the Bill and congratulate the Home Secretary on pressing on with the Government's crusade to deter and prevent crime.

There are two ways of deterring rational criminals from committing crime. The first is to improve detection and conviction rates. The Government have come to grips with that problem by increasing the number of police officers by 16,000 since 1979, and by increasing the number of civilians working at police stations by 16,000. The Government have also announced plans to fund an extra 3,000 police officers.

Police use of improved equipment—including better use of information technology and use of closed circuit television—is likely to improve detection and conviction rates, but it will not be fully effective in deterring rational criminals unless criminals, once convicted, receive a punishment to match the crime. Home Office statistics show that prison operates as an effective deterrent against re-offending for many offenders. Critics of imprisonment sing the praises of community service, but prison has better results, despite the fact that prison comes higher up the sentencing tariff list.

Most prison inmates would greatly prefer to be at liberty, so those inmates who are rational are likely to try to avoid being sent back to prison. Unfortunately, many offenders become persistent offenders and end up with a long list of custodial sentences. There are professional burglars who know that, if they are careful and lucky, they can get away with dozens of burglaries and reap substantial ill-gotten gains before they are caught. When they are eventually caught, they know that, as the law stands, their third conviction is unlikely to result in a custodial sentence that is much longer than their first. I,

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therefore, strongly welcome the Bill's "third strike and you're out" approach. A three-year minimum sentence for burglars with two or more convictions for similar offences seems eminently reasonable.

I am also delighted that traffickers in hard drugs will face a minimum of seven years' imprisonment. Drug barons who make vast profits out of human misery and loss of life should face the death penalty for a repeat conviction. The evil perpetrated by those people transcends in seriousness many offences of murder, as the supplying of drugs on a large scale may result indirectly in many deaths. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us, when he replies to the debate, whether the Government are willing to allow a free vote on an amendment to that effect.

I welcome the requirement to impose a life sentence on repeat serious or sexual offenders, unless there are exceptional circumstances that justify not doing so. Of course, however long prison sentences are, irrational criminals will always reoffend after attaining their liberty. Nothing will deter them. Some of the do-gooders on the Opposition Benches would probably say that we might as well let them off or let them out early. But that misses the point. For as long as persistent criminals are kept in prison, they are largely prevented from reoffending. Whether it costs £20,000, £30,000 or £50,000 per annum to keep a dangerous, wicked person under lock and key, while potential aggressors are kept off our streets, potential victims will be saved the trauma of being raped, knifed, shot or burgled.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) said on the concept of minimum sentencing. He seemed to oppose the concept, claiming that discretion should be left entirely to judges, and citing, with apparent approval, an earlier speech on this subject by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence). He said that the Home Secretary had started down a slippery slope by introducing minimum sentencing. He went on to make the extraordinary and illogical claim that the Home Secretary had speeded up his progress down the slippery slope by including in clauses 1, 2 and 3 a proviso that the new, longer minimum sentences should not be imposed if that were justified by exceptional circumstances. With respect, the hon. Member for Blackburn cannot have it both ways. Either he is for judicial discretion in those clauses, or he is not.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North): The hon. Gentleman should not misrepresent my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who did not say that determinate sentences should be left to individual judges. He said that it should be up to the Court of Appeal to give guidelines. The hon. Gentleman should correct that point before he continues.

Mr. Sweeney: I am grateful for that attempt at clarification. I understood it to be an obvious discrepancy in the hon. Member for Blackburn's speech.

I can see nothing wrong, in principle, with minimum sentences. They are not new. When a mandatory minimum 12-month driving ban was first introduced for people who drink and drive, the only objectors were drunken drivers. I am confident that the public will have little sympathy with persistent serious offenders who are sent to gaol for longer than they had expected.

The Bill introduces the new principle of honest and transparent sentencing, which I am sure the public will welcome. The hon. Members for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) and for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) quite reasonably said that the views of legal practitioners should be taken into account in framing legislation. I remember my days as an articled clerk accompanying counsel down the steps at the Crown court to see clients in the cells just after they had been sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Counsel would explain that the apparent sentence was not as bad as it seemed, and would then tell the defendant how long he would have to serve. Most defendants, especially the experienced ones, showed by their demeanour that they had already done the simple sum for themselves. The present gulf between theoretical and actual sentences, although narrower than it used to be, brings the law into disrepute. The public have a right to expect that the headline sentence that appears in the papers bears a close relation to the period actually served.

The Bill rightly preserves a significant incentive for prisoners to behave well throughout their sentences, including any period spent in custody on remand, so that they may be released at the earliest possible date. The hon. Member for Swansea, East expressed concern that persistent burglars who had committed trivial offences, such as taking a milk bottle through an open window, might end up serving a three-year minimum sentence. I cannot believe for a moment that the judge's discretion under exceptional circumstances would not be used to prevent such an offender from having to spend three years inside.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) said that the efficacy of a long sentence should be judged on the extent to which the prisoner reoffends after release. That is one way of measuring the success of a prison sentence. However, another measure is the number of offences that the offender is prevented from committing while he is inside.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery criticised clause 21 for allegedly obliging judges to halve nominal sentences to achieve the same net result. With respect, it is plainly necessary for judges to take into account the effect of the Bill so as to achieve the desired net result. The alternative would be for many sentences to be almost doubled. That is not the intention behind the honesty in sentencing provisions. Despite his long experience of the law, the hon. and learned Gentleman seems to fail to understand that part of the Bill.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) was sceptical about the value of long sentences. I accept that long sentences are not necessarily an effective deterrent. However, I believe that tough sentencing has an impact. I recently visited Singapore, where $500 fines are imposed for dropping litter, and where drug barons receive the death penalty. I did not see much litter, and I suspect that drug barons operate covertly.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said that we should listen more closely to the experts. By that he meant solicitors like himself, barristers like the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery, and judges, many of whom understandably have high self-esteem and think that they should have total discretion in sentencing. I have been talking to some real experts, such as the police, who deal with crime every day. I have also been talking to

some other real experts: my constituents in the Vale of Glamorgan, who, despite recent improvements, face a totally unacceptable level of violent crime and burglaries. Almost every week I hold two surgeries in different parts of the vale, and the story I hear is the same. The public applaud the Home Secretary's efforts, but urge me to urge him to do more.

The police also seem to be on our side, whatever Opposition Members may say. In a press release on 6 March 1996, the national president of the Police Superintendents Association, Chief Superintendent Brian Mackenzie, said:

"Police officers throughout this country are fed up to the back teeth with apologists for criminal activities finding excuses not to severely punish hardened professional criminals . . . it would help public confidence if prisoners were required to serve the full sentences which were handed out . . . We have had 30 years of feather bedding wrongdoing. However, since the pendulum started to swing back two years ago we have seen a continuing reduction in reported crime . . . We totally support the Home Secretary in what he is proposing."

In a similar vein, the chief constable of Hampshire, Mr. John Hoddinnott, said:

"the public are justifiably concerned by offences like burglary, which are particularly distressing to victims. Those who persistently commit such offences must expect the courts to hand down a lengthy custodial sentence".

Finally, on Radio 5 on 12 October 1995, the President of the Police Federation, Mr. Fred Broughton, said:

"The sentencing issue is going to be controversial, there are going to be those people that say, 'does it really work, would it make an impact?' I'll tell you what it will do. It will give confidence to victims and witnesses that have seen people committing very serious offences come out of prison early and then re-offend".

I welcome the Bill's provisions for the extended supervision of sex offenders. There was a sad case in my constituency involving a young mentally handicapped girl who was seriously sexually assaulted. Her assailant was originally charged with rape but, due to lack of evidence—which may have been occasioned, in part, by the young girl's mental problems—the charge was reduced and the assailant was convicted and served a prison term for sexual assault.

In due course, the assailant was released early from prison. He returned home and was unexpectedly seen leering across the garden fence at the young girl—his next-door neighbour—whom he had been convicted of assaulting. I believe that it is imperative for the Government to take the action necessary to ensure that, when people are found guilty of that kind of offence, they cannot live close to those whom they have attacked after they have completed their prison sentence.

The Bill correctly places great emphasis on the need for tough sentences for persistent serious offenders. I welcome its useful range of remedies for fine defaulters. The legislation also includes measures designed to help to deal with young offenders who must be deterred and prevented from becoming professional criminals. I particularly welcome the new option allowing the courts to label young offenders in order to protect the public.

Last year there was a spate of quite serious burglaries, ram raids and the like in the little town of Llantwit Major in my constituency. Two young offenders were eventually apprehended for the crimes and sent to an institution in England. The crime rate in Llantwit Major plummeted immediately and I think that it would have assisted traders and other crime victims if the names of those young criminals had been publicised. We are not talking about young innocents who, through labelling, may be turned into criminals; we are talking about youths with a string of previous convictions. They were as addicted to crime as their much older counterparts.

I believe that one very helpful measure is missing from the Bill. I would like to see a declaratory statement to the effect that, in exercising its sentencing discretion, the judiciary should regard the interests of victims as paramount. It is a well-established principle of family law that the interests of the children of the family are paramount in divorce proceedings. The most important people associated with crime are not the criminals, the social workers, the court ushers, judges, magistrates, barristers, solicitors or those who work for the Crown Prosecution Service, but the victims. We must put their interests first in terms of deterrence, retribution and prevention.

I believe that such an amendment to the Bill would assist the interpretation of sentencing powers and reassure the public, who are the potential victims of crime, that the Government put their interests first.

7.54 pm

Mr. John Hutton (Barrow and Furness): It is true to say that the Crime (Sentences) Bill, which we are debating this evening, is designed, at least in part, to provoke an argument with the Opposition. However, thanks to several impressive contributions by Conservative Members, today's debate has served only to expose the extent of existing reservations and disagreements on the Conservative side regarding the direction of the Government's criminal justice policy.

We must put any debate on law and order in Britain today into its proper context. The facts are clear: crime has more than doubled since 1979. Convictions and cautions have fallen and criminals are three times more likely to get away with their crimes today than in 1980. In simple terms, there is more crime today and more people are getting away with it. The international comparisons are not very flattering to the Government: crime has risen faster in Britain than in any comparable country over the same period.

The figures for Cumbria in that period are also fairly depressing. Recorded crime in Cumbria has increased by 109 per cent. since 1979. Recorded incidents of violent crime in Cumbria are up by 205 per cent., and by 7.7 per cent. this year alone. According to the British crime survey—which provides a better and more accurate record of crime in the United Kingdom—in the northern region, one adult in 20 was a victim of wounding, common assault, robbery or a snatch theft at least once in 1995.

If we strip away the Home Secretary's party conference rhetoric, any reasonable person is likely to conclude that the Government have failed to respond effectively to the rise in crime in our society. The self-proclaimed party of law and order has failed spectacularly to deliver the goods. At least the Government's response has been predictable, if not effective. A serious debate about the measures that might help in the fight against crime has been replaced by mood music which is designed to grab a few quick headlines in the tabloids. As we approach the next election, we are confronted with a Government—desperate for any measure that might restore their

[Mr. John Hutton]

fortunes—who are cynically preparing to make changes to the criminal justice system on the basis of the Home Secretary's latest whim.

The Government are obviously prepared to perform spectacular U-turns on provisions that lie at the Bill's heart. Clauses 1 to 3, dealing with minimum sentences, and part II of the Bill, dealing with parole, are the most obvious examples of the U-turn stampede.

The Government's social and economic policies undermine their law and order agenda. Social disintegration and the marginalisation of the poor, which have become the characteristics of Conservative economic and social policy, create the conditions in which crime can thrive. Everyone knows that—even the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Mr. Sackville), has conceded that point.

That is not an excuse or a justification for criminal behaviour: people must always take full personal responsibility for their actions. However, I wonder how much of the additional expenditure on law and order might have proved unnecessary if we had devoted more attention to the causes of crime and to crime prevention. Such a policy might not have attracted the headlines that the Home Secretary craves in the *Daily Mail* and the other Tory tabloids, but it might have made a greater impact in the fight against crime than the measures that he has outlined today.

The national debate about crime must be informed once more by serious criminological research and analysis. We must look at the evidence in the cold light of day and consider why crime has risen, what measures would make matters worse and should be avoided, and how Government can help. I believe that such a debate should focus on improving the workings of our youth justice system—about which the Bill says nothing—and provide greater consistency in sentencing between different courts.

Hon. Members may have seen a report in yesterday's *Observer* describing a leaked Audit Commission report on Britain's youth justice system. I have no reason to believe that the report is inaccurate and, according to the *Observer*, it paints a pretty grim picture of Britain's youth courts. It condemns the youth justice system for

"expense, delays and its failure to monitor systematically the impact of its sentencing policies on young offenders. It shows a lack of co-ordination between public agencies in dealing with juvenile delinquency".

Tell us something that we did not already know about the youth justice system.

The provisions in clauses 1 to 3 have clearly undergone substantial evolution since they were first canvassed by the Home Secretary last year. One of the main concerns about his original proposals was the threat to judicial independence and the possibility of rough justice being handed out by the courts.

The new proposals in clauses 1 to 3 have introduced a major new element of discretion into the sentencing arrangements by allowing the courts to impose a lesser sentence if there are "exceptional circumstances". That will obviously result in the Court of Appeal being heavily involved in determining what "exceptional circumstances" are. Its interpretation will have an enormous influence on the impact of the new provisions. The Government's attempt to limit judicial involvement in fixing sentences for repeat offenders has thus gone into retreat.

I should have liked some reference in the Bill to reviewable sentences, as proposed by the Butler committee in 1975. Under such proposals, release would take place only after a finding that the offender no longer posed a risk to the public. I welcome the fact that those given a mandatory life sentence under clause 1 will have such an assessment, but reviewable sentences have much wider potential applications. They could be applied to all child sex offenders, on first conviction or subsequently. Such sentences would have the additional merit of corresponding more closely with the Government's stated intention of introducing more honesty into sentencing practice.

I am also concerned that the list of serious offences in clause 1(5) includes only two serious sex offences. Why did the Government choose to list only those two serious sex crimes? What about offences under sections 6 and 12 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956? Both sections detail serious sex crimes involving young children. I fully appreciate that a line has to be drawn and new offences have to be characterised, but I should be grateful for an explanation.

I welcome the provisions on the supervision of sex offenders, but I have two reservations. First, unless I am mistaken, the list mentioned by the Home Secretary this afternoon detailing restrictions that might be imposed on convicted sex offenders does not appear in the Bill. I assume that the Home Secretary was referring to his powers under clause 12(5) to make regulations on the supervision of any type of offender. It is a shame that draft regulations have not been published to correspond with the publication of the Bill. We could then have a better-informed debate on what the Home Secretary has in mind for the supervision of sex offenders. I am disappointed that the Bill includes no specific reference to the restrictions and controls that could be imposed on sex offenders. I think that that omission is a mistake.

Secondly, I am concerned about the extended powers under clause 16 to impose extensive post-release supervision orders on convicted sex offenders. Clause 16(1)(a) refers simply to someone convicted of a sexual offence. I am sure that that will be sufficiently comprehensive in most cases, but I am concerned that it will not always be comprehensive enough. Why should not those powers to impose a more extensive post-release supervision order extend to someone convicted of child abduction? It may be that such an offender did not get any further than abducting the child because the child was rescued before any more serious offence was committed. Would such an offender be considered a sexual offender for the purposes of the clause? My understanding is that he would not. The Bill is at fault there.

I should like to emphasise the comments of the Parole Board about the importance of prisoners being under effective supervision once they have been released. As many hon. Members have made clear, clause 12 might well result in prisoners being under supervision for considerably less time than at present. That would not be a sensible or desirable change. Considering the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of the Bill, our constituents would find such a measure extraordinary.

In its comments published on 15 October on the Government's White Paper, the Parole Board said:

"In general, therefore, under the proposed arrangements most prisoners will be under supervision for considerably less time than at present. But the White Paper is almost entirely silent on what supervision will mean. If it is to be at least as effective for long term prisoners as it is at present, the existing system which relies upon detailed risk assessments must not be dismantled."

Unfortunately, the provisions in the White Paper are now contained in the Bill, which is as silent as the White Paper was on what supervision orders will mean in practice.

More significantly, the Parole Board goes on to say:

"We believe that the 'honesty in sentencing' proposals will lead to an abandonment of that rehabilitation process, replacing a system which is effective in dealing with the release of dangerous and persistent criminals with one which will be worse in almost every respect. This will result in poorer rather than better protection for the public. The Board strongly believes that the Government will be making a serious, and potentially dangerous, mistake if it does not reconsider this part of its White Paper proposals."

Unfortunately, the Government did not reconsider that part of the White Paper proposals. They are in the Bill. I hope that we shall have some detailed answers in Committee to the serious criticisms that the Parole Board has made.

Many hon. Members have referred to the impact of the proposals on the prison population and the prison estate. I do not want to repeat all the arguments that have been made, but there is a real concern that the Government's proposals will lead to an impossible burden on the prison service. The Select Committee on Home Affairs, which is currently investigating the prison service, heard evidence last week from the Prison Governors Association that the service will be in a very difficult situation next year, notwithstanding the coming into force of these proposals in the medium term.

It is imperative that the quality of the prison service is maintained. We have to do something constructive with those who come into our prisons. There is no point and no value for the taxpayer or for society in recycling an endless stream of prisoners through prison gates, many for the second, third or fourth time. They will come back again, costing us a huge amount and providing no substantive protection. Any proposals which might hit at the rehabilitation and education programmes of the prison service would be a huge mistake. There are concerns—some have been expressed by hon. Members and others by people outside the House—that that is already happening under the twin pressures of more prisoners coming in and the continuing squeeze on prison budgets, which are facing a 13 per cent. cut this year.

In essence, this is a Bill that must be and needs to be improved in Committee so that the public can be offered greater protection from dangerous criminals and so that the courts will be allowed to develop better sentencing policies. However, the Bill has all the appearance of being a last-gasp effort by a Government who, everyone knows, have simply run out of excuses to explain away the record increase in crime during their period in office. They have run out of excuses and very soon, they will be run out of office as well.

8.9 pm

Mr. William Powell (Corby): My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has brought before the House a valuable measure which deserves discussion and which, with the exception of the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile), every hon. Member who has spoken in the debate feels deserves further discussion. I certainly support that line.

Before I came to the House, I practised every day for 15 years in the criminal courts, mostly in London. I had close experience, therefore, of many people who were given prison sentences. I used to visit prisons on a basis that was far too regular for my own good, so I had a continuing knowledge of what was taking place in the criminal courts.

When I came here, I did not, unlike some hon. Members, wish to devote my time solely to criminal justice issues, although I could have done. I have, therefore, become a little more detached than would have been the case if I had continued with my daily practice, but I hope that I have not forgotten those past days or unlearned the lessons that were a part of my daily experience.

Above all, I learned that there were few things more inimical to our system of democracy than punishing the innocent. As conviction necessarily involves punishment, it is vital that our system of criminal justice ensures that we do not make it too easy to convict people and that a high standard and quality of proof is provided before conviction takes place.

Once people have been convicted, the public are entitled to expect that the courts will reflect the seriousness that the public feel about the activities that are carried out by criminals. When I was born and in the years after world war two, the Lord Chief Justice was Lord Goddard. He commanded respect throughout the country. Ordinary people felt that as long as he was Lord Chief Justice, he and the judges whom he led would conduct the criminal justice system in a way that met with their approval and approbation. In the 40 years or so since Lord Goddard retired as Lord Chief Justice, there has, I regret to say, been a striking collapse of public confidence in the ability of the criminal justice system to reflect people's wishes.

Another principle that I learned, which is of the most profound importance, is that the criminal law exists to protect the poor, the weak, the inadequate and those who may lack courage. They are the people whom we remembered last week on the feast of All Souls Day. Ordinary people are entitled to expect with confidence that the criminal law will protect them, by ensuring that those who commit crimes are caught, convicted and properly punished.

I take the view that most criminals get caught, but I believe that they do not get caught for all the offences that they commit. We have to provide a mechanism that will ensure that those who commit crimes are convicted of all their crimes and not merely for one or a small number of their crimes. An Opposition Member referred not long ago to the fact that professional burglars may feel that they can get away with their burglaries time and again before they are convicted. When they are subsequently convicted, they are not convicted for their earlier crimes.

When I started practising in the criminal courts, there was a thriving industry of "defences taking into consideration". That is no longer the case. We must provide a mechanism whereby those who are convicted of crime will assist the authorities in uncovering all their past criminal activities, as far as is possible.

[Mr. William Powell]

One of the principles that we might adopt from the American system—it is much derided, but it has many more strengths than our superior English lawyers are often prepared to concede—is that in American jurisdictions, if the judge trying the case feels that the person before him is a professional criminal, that is, a persistent criminal who is earning his or her living substantially out of crime, he may sentence that person to an impossibly long term of imprisonment. However, there is a review a year or so later.

Somebody may be sent to prison for 99 years—nobody imagines that that person will serve 99 years—as a holding sentence. A year later, that person will be brought back before the court and the court will then inquire into what assistance that person has given to the prosecuting authorities in the detection of other crimes in which he has been involved. He may have given information about other people who have been involved in the same crimes, or he may have helped in the recovery of property. He may have given information leading to the arrest and conviction of other persons. If that person has disgorged all that he knows, the judge may vary the sentence from 99 years to a much more sensible period. That system avoids the distasteful practice of plea bargaining, which has grown too much in this country, albeit covertly.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman with great interest. Is he advocating that we should induce a prisoner with a savage sentence to lie, cheat and admit to things that he has not done? Is he advocating that we should do all the things that are wrong in our law? That led, for example, to a false clear-up rate by the Kent police. Surely the hon. Gentleman cannot be advocating that.

Mr. Powell: It is clear from what I have said that if a convicted person proposed to give the police such assistance, they would be able to advise the trial judge that that was what had happened and perhaps the 99-year sentence would be doubled as a consequence. However, we must provide some mechanism whereby those who have already been convicted of crime and who have been involved in serious crime time and again come forward to the courts and provide as much information as they can. I am not talking about false information, as the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) fears. The courts can easily reflect such co-operation or lack of co-operation in their handling of people. There should be some benefit for those who assist in the process that I have described and such a benefit does not exist to a satisfactory extent at present.

In the present day, there is a lack of fear of the criminal justice system among professional villains. In the days of Lord Goddard, there was respect and fear of what would happen if one came before Her Majesty's judges. Only the other day, the *Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph*, the local newspaper that covers the eastern part of Northamptonshire, including my constituency, produced the best article it has written in my years as a Member of Parliament.

On 9 October 1996, the headline was, "Why didn't they lock me up?" The story continued:

"A teenage thief admitted today that prison is the only thing which will stop his life of crime.

In an amazingly frank interview the 17-year-old said: 'I'm looking for a job but it's easier to go out and steal. Prisons are the only thing which could stop me.'

The teenager, who cannot be named for legal reasons, confessed to: committing his first offence at 13, breaking into hundreds of cars in four years, selling stolen radios to buy cannabis.

He said: 'I don't want to do this for the rest of my life—but it's easy money.'"

That person had no fear.

Just before Christmas, at the Middlesex Guildhall—just the other side of Parliament square—a convicted burglar was brought before Judge Clarkson. It was the judge's last case. The defendant was 6 ft 8 in tall. He was a professional burglar who had been convicted several times. On that occasion, the jury convicted him of a series of burglaries in the Finchley area of London, during which he had undoubtedly humiliated the victims of his crime. Given his size, many people felt terrorised by him. He was advised by his counsel, absolutely correctly, that the likely sentence would be eight years—a serious sentence for burglary. He was sent to prison for 27 years; he fainted in the dock when he heard the sentence. Many of our constituents would welcome it if more prisoners fainted in the dock when they heard their sentences.

I am referring to professional criminals. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) said that too many people in prison are not professional criminals, but professional prisoners. Those are not the people I have in mind. I am referring to serious, professional, ruthless criminals who most of our constituents feel are getting away with their crimes.

Unfortunately, whether we like it or not—and I do not like it—increasing numbers of our constituents no longer trust those who operate the criminal justice system to deliver penalties that are appropriate to the crime. By changing direction, the Bill starts a process whereby we hope that it will be possible to impose even tougher sentences and, at the same time, weed out prisoners who ought not to be in prison and for whom nothing worth while is achieved by their being in prison.

I refer not merely to those who fail to pay their television licence fees, but to the professional prisoners mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley, who are sent to prison time and again. They become used to prison life and even begin to depend on it. They are frequently illiterate, always untrained and have nothing to offer the world except the possibility of another crime, which, as much as anything else, is designed to get them back to prison life.

I should not wish to fill our prisons with 75,000, 100,000 or 200,000 people. I should prefer it if fewer than 5,000 people were in prison; those in prison should be the professional villains who wreak such appalling havoc on the lives of many people.

I approve of minimum sentences. No one has had any trouble with the idea of maximum sentences, so I do not understand why there should be such a difficulty with minimum sentences. However, I wish that the judiciary had taken advantage of the increased powers that we gave them. Time and again I have voted to increase the powers of sentencing available to the courts, only to find that they are not being used. As far as I am aware, Judge Clarkson in the Finchley case that I mentioned was the only judge ever to have used the powers of enhancing sentences that we have given for such cases as I have described.

Experts in the field have lost touch with our constituents—the all souls, as I described them—the poor, the defenceless and the weak who look to the police and the courts, presided over by magistrates or judges, to ensure that those who commit serious crimes receive serious punishments.

When I talk about deterrent sentences, I do not mean tough sentences whereby somebody says, "That was tough," and it is quickly forgotten, but sentences that crackle round the community for years to come. In 1958 there were race riots in Notting Hill. Mr. Justice Salmon sent those convicted to prison for four years, and 10 years later when I started at the Bar, people in the Temple and in prisons were still talking about the deterrent sentences imposed on those Notting Hill race rioters in 1958.

When I started at the Bar, there was an outbreak of vandalism of telephone kiosks in Birmingham. Judge Argyle, the then recorder of Birmingham, sent everyone who was convicted of vandalism to prison. The vandalism stopped in Birmingham, but not elsewhere. People in Birmingham talked in pubs, clubs and their homes about the prison sentences that inevitably followed such crimes.

Deterrent sentences should crackle round the community. They should not be forgotten, but should be remembered for years. As so much crime is international, they should be remembered abroad, too.

Certain crimes are limited in number, but important and serious, and all our constituents find them objectionable and repulsive. They require deterrent sentences: Those involved in the production and distribution of child pornography should be imprisoned for a long time. People who are involved in sexual offences against young children or kidnapping should be imprisoned, not for an indeterminate life sentence, but for a minimum of perhaps 60 years. Above all, those who are responsible for the mass importation of drugs into Britain, sometimes involving millions of pounds, should be imprisoned.

The other day, when I was driving home I heard on the news that the Old Bailey had heard its most serious case ever involving heroin importation. The sentence imposed on the main defendant was 14 years. The case was reported briefly on the news and then forgotten.

I wish it to be known abroad that those who bring vast quantities of heroin into Britain will be pursued to the ends of the earth, that all their assets will be stripped from them when they are convicted and that they should expect to spend at least 60 years in a British gaol if they are convicted in Britain. The message should go out from the House and the country that certain people are absolutely unwelcome. We should protect our people as they expect to be protected and as they expect the judges to protect them—by sending those who smuggle heroin worth £5 million or £50 million to prison not for 14 years, but for the whole of their effective lives. Those sentences would crackle round the community exactly as deterrent sentences should.

8.29 pm

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): I shall not follow the line of thought of the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Powell)—[HON. MEMBERS: "Line of thought?"] Perhaps I am being generous. His speech certainly provoked a response that is worthy of discussion in Committee.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend accept that it shows that the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Powell) has been out of the trade, as it were, for some 15 years? The standard sentence set down by the Court of Appeal for serious drug smuggling of class A drugs is more than 20 years, not 14. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman ought to come up to date before he speaks in the House.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. I know that he tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Corby.

I speak as one of the hon. Members in this debate who is not a lawyer and, alongside the bunch of professionals, I join several of my select colleagues in putting forward views on the Bill. I speak as someone who has been a Member of Parliament for four and a half years and who has witnessed the effects of crime on many of my constituents. I reject the charge levelled by many Conservative Members that the Labour party and the Opposition are soft on crime and soft on the causes of crime. We are trying to put forward some very positive ideas about how to tackle crime. I reject the overall suggestion that any discussion of the nature of the Bill means that I and my hon. Friends are soft on crime.

I have certain reservations about the Bill's impact on the performance of the Prison Service and the prisoners detained by it. I have some questions about the use of resources in the long term for the prevention and detection of crime. I have—I hope—some genuine thoughts on whether the Bill's overall aims will be effective, and whether it will produce a policy that is fair and equitable and seen to be so. I believe that it may have some detrimental effects.

The Bill is certainly a major measure. I strongly agree with the thoughtful remarks of the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), a former Prisons Minister. The Bill will certainly increase the prison population. According to its explanatory notes, its likely impact will be the creation of an extra 1,000 gaol spaces over the next few years, the building and completion of 12 new prisons and the expenditure of between £375 million and £435 million a year in additional running costs for the prison system—when there are already a record 57,000 prisoners in gaol. The Bill's main impact will not be felt for some 10 to 12 years, when the gaol sentences and increased numbers will have filtered through.

Although prison is certainly important and, in many ways, a deterrent, prevention, detection and conviction rates are just as important as final sentences in preventing crime, as many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), have pointed out. Since 1979, 22 new prisons have been built, and an additional 11,635 prisoners have been subjected to terms of imprisonment, yet throughout the same period crime has doubled.

The preventive nature of sentencing has not necessarily had an impact on the number of prisoners who are now detained at Her Majesty's pleasure. Sentencing represents just one approach. The pressures of detection, prevention, numbers of police officers and a more long-term strategy will have a more important and beneficial effect on reducing crime than, as I shall try to explain later, harsher and often more unfair sentences.

In a very helpful brief that arrived today, the Law Society has supported such a view. It said:

"We consider that criminals are more deterred by fear of being caught than by the punishment that they may receive. For this reason, we do not believe that longer sentences necessarily act as an effective means of crime prevention."

[Mr. Hanson]

Surely crime prevention is what this House should be about.

Since 1979, north Wales has seen a 77 per cent. increase in the number of crimes: last year, 41,645 crimes were committed in the North Wales police area. That is a tremendous increase, at a time when the number of prisons has doubled and the number of prisoners has risen. That figure does not take into account the number of crimes that were not reported.

Between 1980 and 1994, however, convictions have fallen. There was an increase in crime of between 79 per cent. and 80 per cent. in that period, yet there was a 10.3 per cent. fall in the number of convictions. As a number of my hon. Friends have said, only one in 50 crimes results in conviction. That is not satisfactory, yet the Bill will not address it. Conviction and policing are the best prevention and deterrent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) made a number of positive suggestions in the debate on the Queen's Speech last week as an alternative to sentencing that would help crime prevention. Closed circuit television would certainly help. Resources that will be put into the building and managing of new prisons could be directed at crime prevention. As a number of my hon. Friends have said, the physical presence of police officers on the streets is a greater deterrent than the fear of conviction.

The 100,000 illegal guns, the banning of combat knives, my hon. Friend's helpful suggestions on youth orders, investment in crime prevention, truancy and improvement in recreational facilities are at least as important in preventing crime as the harsh sentencing policy which the Bill will introduce. I should like greater emphasis on those issues and some consideration in Committee of whether the Government's proposals are the best way forward and whether some of the resources being pumped into the inevitable consequences of that harsher prison system would better be spent on key prevention measures.

I would welcome—and shall try to elicit—a response from the Minister on the operation of the policy. A number of clauses will result, as has been said, in greater prison numbers. What research has been undertaken into the proposals' impact on the future prison system and the prevention of crime in the first place? We have an example in evaluation of the American experience.

In Committee, there should be detailed discussion on delays in cases coming to court. What has happened in America with plea bargaining? Has it increased and resulted in a reduced sentence for some individuals? What has happened to the number of petty criminals who have been imprisoned as a result of proposals similar to those before us? What has happened to a whole range of issues concerning evaluation of the—admittedly—harsher American regime? Such questions need to be considered and more work needs to be done on evaluating the impact of harsher sentencing proposals on the present and future prison populations and the prevention of crime, which should be the main concern of the House.

I am also concerned about the impact, effectiveness and fairness of some of the proposals on our wider communities, such as those in clause 1, which imposes a mandatory life sentence for a second serious sexual offence. I simply ask whether the Minister can guarantee that such proposals will ensure that more serious crimes will not be committed as a result.

Rape is a foul and vicious crime. It is an affront to women, and a crime that deserves severe and harsh punishment. No one will decry that, but I remain unconvinced—I would be willing to be convinced in Committee—of the merits of a term of life for a second serious sexual offence. The person who committed such an offence might be tempted to murder the victim. If the penalty remains the same, I fear for the individual on the receiving end of the crime.

Mr. Maclean: If the hon. Gentleman needs convincing that life is appropriate in those circumstances, how does he justify the fact that life is currently one of the sentencing options for someone who commits the crime of rape?

Mr. Hanson: I accept what the Minister says, but the difference is that life would be mandatory on a second offence in the example I have given, so an individual might feel that he might as well commit murder as rape is he felt that the survival of the victim would result in a conviction. I have no answer to that fear, but I am willing to discuss it in Committee. That issue has been raised by other hon. Members, and it needs to be addressed before we accept the clause.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend agree, contrary to the Minister's glib approach, that rape is rape is rape, that there are many different types of rape? For example, there is statutory rape on a child, in which, say, the boy is 15 and the girl is 12. That would constitute one strike. There is boy friend on girl friend date rape, which is not as serious as that committed by the man who leaps out of the bushes.

There are so many different types of rape, and perhaps there are two solutions. One might be to redefine the crime of rape, as the Canadians have done, into various degrees of rape; secondly, perhaps only the most serious type should attract a mandatory life sentence for the second offence.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. He highlights again the complexities of the issue, which the Committee will need to discuss. My main contention remains the same; I am concerned about the safety of victims of that appalling crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) mentioned clause 3, which deals with burglary. Burglary is a horrible crime. It violates individuals and causes great distress and a range of social problems, but a mandatory sentence may cause some difficulties. That was amply outlined by my hon. Friend, who made an assessment of the impact on the criminal. It is possible that an individual who had committed three minor offences, distressing though they might have been, would receive a relatively severe, mandatory three-year sentence. In addition to taking that person out of circulation for three years, such a sentence might make him into a more hardened, long-term criminal who was a greater danger to society at the end of that sentence. That was one reason why Ministers rejected mandatory sentences for a number of offences in 1991.

I am also worried about the effect that mandatory sentences might have in increasing violent crime. If individuals have two offences under their belt and face possible detection—despite the fact that detection rates are low and criminals easily get away with many crimes—for a third crime, they may increasingly resort to carrying weapons and other harmful instruments. That could lead to an increase in violent crime. Those issues should be explored before we rush headlong down the road of the easy solution of harsh sentences for headline-grabbing effect.

We must also consider the likely increase in the gaol population, and we must evaluate the stresses and the likely result of additional prisoners in gaols. Those issues will all add to the long-term problem of crime which the Bill is meant to address.

I welcome one aspect of the Bill—the proposals for non-custodial sentences for those individuals who are convicted for non-payment of fines. I raised several years ago the case of some constituents who had gone to gaol for non-payment of television licence fees, largely through poverty rather than criminal intent. The proposals in the Bill will certainly be a great help in reducing the gaol population for such offences, and, constructively, will provide a way to keep families together. Children will be able to have their mothers with them rather than face the disruption that a gaol sentence brings for what remains the minor, although still important, crime of non-payment of television licence fines.

A number of issues need to be examined and the Bill should go to Committee for discussion. I am disappointed that the Government have introduced it in this form, because the proposals strike me as more about pre-election posturing than positive ways to reduce crime. No Opposition Member wants to see criminals getting away with crimes or crime increasing. We want effective measures to be taken to reduce crime and provide security for our constituents. *[Interruption.]* The hooligan element on the Conservative Benches is providing a great example to the public through the comments of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale).

A thoughtful approach can be taken to reducing crime. The Labour party has that thoughtful approach, and we will exercise it in Committee. I hope that the Bill will be a better Bill, after having been studied in Committee, than it is at the moment.

8.46 pm

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): The Bill, although perhaps not perfect, does more than any other Bill in recent years to respond to the reasonable desire of the citizen for better protection against crime and criminals, and it warrants the support of all Members of the House who represent those citizens.

The Home Secretary has been beset by attacks from all sides—from the Labour party, Liberal Democrats, penal reformers, judges, the Bar, the Law Society, academics and a section of the public that wants every criminal to be imprisoned for life, or shot, or worse. We have a brave and courageous Home Secretary who is holding fast, with this Bill, to the conviction that much more can be done to protect society; that prison works to protect society; that there is room for tougher sentences and more honesty in sentencing; and that we need to support the police, who are crying out for our support. He is right, and we all know it.

Why is my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary right and his critics wrong? I shall endeavour to show how his critics are wrong, and I shall begin with three obvious points.

First, not all judges are opposed to the provisions in the Bill, and neither are all practitioners, all academics or all penal reformers. A sizable number of them—and I have spoken with them—support the proposals. Secondly, not all the opposition to the proposals is reasonable. I took part in the programme called "Kilroy" last week and I was howled at, when I said that we were toughening the law, by those of the public who wondered why we were not proposing even tougher sentences; why first offenders were not to be sentenced to life imprisonment for rape or serious violence; why three years for burglary was not the first sentence to be imposed on burglars; and why seven years was not the first sentence to be imposed for drug offences.

In my opinion, those attacks on me were not always reasonable. When such sentences would be reasonable, in the circumstances of a particular case, the courts have the power to impose them already.

Thirdly, many of the perceived ills of our system—this was clear from the television programme in which I took part—are not the fault of the Government. The judiciary is independent and cannot be interfered with or told what to do by the Government, save where Parliament lays down minimum or maximum sentences. If the maximum sentence is greater and the sentence imposed inadequate, the blame must unfortunately lie with the judiciary and not the Government.

Let me deal with as many of the Opposition's unmerited criticisms as I can in the limited period available. The credibility of the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) must be somewhat diminished as we recall how his party's view has changed in reaction to the proposals. His decision not to vote on the Bill clashes with his first reaction to the proposals, which he attacked in a press release as

"a bizarre mixture of complacency and desperation".

He then dismissed them on "Today" as

"ill-thought through and ill-considered".

One of his henchmen, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), was authorised to dismiss the proposals as "daft", while his deputy, the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), described them as "a farce".

The concept of minimum sentences was attacked in a Labour policy document, "Honesty, consistency and progression in sentences", as was the scrapping of automatic early release from prison. When one knows that such opposition to fundamental principles has changed so much, one can hardly have overwhelming confidence in the hon. Member for Blackburn's judgment.

Nor can one have confidence when we recall that, as we approach a general election, the Labour party has voted against virtually every measure to toughen our approach to criminals—

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): That is not true.

Sir Ivan Lawrence:—or has at least failed to support them. The hon. Gentleman cannot deny that. Labour has

[Sir Ivan Lawrence]

failed year after year to support the prevention of terrorism legislation, stronger stop and search powers for the police, limitations on bail and higher maximum sentences.

Mr. Michael: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Sir Ivan Lawrence: The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to respond to the debate, and he can then deny that he has failed to support the tough measures that we introduced. *[Interruption.]* It is on the record—he cannot deny it. His words are clear in *Hansard*. He can deal with that matter when he comes to the Dispatch Box.

Higher maximum sentences for the worst child offences were opposed by Labour, as were secure training orders for persistent 12 to 14-year-old offenders and the taking of intimate DNA samples from suspects. Labour has decided to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime as we move nearer to a general election, as it knows from the opinion polls that that is what the public expect from their representatives.

In the light of these responses, let us study what the hon. Member for Blackburn has stated today. He said that we made mistakes in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1991 on unit fines and taking into account previous convictions, and we did. Some of us warned against the latter, but the Government did correct those mistakes in subsequent legislation.

In addition, not all the 1991 Act was bad. Most was good and remains on the statute book. We recognised error and corrected it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) wisely observed, we always aim for the best, and our proposals must change in the light of experience. My own views have certainly changed on the need for minimum sentences in the light of judicial failure to lay down minimum guidelines. But to use that as a reason for not endorsing the Bill is as irrelevant as it is ridiculous.

The hon. Member for Blackburn said that the Bill does not deal with muggers and knife robbers—a point made also by the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile)—and he is right. The Bill could have been even tougher on the imposition of minimum sentences, but we are under enough attack for making the Bill as tough as it is. Do the Opposition want youngsters who gang up and assault people in the streets to be at risk of life imprisonment? Very well—let them table amendments to that effect as the Bill progresses.

Perhaps they are right, but the Bill does not stop judges giving harsher sentences in appropriate cases—judges can give life to muggers now. They can give more than three years to three-time offending burglars or more than seven years for three-time drug traffickers. This Bill does not restrict judges' freedom to pass longer sentences: it only restricts their freedom in some circumstances to pass shorter sentences.

The hon. Member for Blackburn scoffed at the length of time it will take to introduce these measures. He is right to deplore the delay, but wrong to scoff. If it were possible to put the measures in place immediately, we would do so. But new prisons will have to be built, and it is not possible to proceed more quickly, much as we would all wish to do so. That is not a fair criticism. His other attacks were not credible, and the House and the country will have little difficulty in dismissing them.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) was high in eloquence and arrogance and low in humility and respect for others, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney), who did not share his opinions. His confident assertions were shown to be suspect, and his claim that his party wanted more policemen was shown to clash not with a consultation document, but with a recent policy statement that there was no point in having more police officers.

The hon. and learned Gentleman said that those not subject to minimum sentences will be released earlier than at present, but it is by no means clear that that can be read into clause 21 of the Bill or the abolition of the relevant provisions in earlier Acts. Even if he were right, that is not the intention of the Bill and it can be remedied as it is improved during its passage through Parliament. He knows that very well.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery says that all manslaughter cases are not the same, and that it is an injustice to say that two will result in life sentences. But he chooses to ignore the fact that a different tariff will be set for "accidental crimes", and that exceptional circumstances can avoid the imposition of the mandatory sentence. He falls into the trap of assuming that, because there are occasional bizarre cases, that is a reason for not dealing with the generality of cases. If we never dealt with the generality for fear of the exceptional, we would never pass any laws to protect the public. Such a philosophy is totally ridiculous.

The final arrogance of the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery was to assert with confidence that jurors will be unlikely to convict anyone in manslaughter cases if they know that a later manslaughter would result in a life sentence being imposed. What evidence does he have of that? That is absolute rubbish. He asserted with confidence that no jury would convict on a second manslaughter offence if they knew of a first offence for fear that the defendant would receive life imprisonment. What evidence has he of that? In how many cases would a defence barrister put his client's previous conviction for manslaughter to the jury, making it more certain that the defence of accident or wrong identity would be disbelieved? It is nonsense, and I am surprised that the hon. and learned Gentleman has not recognised that. That is not my judgment, and I have been practising at the criminal Bar at least as long as he has.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department pointed out that it is any event to give the sentence of life imprisonment—

Mr. Bermingham: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Sir Ivan Lawrence: No.

Mr. Bermingham: Why not?

Sir Ivan Lawrence: Because other hon. Members want to speak. The hon. Gentleman has not been here from the start of the debate, unlike some of my hon. Friends. He will forgive me if I carry on. *[Interruption.]* Hon.

Members will not throw me from my speech, because they know I am talking sense. The fact that they are trying to distract me from talking sense shows how pitifully poor their argument must be.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State has pointed out, the approach of the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery is attempting to give the sentence of life imprisonment a more dreadful aspect than it bears, for its purpose is to limit the risk of release. The inevitable result would not be that life imprisonment meant life, much as some might wish that to be so. I see no merit in the hon. and learned Gentleman's criticisms, so I think that we can dispense with them.

What then of the criticisms of some judges? The provisions to introduce more honesty—not complete honesty—into sentencing has the judges' support. As Lord Denning said:

"It is absurd that a sentence of three years' imprisonment really means less than 18 months. It detracts from the authority of the court when everyone knows that a long sentence does not mean what it appears to mean."

The former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Taylor of Gosforth, said:

"I believe public confidence in the system is eroded when convicted criminals are seen to walk free from prison after serving less than half their sentences, however good their behaviour may have been in the interim."

We are doing something about that, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is to be congratulated.

The judges were, and perhaps still are, sensitive about the fact that limiting their discretion is part of the purpose of the Bill; as a recorder, I understand that, but the judges are surely over-reacting. Some said at first that minimum sentences were not known in our system, until the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, pointed out that, if Parliament can prescribe a maximum sentence, as it does, there is no constitutional reason why it should not prescribe minimum sentences—and it has done so, with considerable effect, for murder and for drink-driving.

I would rather that we did not have to introduce minimum sentences, as has often been pointed out—my quotation from five years ago keeps coming up—but, if the judges have not considered over those five years that a minimum sentence of three years' imprisonment for a professional burglar or seven years for a professional class A drug trafficker is appropriate, they cannot complain if Parliament decides to do something about inadequate sentences.

If only 10 out of 217 people convicted in 1994 for second-time rape or serious violent offences received the life imprisonment that the judges were capable of imposing; if judges give seven-times burglars 19 and a half months' imprisonment and do not sentence a third of them to prison at all; and if they give inadequate sentences to seven-times drug traffickers, they can hardly complain when we toughen the sentencing requirements.

It would have been better if the Lord Chief Justice and the appeal judges had laid down minimum guidelines; but they could not do it, they did not do it, and it is for us, the elected representatives of the people, to do it if the judges fail. That is what the people whom we represent want and have a right to expect.

What of the criticisms of academics, probation officers and others? I hope that I will be forgiven for lumping them together and dealing quite briefly with many of the attacks.

It has been said that there will be an increase in the need for prison spaces at a time of existing pressure on the system; of course that is so, but my right hon. and learned Friend has made it clear that, if we have been able to build 22 new prisons over the past decade and a half, we can do the same again over the next decade, in time to ensure that the provisions of the Bill can be put into effect.

It has been said that effective sentences will double; they will not. Guidelines—or, if necessary, legislation—can ensure that the courts take account of the abolition of parole when sentencing.

It has been said that the Bill does not create honest sentencing, because there will still be 16 to 20 per cent. reductions for good behaviour. As I have said before, that is more honest sentencing than reducing the sentence by a half or even by a third.

It has been said that there will be anomalies, and there will be, but that is no reason not to do what needs to be done to reduce anomalies and their bad effects.

It has been said that there will remain a wide range of sex offences that are not punishable by life imprisonment; that is right, but the Bill extends the provisions for dealing more effectively with treatment and supervision in prison, via the Prison Service, and out of prison, via the Probation Service, and there are further plans to deal more adequately with such offenders. Those plans are long overdue, but the problems are being addressed, and we should be complimented, not attacked, for that.

It has been said that minimum sentences never work; but minimum sentences that appear in judicial guidelines work, so why should not statutory provisions work?

It has been said that prison does not work, but clearly it does if it removes the worst offenders from circulation. I can say from my experience as a barrister for 34 years that what offenders fear most is imprisonment. They will do anything to get out of it; they will plead not guilty to get out of it. From my recent experience of talking to offenders who might be affected by "three strikes and you're out" in Texas and California, the life sentence is feared. It works with them, and it and would work with many other offenders.

If it is said, as both Government and Opposition Members have said, that prison does not work because it has done little to reform offenders, I say only that 50 per cent. of those imprisoned do not reoffend within two years, which is no worse a record than that of community sentences. I agree that more, perhaps far more, should be done to make reform a more effective part of prison life.

If one considers the criticisms objectively, it is not reasonable to conclude that they have such force as to make the Bill unacceptable. Many have no basis in fact; others are merely opinion based on little evidence; others have a scintilla of merit but can be met by improving the Bill and by further legislation. The little that cannot be so addressed is not sufficient to justify destroying measures that have, by every opinion poll going, the overwhelming support of the public; of the police, to judge from statement after statement of senior and junior officers; and, I suspect, of the overwhelming majority of the House.

The Government have taken a raft of measures to be tougher on criminals and the causes of crime. They have helped to reduce crime by 10 per cent.—the largest reduction sustained in our history. The Home Secretary

[Sir Ivan Lawrence]

should be congratulated on his successes in dealing with crime and the Government deserve the House's support for the Bill.

9.6 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (Bury St. Edmunds): One thing that has escaped the attention of the House is that the drop in crime in the past three years is the largest in the industrialised world. I want to tell my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary that the Bill comes at the end of a step-by-step approach by him to tackling crime and its underlying causes realistically. Its object and underlying thrust is to target career criminals—dangerous and professional criminals—and to provide sentences appropriate to act as a deterrent. Enough is enough is the message that emanates from the Bill.

Over the past few years, I have watched the Home Secretary's initiative working in my rural area. The introduction of the parish constable scheme, of liaison officers in parishes and in rural towns, of closed circuit television, and the encouragement of community action schemes all build up to give support to communities in fighting crime. I welcome the Bill and the support that my right hon. and learned Friend has given at grass-roots level to tackling the incidence of drug abuse and to the attempts of communities to fight against it.

The real issue is the profound sense of disappointment in communities as they watch what goes on in the courts and the criminal justice system. There is a clear public perception of sentencing that goes well beyond saloon bar comment. It is shared by magistrates and the police, to many of whom I have spoken. In my constituency this summer, there were unacceptable scenes of yob activity. I welcome the fact that in Committee we will have the opportunity to ensure that yobs can be named in public and shamed by their communities.

People do not only feel anecdotally that sentencing is inappropriate. In 1994, the average sentence passed on burglars with seven or more convictions was slightly more than 19 months; a quarter received no custodial sentence at all. When a first-time offender receives 16 months on average for burglary, it is utterly illogical for someone who commits seven additional burglaries to receive a custodial sentence that is only two or three months longer. People's instincts are borne out by the facts.

There has been a lot of talk about challenging the role of the judiciary. Of course, the independence of the judiciary is sacrosanct, but Parliament sets the laws and the framework within which the judiciary operates. Parliament must protect the interests of the victim, not the well-being of the offender. The protection of the citizen is at the heart of the Bill, implicitly and explicitly.

All of us who have suffered burglaries know of the horror of being burgled. That is particularly so for elderly people. So much criminal activity is undertaken by a small group of people. It is correct for the law to concentrate on tackling those individuals and ensuring that they spend an appropriate length of time in prison.

Drug trafficking is the greatest social evil of our generation. All the attempts to deal with it more liberally in, for example, Zurich and the Netherlands, have failed. We have to send drug traffickers a clear message that we will not tolerate what is going on. That is happening in conjunction with the Government's overall education, rehabilitation and enforcement scheme, under "Tackling Drugs Together".

I shall be brief as time is running out and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Mr. Jessel) wants to speak. As has been said, the Attorney-General already has the power to appeal against lenient sentences, which is helpful and the power can no doubt be strengthened. The real need, however, and the underlying core of the Bill, is to protect the public from the release of a vicious individual when it is clear that he or she remains a potential danger to our society. Nothing enrages the public more. They want honesty in sentencing and that is precisely what they are going to get.

I welcome the introduction of the clauses dealing with mentally disordered offenders. It is a grey area—especially the problem of people who are released from psychiatric institutions and those who are sometimes sent directly into the criminal justice system—and it has not been dealt with satisfactorily. I am glad that the Bill will try to deal with that problem as well.

The criminal justice system must be all-embracing and must do a number of things. It must prevent crime—through CCTV, neighbourhood watch and raising awareness—it must provide the police with appropriate powers to tackle crime, particularly organised crime, and it must ensure that the guilty are convicted and the innocent set free, but it must also ensure a sentencing policy that reflects the severity of the crime, that is not a lottery and that protects the public. That is what the Bill is all about and it has my wholehearted support.

9.12 pm

Mr. Toby Jessel (Twickenham): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring) warmly for curtailing an enormously interesting speech.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) referred to public opinion. I have sent out 69,000 survey forms in my constituency—one to each constituent—and have received 13,000 replies. I have managed to put only about half of them on my computer so far. I can confirm that there is certainly more worry about law and order than about any other issue in my constituency.

When we are discussing justice or the courts, I see no reason why we should forget that we live in a democracy. Magistrates are supposed to represent the people. Judges sometimes refer to public policy and they certainly accept that concept. The people see the purpose of criminal law and the courts as not only justice, but the protection of their safety. People are worried by criminal conduct and expect not only the courts but the Government and Parliament to act. I have no hesitation, therefore, in supporting this excellent Bill which will provide honesty in sentencing, which is important, but whose central purpose is to provide mandatory sentences for second violent crimes, such as manslaughter, armed robbery, rape, intercourse with girls under 13 and so forth. I want the Bill to be amended so that the seven years for a second offence of drug trafficking, as currently in the Bill—which is not enough because trafficking in drugs ruins so many lives—becomes instead a life sentence too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds, like many other right hon. and hon. Members, referred to the independence of the judiciary. I have tremendous respect

for judges—I always have had. I come from a legal family, but I am not a lawyer myself. It is a prime duty of Parliament to uphold the authority of the courts. I regard judges in general as intelligent, wise and public-spirited people. However, when they and others speak of judges' independence in sentencing, they do not always mention that that independence is already inhibited in a way that is seldom publicly mentioned, but which I am convinced is none the less real.

If you talk to judges, Mr. Deputy Speaker—perhaps when you meet them socially—and discuss their work in any depth, it does not take long to discover that they greatly dislike their decisions being reversed by a higher court on appeal, whether that is reversal of a verdict or reversal of a sentence, upwards or downwards. That feeling is general. It never lies far below the surface. It is not in any way discreditable. It is, in fact, completely understandable because a reversal of a judge's decision implies that, in the eyes of the higher court, the judge got it wrong.

That is, in a sense, one facet of British professionalism, which is, on the whole, a good influence—it not only maintains qualifications and technical skills, but standards of performance. However, British professionalism has a downside and that is true of all the learned professions, whether lawyers—including judges—doctors, accountants or any other profession. They seem to care more about the good opinion of their brother or sister professionals than they care about what the general public think of them. Doctors care about what other doctors think of them; vicars care about what other vicars think of them; accountants care about what other accountants think of them; lawyers care about what other lawyers think of them; and judges certainly care a great deal about what other judges think of them. That feeling stems partly from the British guild tradition of the middle ages; it is shared by judges and it is one of the reasons why they dislike their decisions being reversed.

When sentencing, judges have regard to tariffs—if that is the right word. I have seen the books that they use which contain examples of adding three months for this, or subtracting six months for that and I believe that broad compliance by judges with those variables will tend to diminish the chances of a reversal by a higher court on appeal. That must result in a substantial propensity of judges to comply with and rely on that type of guidance when sentencing, which not only constrains their real independence, but gives rise to a body of sentencing conventions and practice that tends to crystallise and from which the courts will not want to depart.

As a result, when Parliament and public want stiffer sentences to deter crime, we cannot look to the courts because the judges themselves have a built-in tendency to maintain the current sentencing fashion. Such an objective can only be brought about by statute. We are in such a situation now and that is why we need the Bill, which I warmly support.

9.19 pm

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): We have heard it all now—the hon. Member for Twickenham (Mr. Jessel) had to send out a questionnaire to his constituents to discover what the Opposition have known for years: ordinary members of the public are desperately worried about crime after 17 years of Conservative rule.

The Home Secretary must have realised how deep his problems have become when he listened to several of his right hon. Friends, people who had held office as Home Secretary or Minister of State at the Home Office, damning him with faint praise. The first four expressed serious reservations while supporting parts of the Bill. We, too, wish to support parts of it and, in Committee, to increase its effectiveness. We also support its general direction in terms of tackling the problems of sentencing.

The Secretary of State must have been even more worried when he realised that just two voices were raised in unqualified praise of his approach to law and order. The first was that of the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney)—the man who wants to increase the gun culture instead of tackle it, and introduce to Britain the gun culture of the wild west. The second was that of the hon. and learned Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence), whose speech was absurd, inaccurate and misleading. He swung wildly between the idiosyncratic and the sycophantic.

Given that the hon. and learned Gentleman would not wish to mislead the House, I can only sympathise with him for suffering acute amnesia. He should know—as he would if he reminded himself by looking at the record—that we have consistently sought to improve law and order, to tackle the real problems of the criminal justice system and to be tough on crime and the causes of crime. The hon. and learned Gentleman's denial of that makes his speech tonight one of the most absurd that I have heard in the House for a long time.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan believes everything that the Home Secretary says and everything that his right hon. and learned Friend promises. The hon. Gentleman said that the Government have increased police numbers. They have increased in his constituency and mine since transparency forced the Welsh Office and the Home Office to stop playing silly games. At the general election, however, the Home Office promised an increase of 1,000. On 31 March 1992, the total number in all ranks was 125,570. By 31 March 1996, the figure stood at 124,821. To help with the arithmetic, that means the total number of police has gone down by 749 during that period.

Mr. Spring: The Opposition's great devotion to law and order does not seem to accord with the actions of Labour local authorities, which are familiar to us—for example, the action of local education authorities that have denied the police access to schools to talk about various serious issues.

Mr. Michael: I dare say that the hon. Gentleman wants to enter a competition for the absurd with the hon. and learned Member for Burton. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and I have spent a great deal of time travelling up and down the country, and we see the seriousness with which local authorities are trying to tackle the problems of crime, to prevent crime and to reduce it. They have asked for help from the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. If they gave more help, local authorities that want to tackle such problems would be in a far better position to do so.

The hon. and learned Member for Burton said that the Home Secretary is right to realise when he is wrong. What is extraordinary is the speed with which the Home

[Mr. Michael]

Secretary is now having to perform U-turns. We have seen it happen in the past couple of weeks, but today it reached new heights. The Bill was published a little over a week ago, but this afternoon the right hon. and learned Gentleman announced three major changes to what was supposed to be the flagship of the legislative programme.

The new penalties are to include the disqualification of drivers. It is a privilege to be a driver, and it will be interesting to examine the detail of that amendment. The Home Secretary spoke of a curfew on young offenders. It will be interesting to see how he deals with the practicalities and targeting of that measure. The third change was the removal of the restriction on the naming of young offenders. There are circumstances in which that is appropriate. We await the measure with interest.

If the Home Secretary is honest and sincere, and intends those changes as constructive proposals rather than as part of his pre-election games, I ask him to let us have his wording now so that we have time to study it in detail, instead of having to table amendments at the last minute when we are in Committee, as usually happens. He and his colleagues know that, when we are given a chance to debate such matters seriously, we do our best to be constructive. The Minister of State knows that we worked positively with the Government on amendments to the Security Service Bill earlier this year. That was a good example of how both sides should deal with legislation.

That is how this Bill should be approached. If the Home Secretary is serious he will give us ample notice of the amendments that he proposes. We will respond as helpfully as we can to his suggestions.

No one could accuse the hon. and learned Member for Burton of being reasonable if they heard the petulant way in which he challenged and questioned prison governors when they appeared before the Home Affairs Committee last week. His words and the exchanges were available to those who listen to proceedings on the Committee Corridor. Perhaps it would be salutary for the hon. and learned Gentleman to listen to the arrogant way in which he controlled that debate and approached the evidence given to the Committee.

The hon. and learned Gentleman ridiculed my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn and went on to support my hon. Friend's proposals for minimum guidelines. It is interesting to see where support for constructive suggestions comes from. The hon. and learned Gentleman seems not to know that, for serious offences involving class A drugs, the penalties start at eight years for the first offence.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan claims to support victims, yet the Home Secretary whom he supports has slashed the budget for compensating the victims of serious violent crime by £700 million over the next five years.

With the exception of the speeches made by the Home Secretary, the hon. and learned Member for Burton and the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan, this has been a serious and constructive debate on both sides of the House, not least on the part of the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). I agree that his successors as chairmen of the Conservative party have provided a target-rich area, but his successors as Home Secretary have been even more disastrous. He was right to say that both sides of the House want to deter re-offending and to impose long sentences on the most serious and violent offenders.

The Labour party has been pursuing consistency since before the right hon. Member for Mole Valley left office. Since my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn became the shadow Home Secretary, he has made a singularly valuable and consistent contribution to thinking on these issues. That is why it has been a particular pleasure to work with him. I only wish that the Home Secretary would read with care my hon. Friend's contributions, because they have been constructive.

The right hon. Member for Mole Valley is wrong, I believe, to argue against firm sentences for rape on the ground that offenders might then commit murder. There is little evidence for that. We had similar arguments when it was suggested that higher penalties for carrying a gun might encourage offenders to use the gun. The hon. and learned Member for Burton had the grace to admit that he was wrong when he argued that case, which we contested strongly when we debated the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

I remind the House and the hon. and learned—and forgetful—Member for Burton that the 1994 Act lacked any recommendations or measures to tackle violence, knives, guns, drugs or drug-related crime, or provision for the police to stop and search suspects in the street—until Labour tabled proposals on each of those issues. That is why I found it both absurd and insulting that the hon. and learned Gentleman should offer us a list of criticisms of the Labour party. We can stand with pride on our record—as long as the record is looked at in *Hansard*, not in briefings from Conservative central office.

We took the view that we need to diminish the culture of violence and to tackle the carrying of guns and knives because, if carried, they are likely to be used with tragic consequences. If they are not carried, they cannot be used. At the time, we also made recommendations about advertising and mail order sales. I mention that because it is rather frustrating to find the press and media talking about politicians jumping on the bandwagon. The Opposition have been tackling these issues for a number of years. Some people may be open to criticism for coming late to them, but the Leader of the Opposition, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn, other hon. Members who served on the Committee that looked at the 1994 Bill and I certainly cannot be accused in those terms.

The right hon. Member for Mole Valley also pointed out that some sentences will be shorter as a result of clause 21. He emphasised the need for effective community sentences—I share his concern about that. The word "community" often means that a Minister is about to try to do something on the cheap. I speak with some feeling here with my background as a youth and community worker. Removing training requirements from probation officers when they are dealing with ever more dangerous and disturbed offenders is neither good for them nor good for the general public. I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the value of community service in changing attitudes, and I agreed with his damning and alarming exposure of the fact that the number of people in gaol for violent crimes has fallen while violent crime has actually doubled in England and Wales and trebled in Kent, part of which is represented by the Home Secretary.

The right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) knows in his heart that it is to the Home Secretary that he should apply his description of "wayward and unpredictable". The shadow Home Secretary, by contrast, has consistently pursued clear objectives—to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. Indeed, my hon. Friend has gone further and come up with proposals. He has listened to people with expertise in and experience of the criminal justice system; he has also listened to members of the public and members of the parliamentary Labour party. The home affairs committee of the parliamentary Labour party has unanimously called for the approach that we are adopting to the Bill.

The right hon. Member for Witney also called for respect for probation officers, judges and others in the criminal justice system. Given that he is a former Home Secretary, his criticism of the low quality of legislation emanating from Whitehall was devastating. In fairness I might add that the Home Secretary and other Ministers must be responsible for the legislation they bring before the House.

It is possible to bring about sensible improvements when legislation is constructively examined in Committee; we stand ready to do that. We want honesty, consistency and progression in sentencing policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn has published constructive proposals, and we shall engage with the Government in Committee to improve this Bill as it proceeds through the House.

The right hon. Member for Witney also asked whether what happens in prison may matter as much as the length of sentence. I hope that Ministers will consider that point carefully. The protection of the public after prisoners are released is just as important as the sentences they are given before entering prison. We should take seriously the possibility that, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested, prisoners will leave prison more accomplished offenders. We all remember the short, sharp shock that resulted in offenders emerging fitter and better able to run away from police. We need to learn from history; if we do not, we shall be condemned to repeat its mistakes.

The right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) made a thoughtful and entertaining contribution, with a whiff of agnosticism.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) raised the problems of "not guilty" pleas in the courts. I remind the Minister that my hon. Friend asked him to tell the House the precise meaning of "exceptional circumstances" and to clarify the likely effect of that provision.

The right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) predicted greater injustice and expressed doubts about cutting three-year sentences. Some of those doubts relate to the effect on prison populations. He drew attention to muddles in the Bill, which the Home Secretary must tackle.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby) rightly criticised the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn said at the start of the debate, the mandatory sentences in the Bill are not mandatory sentences in the sense that the Home Secretary tried to tell the Conservative party conference they would be. I commend to the hon. Member for Uxbridge the excellent paper "Fairness and Consistency in Sentencing" published by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn, because the hon. Member appeared to support the Labour view set out in that document.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) said that there are reasoned ways of tackling sentencing policy in prisons, and that the Home Secretary's speech was informed by conference rhetoric and desperation in the run-up to the election. It is also informed by the Government's failure to protect the public and the Home Secretary's complicity in that failure.

I agree with the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) that we are letting offenders get away with it, in a criminals charter. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) made a similar point when he argued that detection was the greatest deterrent.

That does not mean that we should reduce or disregard issues of punishment and sentencing, but a Government under whom the proportion of offences that end in a punishment has reduced so dramatically have no right to lecture the Opposition. Only one crime in 50 is now punished by a court. A Conservative Government whose predecessor promised more police officers in the run-up to the most recent general election and who have delivered a cut in police numbers—on the Home Secretary's own figures—and been criticised for it by the chairman of the Police Federation, need to pause before piling criticism on Labour. As I said, Labour continues to be ready to be constructive in its approach to the Bill—as it has been in its approach to previous legislation—because we want to pass effective legislation that will tackle the problems of crime.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile), in a thoughtful speech, made several powerful and valid points. The Bill is so narrow that we do not share his view that it would be appropriate to vote against it, but several of his arguments need to be considered carefully in Committee. He was right to highlight many inconsistencies in sentencing that will arise from the Bill if it is not amended in Committee, not least the uncertainty in clause 21 about whether a sentence currently of four years will end up at 22 and a half months or 18 months. The Minister needs to clarify that. There is a lack of clarity, and the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn genuinely searched for clarity between them. The Minister has heard the questions; it is time for him to give some answers.

The Home Secretary has introduced another piece of legislation. It takes some steps toward progression and levels of sentencing that address the needs that we have highlighted. We stand ready to debate the detail of the Bill in Committee. It would be helpful if the Minister, in his reply, would tell us whether the three amendments proposed this afternoon are the last amendments, or whether there will be some more in Committee, and a few more on Report. Will there be fresh attempts to regain the high ground, and further desperate attempts by the Home Secretary and his colleagues to find a way to restore their critically damaged reputation for running the criminal justice system so ineffectively? It is time for us to have some answers from the Government, and I look forward to the detailed debate in Committee.

9.40 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. David Maclean): We hear that diatribe from the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) every time he speaks in or winds up a debate in the House. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Burton (Sir I. Lawrence) pointed out, he would have had slightly more authority if he had not been totally contradicted by his abysmal record. We have heard more fine words from the hon. Gentleman tonight, but he has a record of doing the opposite. It is Labour saying one thing and doing another. How can we take seriously anything that the hon. Gentleman says now?

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maclean: I shall develop my point, and then I shall happily give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth claims to be worried about the risk to the public from our sentencing proposals, and about the dangers of prisoners offending when they are released. But his voting record shows that he voted to ensure that prisoners' liability to recall ended at the three-quarter point of their sentence, and that they could not be recalled to prison for breach of parole conditions on offences committed in the last quarter of their sentence. He thought that that was an unfair liability to impose on prisoners. He was not concerned about the risk to the public then. That was not a central office brief; it was recorded in *Hansard*, at column 369 of Standing Committee A dealing with the Criminal Justice Bill.

The Labour party claims to be concerned about the injury done to children by paedophiles and others. But when we increased the penalty for cruelty to children from two years to 10, Labour Members voted against it. They say one thing and do another. That is recorded in *Hansard*, Criminal Justice Act 1988, 18 January 1988, column 766.

Mr. Straw: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on reading out the Conservative central office brief. which, as usual, has been sent to us. It states at the beginning:

"Saying One Thing, Doing Another."

I thought that that was the text that the Secretary of State now follows.

What the right hon. Gentleman has just claimed is completely untrue. He should refer again to the record. We supported the proposal in the 1988 Act to increase the penalty for cruelty to children to 10 years.

Mr. Maclean: Then they voted against the Act. Labour Members claim that they will improve the Bill in Committee, and they take credit for what they say are improvements that they thought of, invented or drove through. They then either vote against the measure or sit on their hands on Second Reading and vote against it on Report. That is the hypocrisy of the Labour party's position.

We have heard Labour Members talk about parental responsibility, but when we changed the law to compel parents to attend court with their children the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth argued passionately against it and voted against it. He said:

"Holding parents responsible for controlling their children's behaviour and punishing them financially will only make matters worse."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 24 January 1991; c. 453.]

If that is referred to in the central office brief, it has come from me, because this is my research.

Recently, we saw the latest Labour party hypocrisy on knives. If it is concerned about people carrying knives, why did its spokesman, the leader of the Labour party in the other place, argue against the essential power of stop and search contained in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which the police require to deal with the problem? He said:

"The clause goes well beyond the powers which the police ought to have and need to have in a democratic ... society."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 May 1994; Vol. 555, c. 611.]

The Labour party's present search for a definition to deal with knives that are responsible for a small amount of crime is merely a smokescreen to cover it's shame at trying to deny the police the power to search all those who may carry any sort of knife to commit crimes. Again, the Labour party says one thing in the House of Commons, but does another in the other place when it thinks that no one is looking.

Mr. Michael: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maclean: The hon. Gentleman had enough time to prattle on, and he is eating into my time.

Labour Members may try to con the public into thinking that they do not oppose the Bill, but we shall watch them carefully in Committee and in the other place to ensure that they do not try their usual trick of undermining the Bill through amendments that dilute its essential principles.

I turn now to the speech by the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw). He was all over the place. The hon. Gentleman's U-turn today, like the one we saw on Monday, was quite extraordinary. The Labour party initially criticised my right hon. and learned Friend's proposals as farcical, daft and unnecessary. It then rushed out its document entitled, "Honesty, Consistency and Progression in Sentencing", in which it argues:

"Offences of a sexual nature should be distinguished from other violent offences, since serious sexual assaults always reflect severe problems with personal relationships, and lead to great concern about the offender's propensity for further offending."

That is what the Opposition said in March 1996. However, last Monday the hon. Gentleman made the first of his two U-turns. He said that he had no difficulty at all with offences of serious violence that result in homicide or with sexual offences. The hon. Gentleman made a back-of-the-fag-packet calculation and added sexual offences and homicide.

This afternoon the hon. Gentleman said that a second offence of attempted murder should attract an indeterminate reviewable sentence—another U-turn on the Floor of the House. That is quite inadequate: it is not good enough for the hon. Gentleman to tack on offences such as that on the spur of the moment when he is under pressure. He failed to deal with those who use knives intentionally to cause serious injury, despite his pretence earlier today that he was concerned about that problem. His extension does not cover those who commit armed

robbery. The Opposition's policy cannot be based on back-of-the-fag-packet calculations whenever the hon. Gentleman is under pressure in the House.

Mr. Straw: On the issue of consistency, I return the Minister to a question of knives—a current issue of great concern. Can he explain why on 20 June 1988 he voted against any control on the sale of knives to those aged under 16? Why did he take eight years to change his mind?

Mr. Maclean: I will provide an explanation if the hon. Gentleman will explain why he and the Leader of the Opposition did not vote for the measure either. The hon. Member for Blackburn espouses control of knives as a great Labour cause, but he did not vote for controls. The Labour party went on to try to restrict the stop and search powers that we proposed to enable the police to search not only those individuals who may carry an oddly defined combat knife, but any criminals who carry any sorts of knives, including those commonly used to commit violent offences.

My right hon. Friends the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) and for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) made constructive contributions to the debate. I welcome their considered support for the Bill and the great depth of experience that they bring to bear on the issue. We share the ambition of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney to have as much training and education in prisons as possible. That is also the view of the director general. The Prison Service seeks to preserve a balance, in difficult circumstances, between maintaining security and offering inmates constructive regimes.

The director general attaches great importance to the preservation of offending behaviour programmes and he hopes to meet his key performance indicators of 1,300 prisoners completing accredited programmes by the end of this financial year. We are very close to meeting a demanding active constructive core days target of 26.5 hours a week of purposeful activity per prisoner. We shall not lose sight of those objectives.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley was worried that juries might not convict on the third offence. However, it is highly unlikely that a jury would know whether a person has one previous conviction, or even two. I draw his attention to the fact that, when a second-time violent or sexual offender gets an automatic life sentence, the judge and not the Home Secretary will set the tariff.

I turn to the speech by the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile). He certainly addressed the House with great pomposity, but he did not make a great contribution. He reminded me of his hon. Friend the Member for Caithness and Sutherland (Mr. Maclennan) when he used the same great dignity to extol the virtues of the Liberals' policy on when piglets should be weaned and taken away from their mother. I remember that from when I was a junior Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The policy was every bit as preposterous as what we heard from the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery tonight.

Our intention was described in the White Paper. It has been repeated many times by my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and me on television, in the press and on the wireless. There is no intention in the honesty in sentencing proposals to decrease or increase the length of a sentence. The intention is clear: we want sentences to remain about the same as at present. We disagree with the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery's interpretation of clause 21, but I am happy to look at it and make our intention clear.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery asked us to believe that the Liberals will be voting against the Bill because they think that it will result in shorter sentences and they cannot bring themselves to back such a measure. What a preposterous suggestion. When have the Liberals ever said that they would vote for Bills only if they increased sentences? That is not their view. The Liberal party view is best explained by the comment of the hon. Member for Caithness and Sutherland when he was their home affairs spokesman:

"If I had my way, there would be far fewer people in custody."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 20 January 1994; c. 71.]

I think that the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery shares that view. He does not like our proposals because he is afraid that they may lead to burglars, drug dealers and violent offenders spending longer in custody. That goes against his principles. At least if he comes clean he will be honest to his principles, unlike the Labour party.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery attacked us on the ground that the House has no constitutional right to determine sentences for serious offences. I believe that the House has the right to decide which classes of offence will qualify. There have been disagreements today, which will no doubt continue, on where the line should be drawn. Some hon. Members think that we may have included too many qualifying offences. The hon. Member for Blackburn was worried about section 18 wounding being too widely drawn. Some of his Back-Bench colleagues were worried that it may be too narrow. There is a genuine debate on that. We believe that we have made the right judgment.

Let us make it clear that Parliament has the right and duty to determine which penalties should attach to which offences. The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery argued against that. He was scraping the bottom of the barrel, looking for excuses to oppose the Bill. It is preposterous to claim that witnesses will not give evidence or that defence lawyers will, en masse, start telling juries, "You had better not convict my client because he has been done for rape already and he has a previous conviction for murder, so please do not convict him on this occasion because he will get a heavier sentence."

My right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) was interested in the staged sentence proposals and what the Labour party called the reviewable indeterminate sentence. The main difficulty with that is that it does not include the life licence proposal. The excellent requirement of the life sentence is that when the person has served the tariff, a judgment is made on whether he is safe to be released. If the judgment is that he is safe for release, he still stays on life licence and is liable to recall at any time should he breach his conditions, be perceived to be a danger to the public or offend. That is the main difference between that policy and what I understand to be the Labour party's policy on the reviewable indeterminate sentence.

[Mr. Maclean]

I welcome the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney). He made an excellent speech and I congratulate him on the views that he expressed. He will welcome the action that we are taking for victims in the victims charter.

The authority of the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) in the matter was demonstrated by his assertion that he knew of no company that would ever want to build private prisons. If that is the measure of his knowledge on these matters, the Police Federation is not getting very good value for money. Two prisons are under construction by private consortiums now. The hon. Gentleman is way wrong on that point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), in a very thoughtful speech, made some points at which, I assure him, I will look carefully. He and I may place a different emphasis on the effects of the Bill. My right hon. Friend is worried that it may have some negative effects. I look forward to debating with him, perhaps in another forum, in more depth and with more time, his views on the matter. I believe that there is sufficient flexibility in the proposals to prevent the injustices that my right hon. Friend fears will take place.

My right hon. Friend asked me how many of the 217 sex or violent offenders who were reconvicted have committed another offence. Many of them are still in prison. Nineteen of those who were sent to prison had three or more convictions. That shows that we are right to take the action that we propose on sex offenders because many of them will be multiple offenders.

Sir Michael Shersby: How many of the 217 offenders to whom my right hon. Friend has just referred have murdered again, raped again or committed another serious offence?

Mr. Maclean: I do not have those figures to hand. I can say that 19 of those who were sentenced had been convicted of three or more offences.

Time and again, the rhetoric of the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth is ruined by his record, as it was tonight. I am not talking only about his and the Labour party's disgraceful votes, again and again, against the Prevention of Terrorism Act. I am also talking about his votes against other legislation that punishes criminals and protects victims. He voted against life sentences for those who take a gun to commit a crime. The House should contrast the Labour party's voting record on criminals with guns with its blatant and cynical opportunism on firearms issues now.

The word "victim" trips easily off the hon. Gentleman's tongue, yet how many more victims would there be if my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General did not have the right to appeal against lenient sentences? That vital power has been used many times with the result that some of our most dangerous criminals have spent more time behind bars. Labour does not believe in keeping criminals behind bars and Labour and the hon. Gentleman voted against that power.

Mr. Michael *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Maclean: That is not just my belief; it is the hon. Gentleman's own words. When we increased the requirement for prisoners to serve a half rather than a third of their sentence before getting parole, the hon. Gentleman said that

"Opposition Members have been increasingly concerned about the effect of the decision to change the parole release date to one half of the sentence because it will probably mean an increase in the prison population as prisoners will serve longer sentences . . . In the Labour party, we are worried because we do not believe that the Bill provides effective sentencing reforms which would ensure the reduction in the length of sentences".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 15 January 1991; c. 343-44.]

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wanted criminals to do longer community sentences instead. That is not the case either. He argued that community sentences should be cut from a maximum of 240 hours to 120 hours. Tonight, he said that he believed in community sentences, but in Committee he said that the greater the sentence, the less opportunity there was for good will and motivation to emerge. There we have it. The hon. Gentleman does not like criminals serving their sentence in prison and he does not want them to serve it in the community either. Unless the hon. Gentleman believes in giving criminals a good flogging—we heard earlier that he does not—it is clear to us that the Labour party is soft on criminals. That is the Labour party's record and the record of the hon. Gentleman as well—and a pretty sordid one it is.

Time and again, Labour argues for measures that are soft on crime and criminals. How can Labour be tough on crime if it votes against tough measures for those who carry guns to commit a crime? How can Labour be tough on criminals if it votes against closing one of the criminal's greatest loopholes, the right of silence? As we have heard, because of our legislation, there has been a 50 per cent. reduction in the number of criminals remaining silent. Yet Labour voted against it.

How can Labour Members be tough on crime if they do not even have the guts to vote for criminals serving up to 240 hours on community service? Labour would never introduce a Bill with the tough measures of the Crime (Sentences) Bill.

Labour's record is of opposing everything that gives criminals their just deserts. With an eye on the opinion polls, they realise that it would be bad for their image to be caught voting against the Bill. That is why they will try to dilute it in Committee. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to support the Bill. It will allow us to protect more innocent victims of crime and send a strong signal to the worst criminals in society that if they persist with their evil deeds, they will be severely punished.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 25, Noes 165.

Division No. 5] **[10 pm**

AYES

Alton, David	Johnston, Sir Russell
Ashdown, Paddy	Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Beith, A J	Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*	Llwyd, Elfyn
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*	Maddock, Mrs Diana
Carlile, Alex *(Montgomery)*	Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Chidgey, David	Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Corbyn, Jeremy	Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*	Rendel, David
Harvey, Nick	Skinner, Dennis

Steel, Sir David
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thurnham, Peter
Wallace, James
Wigley, Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Archy Kirkwood and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Amess, David
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Body, Sir Richard
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Devlin, Tim
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Dunn, Bob
Dykes, Hugh
Elletson, Harold
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Fishburn, Dudley
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorst, Sir John
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Harris, David
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Michael
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Howard, Michael
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, John
Malone, Gerald
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Merchant, Piers
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Sackville, Tom
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spink, Dr Robert
Spring, Richard
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Tracey, Richard
Twinn, Dr Ian
Viggers, Peter
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'ld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mr. Richard Ottaway.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 60 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 149, Noes 23.

Division No. 6] **[10.12 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Amess, David
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Devlin, Tim
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Dunn, Bob
Dykes, Hugh
Elletson, Harold
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Fabricant, Michael
Fishburn, Dudley
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorst, Sir John
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Harris, David
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Michael
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Howard, Michael
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hurd, Douglas
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malone, Gerald

Marlow, Tony
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Merchant, Piers
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Oppenheim, Phillip
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Sackville, Tom
Shersby, Sir Michael
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spink, Dr Robert
Spring, Richard
Stephen, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Tracey, Richard
Twinn, Dr Ian
Viggers, Peter
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mr. Richard Ottaway.

NOES

Alton, David
Ashdown, Paddy
Beith, A J
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Carlile, Alex *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Corbyn, Jeremy
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Harvey, Nick
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Rendel, David
Sedgemore, Brian
Steel, Sir David
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thurnham, Peter
Wallace, James
Wigley, Dafydd

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Archy Kirkwood and
Mr. Don Foster.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).

CRIME (SENTENCES) BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 50A(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Crime (Sentences) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to that Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—[*Mr. Anthony Coombs.*]

Question agreed to.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Ordered,

That Mr. Anthony Coombs be discharged from the National Heritage Committee and Mr. Tim Rathbone be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Anthony Coombs.*]

PUBLIC SERVICE

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Ainsworth be discharged from the Public Service Committee and Mr. Peter Luff be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Anthony Coombs.*]

TREASURY

Ordered,

That Sir Thomas Arnold be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Mr. Tim Yeo be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Anthony Coombs.*]

Basildon New Town

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

10.23 pm

Mr. David Amess (Basildon): Basildon is against crime, but it would seem from tonight's proceedings that the Liberal party is in favour of it. Basildon, Basildon, Basildon. I wish that I had a pound for every time that its name has been mentioned, because of the number of times that people come up to me in the street and say that they can recall the Basildon declaration, which showed that there would a Conservative Government again.

That result pleased some people, but disappointed others. One such person was quoted on 7 April 1992, when asked about a survey, as saying that it

"was a clear sign that Tories were running scared."

He said:

"This is another indication that the people of Basildon are fed up with the Tories and want a change.

I am confident Basildon will elect a Labour MP and that is the only poll that matters as far as we are concerned."

That was my Labour opponent whom I defeated two days later. He was wrong then and he has been wrong ever since. Even on the night of the declaration, he refused to accept that there would not be a Labour Government.

I wish to share my thoughts about Basildon's past, present and future. I shall remain the Member of Parliament for Basildon until the general election, so I was astonished when I saw an advertisement in my local newspaper that showed a picture of the local Labour Member of the European Parliament and Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for the new Basildon constituency. The photograph had a picture of Big Ben and the House of Commons in the background and the candidate was described as "Basildon's parliamentary spokesperson". I do not know whether that is a new technique that is being deployed by prospective candidates, but it is misleading to the general public.

I shall be the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon. When I was first elected in 1983, there were six Members of the House who had, at some stage, represented Basildon. If they were here this evening, they would welcome the opportunity that I am affording my hon. Friend the Minister to reply to this debate on Basildon new town, the plotlands and unadopted roads. Those Members were my noble Friend Lord Braine of Wheatley, my hon. Friend the Member for Holland with Boston (Sir R. Body), Sir Edward Gardner, Sir Robert McCrindle and Mr. Harvey Proctor. But it was only in 1983 that Basildon was constructed as a constituency on its own.

When the media were summoned to observe the 1992 election campaign, some of them were ill informed—indeed, misinformed—about the nature of the constituency. In reality, of course, they had been summoned by the Labour party to see the first Conservative Member lose his seat. It was clear in the articles that were written about Basildon at the time and for weeks and months afterwards that there was no great understanding of the town's history. It is not true that it is a concrete jungle. Its history goes back to the Domesday-book. There is a wonderful soul to Basildon that goes way beyond the inception of the new town's construction in 1952.

Plotlands have a fascinating history. They resulted from poor harvests in the 1870s and 1880s, coupled with imports of cheap American wheat. That meant that many English farmers were forced to sell their land. Essex, with its poor-quality soil, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Dr. Spink) can bear testimony, was severely affected. Many Essex farmers sold property to developers. My hon. Friend has several developers in his constituency, especially in Canvey island. Developers such as the Land Company of London in turn sold the land on in smaller plots to Londoners. The Londoners would travel there at the weekends and would take holidays in the plotland settlements. They travelled via the new Fenchurch Street to Shoeburyness line, opened in 1888.

The plots were grouped into estates. Dunton Hills is typical and I am delighted to be able to tell the House that part of it survives today. Conditions were harsh—the estates were often without electricity, gas or sewerage. Even water was available only through a pump, served by a makeshift reservoir. Heat and light were provided by paraffin burners. To make life harder still, the majority of families on the estates did not have houses and lived simply in tents or wooden huts. After the first world war, many retiring service men moved to the country and spent their pensions on building small bungalows, but life remained the same. Indeed, I must draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister to the fact that, for many of the plotlanders, life still remains pretty tough.

Despite all those conditions, the families, for instance on the Dunton Hill estate, were happy to escape from what they perceived to be the grime of London to the exhilaration of the open countryside. Again, a number of the journalists who descended on Basildon in 1992 did not understand that it is a misnomer to describe Essex as a flat county. Westley heights, the highest point in Essex, is in my constituency and there is some beautiful countryside in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point.

The hardships of their life, coupled with the fact that most of the families came from London, meant that a strong sense of community developed. People would help each other out in times of difficulty—very much the community spirit that I shared as a child with my neighbours in the east end of London. Families would work together on communal projects, such as the building of roads and fences—a main point of contention for the people living in the plotlands. At the end of the weekend, all those people would travel back to London on the crowded 8.38 to Fenchurch Street.

The strong community spirit became all the more pronounced during the second world war, when many people moved permanently to the country. Most of the men and women continued to work in London and would commute in groups of about 100, all leaving home at 6 o'clock in the morning for the long walk to Laindon station. The Dunton Hill estate did not escape the war unscathed and suffered at the hands of enemy bombers. There was also a prisoner of war camp in Laindon, and a generally friendly relationship grew up between the locals and the prisoners, who, I have been advised, were

[Mr. David Amess]

occasionally allowed out and helped residents with various odd jobs. I have also been told that some of the prisoners later married local girls.

When the hostilities ended in 1945, most families remained on the estates. Many of the young men who left to fight in the war, however, stayed away to look for jobs elsewhere and the plots were left to an older generation. Many of those who were left behind found themselves increasingly unable to cope on their own and they abandoned their homes for smaller, better-equipped flats in the new town of Basildon. Nevertheless, to this day, some families remain in their original homes on the Dunton Hill estate—still without sewerage, street lights or electricity, but reluctant to leave the homes that they built some 60 years ago.

There are three areas where one can find plotlands in my constituency—in Laindon, which is the part that I have just described, just off Dry Street and in Bowers Gifford, Pitsea. The debate is perhaps a result of the representations made by people in the plotlands in that part of the constituency.

Bowers Gifford is a wonderful village in my constituency. As I address the House as the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon, it is ironic that Bowers Gifford will fall within the constituency of Billericay after the next election. It is a remarkable village. For example, one of the local residents is Mrs. Hilda Westlake, whom I was privileged to welcome as a guest at the House of Commons a couple of months ago. At the age of 100, she walked up to the Public Gallery, observed our proceedings and later had tea with the Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, one evening Mrs. Westlake fell over in her bedroom, but I am delighted to tell the House that she is now the oldest person in the country to have had a successful hip replacement operation. She did not leave Orsett hospital on a Zimmer frame and her main concern, she told me, was how she would be able to organise the next whist drive in the local village hall. She is a remarkable lady and one of the local roads is named after her.

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point): I have met my hon. Friend's constituent—she is, indeed, a remarkable lady. I know her feelings on the subject and I should like to hear my hon. Friend's views on the fact that his constituency is being completely changed, yet the name is being left the same. Is that not anomalous and likely to confuse the public?

Mr. Amess: Some might say that I deserve to have a tough time, but leaving the name unchanged means that I am open to having a tough time. It would have been more sensible to change the name to take in the part of Thurrock that the new constituency will include in future.

The plotland community is a wonderful group of hard-working people who have seen the new town grow up beside them and who have been paying exactly the same amount of council tax as everyone else in Basildon, but who do not receive anywhere near the level of services that other local residents enjoy. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister replies, he will tell me what powers the Department of the Environment has in that respect. I quote from the agenda for the meeting on 15 June of the housing committee of Basildon district council, which states that the council

"has made the provision of quality services to its local residents a priority."

That commitment certainly does not extend to the people of the plotlands and especially not to Bowers Gifford.

A few of the properties have, it is true, been bought by wealthier families who have renovated them to a high standard. Many of those people moved to the area to escape the noise and stress of their working lives, or retired there. However, I have to tell my hon. Friend that the roads are of a very poor quality—I am not speaking only of gravel or bumps in the road—and there are many subsidiary problems, especially with waste disposal.

It might seem extraordinary to my hon. Friend, but nearly all those local residents have no main drains and have to use cesspits. There is a great problem with waste disposal. In certain parts of the plotlands, waste has to be burnt or carried to a tip. Where roads exist, they were often built by the residents—sometimes to a crude standard—and they are unadopted. I ask my hon. Friend to address that issue, either in his reply to the debate, or later in writing.

Sewers are a problem. Where sewers exist, they are private and that causes great expense to local residents. Only this week, I received a letter from a resident, which I shall quote briefly. My constituent writes:

"we have a private sewer which was installed about 25 years ago, which serves 13 households up Cornwall Road. Last year we had to renew approximately 200 ft from the connection in Pound Lane in 4 in Plastic Pipe with three New manholes; this work was carried out under council order. This was necessary because of damage from lorries. This work came to £2,500.

This was nothing to the cost of laying the sewer 25 years ago, if we were successful in having a new sewer, would this mean that the most expensive work has been done re. the connection into Pound lane?

It would be nice if I could go to our 13 neighbours with some sort of cost to households."

My hon. Friend will appreciate that any repairs to the sewers might be expensive for local residents, but many of them have no sewers.

Will my hon. Friend consider carefully how we can help those who live on the plotlands? I am not suggesting that they wish to alter the life style for which they originally opted, which was created by the peace and the tranquillity of the countryside, but the least they can expect is decent roads and decent sewerage systems. I accept, however, that that is the responsibility of Essex Water and Anglian Water.

Many of the roads are also poorly lit. Tonight, I should like to pay tribute to three former councillors, Mrs. Carol Coombs, Mr. Bob Sheridan and Mr. Kevin Blake, who worked hard to help people in the plotlands. The problems encountered there are a matter not just for the Department of the Environment, but for Basildon district council and Essex county council.

I do not wish to be party political, but although I am a Conservative Member of Parliament, Essex county council is run by the Labour and Liberal parties. Over the past year, that authority has increased spending above its

standard spending assessment to its capping level; increased the council tax by 6.4 per cent.; and reduced capital spending by £20 million. It has cut the fire and public protection budget by £1 million, by placing an embargo on the recruitment of full-time firefighters. It has cut spending on social services by £4.5 million, by accepting an underspend of £3 million, instead of putting the money into increased care for the elderly and infirm. It has cut the libraries budget by £1 million, by raiding the book fund for the first time in living memory.

Whatever the House may think about that, it is well known that the county council is sitting on huge reserves. It would be irresponsible for a local authority with small reserves to spend those sums and endanger the future of local residents, but surely no damage would be inflicted if Essex spent some of its huge reserves on trying to help local residents. Frankly, I cannot think of a better way in which to do that than by spending some money on assisting people living on the plotlands. I should be interested to discover my hon. Friend's powers in that respect.

It is primarily the responsibility of Essex county council, and not just that of the district council, to improve the quality of the roads, the arrangements for refuse collection and the quality of street lighting. Given the county council's huge reserves, my hon. Friend might consider the powers available to him to assist those local residents.

Tonight we debated the subject of crime. I am delighted to report that, according to the latest Essex police statistics, burglary in dwellings is down by 9.8 per cent., other burglary is down by 17.3 per cent., offences against the person—disgracefully—are up by 7.3 per cent. and car crime is up by 1.2 per cent. Criminality among plotlanders is apparently on the increase. Recently a car was driven into a hedge, spraying weedkiller over a garden. There has been illegal tipping, arson and all sorts of unsavoury activities, which local residents have drawn to my attention.

In conclusion, I wish that when those who are entrusted with reporting on our constituencies are given the task of writing articles, they would take the trouble to research an area well. My constituency has been portrayed inaccurately as a vast concrete jungle full of ill-intentioned people. That could not be further from the truth. The constituency that I represent, where I have been proud to live for 14 years, is a wonderful community. I always tell people that we have two miracles: St. Luke's hospice, which saves many people, and a miracle for animals—the Essex Horse and Pony Protection Society, where 60 horses, ponies and donkeys that were abandoned are being looked after. Both those institutions have been supported by local residents and mean a great deal to the people living in the plotlands.

We in the House look forward to the future—to the millennium and beyond. In my constituency, unemployment has fallen by 2,000 since the last election, education standards are improving, and I have shared with the House the fact that my oldest constituent has had a successful hip replacement operation. But we must not forget the past. A week ago, I stood in Dunton as David Bellamy opened our conservation observatory. I have celebrated various events with the people who live in the plotlands. I was taken to the Haven, one of the original homes. This evening I draw attention to the plight of those people, and I ask my hon. Friend to do all that he can to help Basildon new town and the plotlands, and in particular to help the people to get adopted roads.

10.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Sir Paul Beresford): Every Adjournment debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Mr. Amess) is a delight and tonight's was especially so. He used the opportunity to push in his usual emphatic way all the needs of the people whom he serves in Basildon. His shift, as he calls it, will be a sad loss.

The case that my hon. Friend made tonight has been made by him in the past, on paper and in parliamentary questions. Some aspects come as a surprise; if we did not have a debating point or three from my hon. Friend that contained a surprise, that in itself would be surprising. He covers a wide range of topics and it must be acknowledged that he has put Basildon on the map. Everyone in the country knows of Basildon, and I agree that they do not see it as it is.

The regeneration efforts, especially in the centre of the town, are bringing to the fore an aspect of Basildon that does not fit its media image as a concrete jungle. My hon. Friend mentioned the Dunton Hill estate, Bowers Gifford village and the plotlands. I shall have to study the technicalities that he outlined.

I had planned to present some of the history, but my hon. Friend has covered it completely and in more detail than I could. I can, however, confirm many of his points from my own research.

My hon. Friend mentioned the council tax. Setting that tax is, in the main, in the hands of the district and county local authorities. I am afraid that the type of local authority elected in the area, for the moment, is one that dips its hands deep into the pockets of local people. I understand why people living in the plotlands are concerned. I accept that they are not getting the services that my hon. Friend would expect and that they feel they are paying for.

The problem can be attacked in two ways. First, people may approach the valuation office and appeal against the banding of their properties in the light of the services that they receive. That approach might help to reduce their share of the total burden. The ultimate solution, for which my hon. Friend has pushed and will continue to push, comes at the ballot box. We hope for a change of political complexion.

My hon. Friend mentioned the adoption of the roads. I shall look into that; I know that it has also been raised with the Department of Transport, which is also considering it.

I shall take a careful look at waste and sewers. There have been some recent rule changes that may enable the water companies to pay for those services out of their budgets. There may also, I believe, be an opportunity for local authorities to do so—but I shall need confirmation of that, because the plotlands are unusual and not subject to the usual rules.

My hon. Friend said that some of the funding might come from the Lib-Lab county, which he said had huge reserves. I regret to say that, unusually for me, I did not check on the level of reserves; but, particularly if the reserves are unallocated, my hon. Friend should draw

[Sir Paul Beresford]

them to the attention of the district auditor. It would certainly be wrong to apply too high a council tax while there are huge reserves, some of which could be allocated, for example, to lighting.

This evening we have been discussing crime. I know from experience that better lighting can be a great help in crime prevention. Given this evening's sudden U-turns by the Opposition, I am sure that we could approach the Labour party in the area—although the Liberals seem again to be at sixes and sevens—and suggest using some of the reserves to improve local lighting.

I shall have to go away and consider the shattering list of items with which my hon. Friend has presented me this evening, but as ever I have enjoyed debating with him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eight minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 5 November 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON BILL *[Lords]*

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Promoters of the King's College London Bill *[Lords]* may, notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders or practice of this House, proceed with the Bill in the present Session; and the Petition for the Bill shall be deemed to have been deposited and all Standing Orders applicable thereto shall be deemed to have been complied with; That if the Bill is brought from the Lords in the present Session, the Agents for the Bill shall deposit in the Private Bill Office a declaration signed by them stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill which was brought from the Lords in the last Session;

That, as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office, that such a declaration has been so deposited, has been laid upon the Table of the House, the Bill shall be read the first and second time (and shall be recorded in the Journal of this House as having been so read) and shall be ordered to be read the third time;

That no further Fees shall be charged in respect of any proceedings on the Bill in respect of which Fees have already been incurred during any previous Session.—[*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL ORDER CONFIRMATION BILL

EDINBURGH MERCHANT COMPANY ORDER CONFIRMATION BILL

Considered; to be read the Third time tomorrow.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

Census Information

1. **Mr. Barry Field:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what conclusions his Department has drawn from the last census. [609]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): Census information, along with other information, helps us to monitor the nation's health. I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that the underlying trend continues to improve.

Mr. Field: Does my hon. Friend agree that the census shows without any shadow of a doubt that people are living longer, healthier and more fulfilled lives? Is that not the true testament to the reforms that we have introduced in the national health service, as opposed to the myths peddled by the quack doctors of the Opposition?

Mr. Horam: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and I am delighted to tell him that, standardised for age, the health of people in the Isle of Wight is significantly better than that of the rest of us. Is there something special about the Isle of Wight?

Mr. Barron: I wonder whether the Minister and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field) are reading from some census other than the one that was carried out in this country. We know from that census, for example, that people in poor housing use the national health service 50 per cent. more than the average, adding about £2 billion a year to our NHS bill; that deaths from coronary heart disease among women from the Indian sub-continent are up to 45 per cent. higher than the national average; and that people in lower socio-economic groups can expect to die eight years sooner than the most privileged.

The growing gap between rich and poor is leading to growing inequalities in health; to tackle that problem we must tackle the underlying causes of poverty, which the census clearly shows to be increasing. We and the people want to know what action the Government intend to take cross-departmentally about the increase in poverty and the consequential health inequalities.

Mr. Horam: I am quite surprised at the hon. Gentleman; he is the one surviving member of the Labour health team from before the summer, so I should have thought that he would have more knowledge than the rest. He ought to know that the census is one of the items included in the capitation formula that decides the amount of money that goes to every health authority in the country. The formula is adjusted year by year to take into account exactly the sort of factors that he is talking about. I am surprised at him, because I thought that he was better briefed.

Mr. David Nicholson: All Government Members will support the Secretary of State in his efforts to secure resources to treat the growing numbers of people requiring health care, but does the Minister recognise that concern about bureaucracy, form filling and paper pushing in hospitals and NHS trusts is not confined to the Opposition Benches but is felt just as strongly on our side? If hospitals and trusts give priority to patient care rather than to form filling and paper pushing over the coming months, they will have the vigorous support of their Members of Parliament.

Mr. Horam: That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State put together a package worth £300 million, which is designed to do away with such excessive bureaucracy and form filling. The money will go directly to patient care.

Nurses' Pay

2. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trusts have so far settled nurses' pay in the present financial year. [610]

The Minister for Health (Mr. Gerald Malone): Sixty-six out of the 412 that have made offers.

Mr. Cousins: The Minister must know that nine out of every 10 NHS trusts have not settled the current pay round for nurses, and the next pay round is due to begin.

All over the country, nurses and managers are locked in unnecessary disputes, because managers cannot let their hospitals go deeper into deficit. What message of hope does the Minister have for nurses this week?

Mr. Malone: My message of hope for nurses this winter is the pledge that the Government have given continuously to fund our health service in real terms on an increasing basis year on year. That is a pledge that the Labour party will not make.

There are now 412 detailed offers on the table for nurses and other health care professionals to pick up through negotiation. I hope that they will do that and conclude negotiations as quickly as possible. Whether or not they settle is a matter not entirely within my control.

Mrs. Roe: Can my hon. Friend confirm that a staff nurse can now earn more than £340 a week with additional payments for unsocial hours and overtime, while a sister with ward responsibilities can now earn more than £410 a week?

Mr. Malone: Yes, I can generally confirm those figures. If my hon. Friend looks at what was happening in 1979, she will discover that, in today's money, average nursing pay was £191, compared with £326 today under this Government.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Any decisions that the Government may have made this morning to increase resources for the health service are clearly welcome.

As the Minister well knows, this week marks the 50th anniversary of the setting up by statute of the national health service, promoted by William Beveridge and supported by my party in the post-war Parliament. Besides additional resources, removing unnecessary costs would also make a difference. I refer, for instance, to the costs incurred by local pay negotiations in the health service. If it is indeed a national health service, why do not Ministers heed the proposals of all the professionals and have national pay negotiations, thereby releasing a lot of time and money that could be spent on patient care?

Mr. Malone: I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was this Government who put in place the review body for nurses' pay which underpinned our commitment to national fairness for the nursing profession and other health care professionals. The pay review body remains in place. The nursing profession and other health professionals agreed to the introduction of local pay under a framework last year. That is what we are working towards; it will bring real benefits to people all across the country once it is finally introduced.

Patient Treatments

3. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the number of in–patient and out–patient treatments in the national health service in 1978–79; and what were the figures in 1995–96. [611]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Stephen Dorrell): In-patient acute treatments rose from 5.1 million patients in 1978 to 9.2 million in 1995-96. That represents an increase in the number of acute patients treated of 80 per cent. in 17 years. In the same period, out-patient attendances increased from 28.4 million to 35.9 million.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I warmly welcome that staggering increase in the number of patient treatments. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is due to the Government raising expenditure on the NHS from £8 billion in 1979 to about £40 billion this year; and to the Government ensuring that those ever-increasing resources have been used in the most effective way for the benefit of patients? Will my right hon. Friend therefore accept that the figures that he has given prove beyond doubt that the Government's NHS reforms have been on the right lines?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is exactly right on both counts. We give two pledges to the NHS, neither of which is given by the Labour party. The first is a commitment to insist that the health service is efficiently managed. The second is the Prime Minister's guarantee to raise the real resources available for health care in the service year by year by year. That is a pledge which the Labour party refuses to give.

Mr. Cunliffe: Is the Minister aware that, since the health authority closed down the accident and emergency department of Leigh infirmary—it was eventually replaced by a minor injuries unit that opened 24 hours a day—the authority has reneged on its assurances of a 24-hour service and now, in a disgraceful cost-cutting exercise, proposes to close the unit between 10 pm and 8 am? What does he propose to do to safeguard the welfare of the affected patients?

Mr. Dorrell: I give the pledge that we shall continue to increase the resources available for the treatment of patients in the health service. I also give the pledge that we shall continue to insist that those resources are used in the way that is most efficient and gives the most effective health care to the patients in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in every other constituency.

Sir Irvine Patnick: I have made my right hon. Friend aware of the day case centre at the Royal Hallamshire hospital in Sheffield. Are not the staff to be congratulated on the way in which the unit functions? If that unit were copied throughout the country, would that not reduce waiting lists and waiting times? Will the Secretary of State take an opportunity to visit the unit and see how its wonderful facilities are made available to everyone through the national health service?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is on to an important point. I certainly hope to visit my hon. Friend's constituency, but my problem is that day case units are becoming available throughout the country. Were I to undertake to visit every day care unit, I should have to visit every constituency represented by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The units to which my hon. Friend referred have, over the past 17 years, seen an increase in the number of patients treated as day cases from 500,000 in 1978-79 to 2.8 million last year—a fivefold increase. My hon. Friend is right to say that that is a more efficient way of treating them, but it is a better treatment from the patient's point

of view. A patient does not want to be in hospital if the option is to be home by tea time. That is what day case treatment offers them.

Ms Jowell: Can we get behind the Secretary of State's favourite barrage of statistics? Will he confirm that a patient who is treated and discharged too early and who has to be readmitted counts as two finished consultant episodes; whereas a patient who stays in hospital until he or she has recovered and is able to cope at home counts as only one? The first course is bad for the patient, but good for the statistics, while the second is good for the patient, but bad for the statistics. Does that not show the absurdity of using finished consultant episodes as a measurement of performance in the NHS?

Mr. Dorrell: It is the hon. Lady who is quibbling about statistics. She quibbles because she refuses to give a pledge parallel to the one given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—the pledge to ensure that health service funding rises in real terms year by year by year. That is the question that hon. Members on the Labour Front Bench have to answer, but they resolutely refuse to address the issue.

Mr. John Marshall: Does my right hon. Friend remember the statement of the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) that the test of the NHS reforms would be whether they resulted in the treatment of more or fewer patients? Have we not passed the Cook test with flying colours?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is precisely right. In 1991, the Cook test was set by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). It was: would the Government accept the test and judge the success of the reforms on whether the health service treated more patients? The fact is that, since 1990, the health service has grown by one third in terms of the number of acute patients treated.

Mr. Skinner: The Minister cooked the books.

Mr. Dorrell: The Cook test that the hon. Gentleman should apply has been passed with flying colours by the NHS under this Government.

Health Issues (Public Consultation)

4. **Mr. Hinchliffe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he takes to monitor local public consultation processes on health issues. [612]

Mr. Horam: The Secretary of State reviews all trust mergers and all substantial variations in service provision that are contested. In doing so, he takes account not only of the responses, but of the adequacy of the consultation exercise.

Mr. Hinchliffe: What steps does the Secretary of State take to ensure that commitments given in public consultation exercises on closures or changes of use are followed through? For example, in Wakefield, when the county hospital was closed, we had a clear commitment that it would be replaced by a purpose-built geriatric unit. When Manygates maternity hospital was closed, we had a clear commitment that we would be given a purpose-built maternity unit. When the neurosurgery from Pinderfields general hospital was transferred to Leeds, we had a clear commitment that we would have a rehabilitation centre at the hospital. None of those commitments has been fulfilled. What is the Secretary of State doing about that?

While I am on my feet, let me ask the Minister to explain the shambles that has occurred in the public consultation process on the proposed merger of the two Wakefield trusts. The consultation process was stopped half way through and passed over to the health authority because the Government had wrongly advised local people on the way to handle the issue.

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. We have nearly doubled the length of time for consultation in Wakefield—and that consultation involves the merger of the two trusts. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is cavilling at that, as he opined some time ago that there were too many trusts in the Wakefield health authority. Perhaps we can discuss those issues at greater length during Thursday evening's Adjournment debate.

Mr. Dunn: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for taking the trouble to visit my constituency yesterday to see for himself the site of the proposed district general hospital at Darenth park. Will he take it from me that, whatever the consultation that took place in north-west Kent, all the communities in Dartford, Gravesham and north Sevenoaks are united in their determination to support the Government's private finance initiative, which will lead to the new district hospital at Darenth park?

Mr. Horam: I take my hon. Friend's point. Darenth park is a heartening example of the progress being made through the private finance initiative. I should re-emphasise that that is the way to obtain new hospitals without having to wait in the queue for public expenditure. The initiative has been successful in Darenth park, and I am sure that the consultation process there will be successful.

Mr. Pearson: Is the Minister aware that many district health authorities are leaving it to an advanced stage of the NHS trusts' capital investment planning process before going out to public consultation, even though the capital investment plans may involve a major strategic change such as the closure of hospitals? Does he consider that to be acceptable? Will he consider reviewing the NHS management executive guidelines on consultation involving the consumer to make it explicit that consultation, if it is to be genuine, must occur as early as possible and well before hundreds of thousands of pounds are wasted on management consultancy fees?

Mr. Horam: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. It is sensible to have something concrete to consult about. When plans are embryonic, consultation can occur too early and, as the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said, it can go wrong. It is important to consult in the right way and at the right time.

"Fetal Sentience"

5. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what response he intends to make to the document "Fetal Sentience", a copy of which has been sent to him. [613]

Mr. Horam: Prevention and relief of unnecessary pain is a primary concern in clinical practice. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has set up a working party to conduct an independent review on the evidence of fetal awareness and to consider whether there is any need for change in current practice. I understand that the working group will report in the new year.

Mrs. Winterton: Does my hon. Friend agree that that authoritative paper, written by 15 of the world's top doctors and scientists, shows that the structures necessary for the perception of pain are present and functional from the 10th week following fertilisation? Does he agree that the onus should now be firmly placed on those who claim that the unborn child feels no pain during abortion and that they should prove their case? Is it not a good time to review the workings of the law in this sphere, bearing in mind that 4.5 million abortions have taken place—90 per cent. of them merely for social reasons?

Mr. Horam: I assure my hon. Friend that the working party set up by the royal college will look into all the scientific and medical evidence that comes before it. I am sure that it will give a balanced view. On my hon. Friend's second point about reviewing legislation, that is a matter for Parliament.

Mr. Alton: Notwithstanding that reply, is it not a matter for the Government rather than the royal college to examine how legislation works? Given that, since 1990, we allow abortion up to and even during birth in the case of a handicapped baby and up to 24 weeks gestation in the case of a perfectly healthy unborn baby, is it not time now to consider from a legislative point of view the latest scientific evidence about foetal sentience and the pain and awareness experienced by the unborn child? Will the Minister contrast the lack of care that is shown towards the unborn with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which gives protection even to an amoeba?

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about this. As he is aware, there is conflicting medical evidence on foetal awareness. Clinicians who are expert in the field must undertake a balanced study of the evidence. Of course the Government will give full consideration to the working party report.

Dr. Spink: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of foetal sentience, even in the House? Does he agree that it is time for the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to examine the matter and report to the House?

Mr. Horam: I take my hon. Friend's suggestion, which we shall consider. However, it is right for the evidence to be studied by the royal college, which has undertaken to be specific in its report. It is better for the matter to be examined by one group rather than by two or three, especially if one of those has Government status. The royal college is the right body to consider the evidence.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Is the Minister aware that several highly critical papers have appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, suggesting that foetal pain is a misnomer? Will he give the House an assurance that he will wait until a report is published by Dr. Anne McLaren before he makes any Government pronouncement on the issue?

Mr. Horam: Yes, I take the hon. Lady's point. That is why I used the phrase "foetal awareness", which is perhaps a more accurate description of what we are speaking about and could include pain. Clearly, the subject requires careful consideration.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does my hon. Friend not find it rather odd that many of those who lobby for animals to be treated as sentient beings also lobby for abortion on demand?

Mr. Horam: I hear my hon. Friend's point.

Dental Services

6. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists in England were providing national health service treatment for children and adult patients without restriction in 1985 and in 1995. [614]

Mr. Malone: The number of dentists in the general dental services in England was 14,255 at 30 June 1985 and 15,927 at 30 June 1995.

Mr. Ainger: That answer does not strictly address the question. Does the Minister recall the statement made by the Secretary of State on 15 October this year, when he said that there was continued steady growth in NHS dental services? How does he justify that statement when, in the past two years, 1,900,000 fewer people have been registered with dentists in England and Wales, and more than half the population of England and Wales is not registered with a dentist at all? Does he accept that there has been a serious decline in NHS dentistry over the past few years, and that it is time that the Government addressed it?

Mr. Malone: No, I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I read the exchanges between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the hon. Gentleman before I came to answer the question. My right hon. Friend was right: under this Government, NHS dental services are growing. A record number of NHS dentists are providing them. In Wales, that figure in 1985 was 741; it has gone up to 849. I accept the point behind the hon. Gentleman's question. There are problems in certain parts of the country, which we are addressing—in the long term through the purchaser-provider relationship, as the Select Committee on Health recommended, and in the shorter term through the access fund that we announced, through which 22 schemes are getting under way, and more flexible use of the existing legislation allowing us to appoint salaried dentists.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: Against that welcome background of an increase in the number of NHS dentists, will my hon. Friend nevertheless have regard to the problems that can be created by dentists choosing to leave the NHS, which results in a shortage such as there is now in Saffron Walden? Will he undertake to re-examine the scale of access funds?

Mr. Malone: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there are local difficulties, and of course there are mechanisms now by which we can address them. The access funds that have been announced will, I hope, be evaluated quickly, and if they are proven to be effective, we shall see whether they are the mechanism that we should use to alleviate that particular local need.

NHS Funding

7. **Mr. Roy Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received from the British Medical Association concerning the funding of the NHS. [615]

Mr. Dorrell: I am routinely in contact with the British Medical Association. I last met the chairman last week.

Mr. Hughes: The Secretary of State will be aware that the BMA has warned that the hospital service could collapse this winter. What is he doing to prevent such an eventuality? Would it not be wiser to concentrate finances on nurses, doctors, wards and operating facilities rather than turn this great service into a haven for bureaucrats?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman has not caught up with his party leader, who acknowledges that the national health service needs managing; he also acknowledges that the traditional national health service was undermanaged, so there is no doubt about the importance of strong management in the health service to ensure that resources are made available to treat the growing number of patients who come into our hospitals.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the views of the BMA and the hospital service. It is an absolutely regular annual cycle that we hear of problems at this time of year as budgets are being set. The hon. Gentleman might like to know that, in addition to other reports coming out of the health service at the moment, a report from the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts says:

"Essentially, the NHS is in a robust position."

The national health service has benefited from growing resources and is treating a growing number of patients. The Opposition cannot accustom themselves to that fact.

Mr. Rowe: Does my right hon. Friend accept that many of us would take what the BMA says about the health service with rather more conviction if the BMA were not so keen constantly to support doctors who in private it would admit should be got rid of, and that the trade union activities within the health service by which support is given to manifestly incompetent doctors is a disgrace?

Mr. Dorrell: I am not going to get engaged in an exchange of insults with the BMA. I welcome the fact that the chairman of the BMA endorsed the primary care Bill, which the Government will introduce during this Session, as an important step forward in the further development of primary care. I also welcome the recognition within the BMA that the Government are delivering more money year by year to the health service, with the result that the health service is treating more patients year by year. Those are the two key facts about the present position in the national health service.

Mr. Spearing: Does the Secretary of State recall that, last July, I asked, in a written question, what were the deficits in funding for the health service. The Department replied that the figures were not suitable for publication. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Yes; indeed, they were only published after an Adjournment debate on 16 October last. Does the Secretary of State agree that the figures that he has now placed in the Library show that the estimated cumulative deficit on 31 March next year will be at least £120 million net? Do not the deficits and, indeed, the efforts to obscure them from Parliament and the public, show that the Government are not fit to look after the health service and that it is not safe in their hands at all? How would he refute such a charge, bearing in mind the facts that I have just mentioned?

Mr. Dorrell: The variety of red herrings coming from Opposition Members is amazing. All of them are designed to obscure two central facts about the national health service. Since 1990, resources have increased by a quarter, and the number of patients treated has increased by a third. The hon. Gentleman asked us to publish some information. Now, he criticises us for publishing it. What we have seen in the health service is extra money treating more patients. That is what the health service exists to deliver.

Mr. Nigel Evans: Does my right hon. Friend agree that our commitment to the national health service can be seen in each of our constituencies? For instance, at the Royal Preston hospital, which he visited last year, in my constituency, a new cancer unit is being built, at a cost of more than £5 million. A gynaecology unit will be moved to the same site, at a cost of more than £12 million, and earlier this year a new day care centre opened, at a cost of more £1 million. While I am on my feet, I invite my right hon. Friend to come to Fulwood to visit the hospital to see some of the good work that is happening in our constituencies.

Mr. Dorrell: My problem is that, each year, I would have to visit every one of my hon. Friends' constituencies in order to keep up with the good news and the developments in the NHS. The problem for those on the Opposition Front Bench is that the Government are committed to providing more money year by year for the health service. That is a pledge which the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor will not allow the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) to give. Labour will not make that pledge.

Mr. Chris Smith: Is it not the case that everyone, including now the Government, agrees that the health service is facing a real crisis this winter? [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] What precisely will the Secretary of State's much trumpeted extra money from the Chancellor do to solve this

immediate crisis, or does he intend to spend next year's money to ward off this year's problems? If so, will we not end up with exactly the same crisis in a year's time?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman has blown it again—any excuse, any diversion, any subject other than what those on the Opposition Front Bench think should happen. When the hon. Gentleman is asked what he thinks should happen, answer comes there none.

Lady Olga Maitland: Does my right hon. Friend agree that he has nothing to be ashamed of in the health care at St. Helier hospital in my constituency? Is he aware that that magnificent hospital provides more treatments and operations and is opening more specialist units than ever before—progress based on an increase in Government spending on health of 79 per cent. in real terms since 1979? The patients are grateful, and delighted with the service.

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for another local story illustrating the national picture—more money treating more patients in the people's health service supported by the Government.

Antibiotics (Prescribing)

8. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to issue new guidance to family doctors on the prescribing of antibiotics. [616]

Mr. Malone: Detailed national guidance on the prescribing of antibiotics to individual patients would not be appropriate because of local variation in resistance patterns. Only the doctor in charge of the patient is in a position to decide on the most appropriate treatment. The British National Formulary, which is regularly updated and which we fund, provides advice for all doctors on the choice of suitable drugs.

Mr. Williams: That answer is rather complacent. In view of the link between meningitis clusters and the overuse of antibiotics by general practitioners in those areas, and the rise of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus in hospitals, is it not clear that resistance to antibiotics is a major health problem, and should not the Government introduce guidelines for GPs to prescribe antibiotics only when they are necessary?

Mr. Malone: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern on this matter, which the Government keep under close review. It might be helpful if I point out that the idea that antibiotics are on an ever-increasing path of prescription is not entirely right. The increase is still only 3.1 per cent., compared with 3.9 per cent. for all drugs. The Government take the matter seriously and guidance has been issued. The matter is considered by area prescribing committees because that is the most appropriate way in which to meet local needs. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that the matter is kept under constant review by the chief medical officer.

Mr. Tredinnick: Does my hon. Friend accept that homeopathic doctors can offer treatments which substitute for antibiotics? Might there be scope under the primary care Bill for extending the scope of homeopathic treatment in the health service?

Mr. Malone: There is already scope for providing such treatment through the GP fundholding system, and I am pleased that a number of GP fundholders do that. I am also pleased that those who provide homeopathic medicines are now beginning to assess the effectiveness of such remedies, as happens in the rest of the NHS.

Electric Wheelchairs

9. **Mr. Frank Cook:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have received an electric wheelchair from their local health authority since the introduction of the scheme. [617]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Simon Burns): Since the scheme for severely disabled people came into operation, 64 powered wheelchairs have been issued. By March 1997, wheelchair services are expected to have used the full allocation of this year's £6.4 million additional money.

Mr. Cook: A good half million individuals are confined to national health service hand-powered wheelchairs. Many hon. Members will know how difficult it is, even for able-bodied people, to propel or manoeuvre such appliances. The departmental guidelines suggest that only people who cannot stand or walk should be eligible for powered wheelchairs. Will the Minister give an undertaking to review those guidance notes? Will he also tell the House what financial provisions will be made in the next financial year?

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. The Government are determined to provide severely disabled people with as much help as possible. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that two different schemes for wheelchair users were announced. Over the next four years, £50 million extra will be made available, on top of the current funding of £40 million a year, £27 million of which is for powered wheelchairs.

The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that the setting of the criteria, and the guidance for the assessment of people eligible for a powered wheelchair, were determined at local level in consultation with user groups and voluntary organisations.

Mr. Tom Clarke: Does the Minister agree that the slow take-up of the powered wheelchair scheme is bound to be repeated under the wheelchair voucher scheme, which the Government announced with a great fanfare last February as part of the same initiative? What have the Government learnt since then? Why have disabled people and their organisations waited for months for Government guidelines that have been postponed again and again? Does he accept that the House and disabled people were given a clear pledge last February? When do the Government intend to announce their timetable, their proposals for implementation and their plans to honour the promises they gave to disabled people and to the House last winter?

Mr. Burns: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not give the Government credit for providing significant additional funding to help the severely disabled

with their wheelchairs. With regard to the implementation of the scheme for powered wheelchairs, for which the £6.4 million has been made available—

Mr. Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Burns: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will have the courtesy to listen to my answer.

The orders were laid in July, and then it was a matter of establishing the criteria of eligibility. The hon. Gentleman would be the first to criticise us if we had rushed that and got it wrong. When the voucher scheme was announced, it was made plain that it would be introduced gradually over the next four years, starting at the end of this financial year. The guidance that has been worked on through the summer is almost complete, following consultations with user groups and other organisations, and we hope to publish it shortly.

West Middlesex University Hospital

10. **Mr. Jessel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the current proposals to rebuild most of the West Middlesex university hospital. [618]

Mr. Horam: Assessment of the proposals for the redevelopment of West Middlesex university hospital will be carried out when the trust submits its full business case, which is expected to be later this month.

Mr. Jessel: As the West Middlesex is a popular local hospital that gives first-class standards of treatment to patients over a wide area, will my hon. Friend, as a matter of urgency, give a fair wind to the splendid scheme under which the national health service would continue to own the freehold of the land and a 60-year lease of the buildings—and, of course, to provide free treatment?

Mr. Horam: West Middlesex university hospital is indeed a popular local hospital, just as my hon. Friend is a popular Member of Parliament. I am glad to say that his enthusiasm is contagious: it is shared by the clinicians and managers who are driving for the scheme. I can tell him, for example, that the trust and consortium that are behind the scheme are now meeting twice a week to give it maximum impetus. I hope that it will proceed at full speed.

Mr. Flynn: Is the Minister aware that the hospital is one of those in which the so-called hospital bug—methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus—has occurred? Has he read the devastating and moving speech made in the other place by Lord Fitt, who described the death of his wife from that so-called hospital bug? When will the Government look at the number of infections—according to the King's Fund, as many as 50 per cent. of hospital in-patients contract infections of some kind when they are in hospital—and when will they start to measure not the quantity of patients who go to hospital, but the quality of treatment that they receive?

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point. MRSA is a matter of concern. He ought to know, however, that the NHS has sent guidance on the subject to local hospitals, and that local groups and clinicians will be examining it very carefully.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Ms Primarolo:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 5 November. [638]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet, and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Ms Primarolo: Is the Prime Minister aware that, according to his own Government's statistics, the average family living in council housing has been £3 a week worse off since the last election? Is not the main reason for that the fact that the Government have increased taxes 22 times since the election, and put VAT on fuel?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady is worried about the net cash position of council tenants, she might look to see who runs the highest tax rates across the country. The highest band D tax rates are imposed by Labour councils: Coventry, Salford, Hartlepool, Manchester, Islington, Redcar, Hackney—I will not continue the list; the hon. Lady knows them. If it is a Labour council, the council tax is high.

Sir Fergus Montgomery: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are doing everything in their power to help with the rebuilding of Manchester city centre following the terrible damage inflicted by the IRA bomb, while using some of the existing initiatives to help to regenerate our inner cities?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, following the bombing in June last year, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that a task force would be set up to oversee the city's recovery. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Burt), the sponsor Minister for Manchester, announced in Manchester today that EDAW had won a competition to redesign the city centre. That is an important step forward in the redesigning of Manchester, and, I hope, towards a greatly improved future Manchester city centre. Money has already been allocated from European funds, and it is quite possible that, if appropriate application is made, further funds will come forward.

Mr. Blair: Will the Prime Minister admit what he denied just two weeks ago: that, with casualty departments closing and waiting lists up in many parts of the country—and with some hospital trusts technically bankrupt—the national health service is indeed in a state of crisis?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not accept that. Nor do I accept most of the misleading statistics that, the right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends have used in recent

weeks. If the right hon. Gentleman was so concerned about funding, perhaps some time ago he might have matched our pledge to increase funding in real terms each year.

Mr. Blair: Perhaps the Prime Minister will now accept what his own Government's statistics show: that, although they have spent an extra £1.5 billion on the national health service, it has gone into bureaucracy and administration rather than proper patient care. That is why there are 20,000 more senior managers and 50,000 fewer nurses since the Tory internal market reforms.

I ask the Prime Minister to talk to people who use the national health service and who know when they go to a casualty department that something is seriously wrong; who know, when their appointments are cancelled and they are told that they are better off going privately, that something is wrong. Why does he not talk to women who had children in the national health service a few years ago and have had children recently and know the difference in the standard of facilities? Would it not be better for him to admit the existence of this problem and try to solve it rather than deny what everyone knows: that something is seriously wrong in the national health service?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about management and bureaucracy in the health service. Perhaps he can explain to the country why he opposed the abolition of a whole tier of bureaucracy—regional health authorities—saving £100 million a year? The right hon. Gentleman's party opposed that. If he thinks that a £43 billion service does not need proper management, perhaps he might remember what the Socialist Health Association said:

"The NHS was traditionally under-managed and the party"—

Labour—

"should avoid bureaucrat bashing."

The right hon. Gentleman knows that it needs to be properly managed, that it is now being properly managed and that, as a result, money is being allocated to where it should go. He knows that waiting lists are falling, that the number of operations being performed is increasing, that a wider range of treatments is being produced and that the national health service is something that this country should be proud of, not something to be used as a political football by the right hon. Gentleman whenever that is appropriate.

Mr. Blair: I do not think that the Prime Minister— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. If any of the Whips have anything to say, let them come to the Front Bench and say it.

Mr. Blair: I do not think that the Prime Minister understands. This country is very proud of the national health service, but it is not proud of what the Government have done to the national health service. Is not the fear that any extra resources that are put forward now are just sticking plaster to see the Tories through to the election? Why will not the Prime Minister admit what the country knows: that there will be a crisis every year in the national health service while this Government remain in office?

The Prime Minister: I seem to recall that it was a Labour Government who closed hospitals, cut nurses' pay and genuinely created a crisis in the health service. The right hon. Gentleman would be well advised to give up these kindergarten soundbites and concentrate on reality. NHS spending will be more than £34 billion this year—more than £720 for every man, every woman and every child. That is an increase over and above inflation of about three quarters since 1979. There were over 9 million episodes of hospital care in 1995-96—25,000 every day, up 46 per cent. in 10 years.

As the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) said, the acid test is whether more people are being treated. They are, and they are being treated better and offered a wider range of services. The right hon. Gentleman knows that but he will not admit it: he is more concerned with his politics than with the reality of improving treatment.

Sir Jim Spicer: Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to see the statement made last week by the railway franchising director in which he states in clear and unequivocal terms that, over the next few years, taxpayers will be saved more than £2 billion as a result of privatisation? If we add to that better punctuality, service and customer care, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time that the Opposition prophets of doom and gloom recanted and accepted reality—that privatisation is good for the railways and good for the taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is quite right. Not long ago, the Opposition were trying all sorts of scares about privatisation—safety on the railways, services being cut—all of which have been shown to be utterly and comprehensively wrong. The reality is that new rolling stock is being introduced, the service is being improved, there is more investment than before and extra services are being run on a range of lines throughout the country. The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) may shake his head, but all he is showing is that he is ignorant—not that he has any knowledge.

Mr. Ashdown: We have said what we would do to provide extra funding for the health service, both next year and now. If the Government have decided to commit more money to the health service for next year, that is a good thing. If they have decided that the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), the former Foreign Secretary, was right when he said that cutting taxes would be rejected in Britain if it was bought at the cost of closed hospital wards and sacked teachers, that is even better. But does the Prime Minister not realise that the crisis in the health service is not next year—it is now. Wards are being closed—now. Operations are being cancelled—now. Waiting lists are growing again—now. That money is needed—now. Will he provide it and, if not, what will he do to avert the national health service crisis and to prevent any further hospital ward closures this coming winter?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman had better wait for the statement by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on health service funding. It will be made clear at the time of the Budget. I have nothing further to say to the right hon. Gentleman this afternoon except this: it was the right hon. Gentleman who, just a few days ago, was lecturing us about spending

and debt. Now he is advocating extra expenditure. Whatever happens to be his tune for the day, he will shift to it. We have said—and we have kept the promise throughout 17 years—that we will provide extra resources for the health service to ensure that it is able to match the needs of the people of this country. That is why more people are being treated, and better treated, than ever before. The growth in the health service over the years has outstripped every other area of government, and I have made it clear that, in future, it will beat the inflation rate year after year after year. That is a pledge that people do not have to look in the mirror to see. They can look at our record. We have done it.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does my right hon. Friend accept that one of the present Government's great success stories is the fact that they have brought about a growing economy with low inflation and falling unemployment? Will he now accept an invitation from me to visit Macclesfield, where all those facts are amply demonstrated—where we have a Conservative-controlled authority, where unemployment is falling and where we have an area that is proud to be Tory?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that Macclesfield is doing so well. Throughout the country, we see falling unemployment, increasing growth, increasing jobs and increasing prosperity. That will continue to be the case while we retain a Conservative Government following the policies that we have followed in the past few years.

Q2. **Mr. Wigley:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 5 November. [639]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Wigley: Is the Prime Minister aware that more than 40 per cent. of retirement households in these islands depend entirely on the state pension—and that for a single person it is only £61 a week? Is he further aware that, if the link between pensions and earnings had not been broken in 1980, the pension would be £83 a week? On what basis can the Government deny pensioners who depend totally on the state pension any share at all in the increase in prosperity over that period?

The Prime Minister: Of course I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns. That is why we have always recognised the significance of the state pension as the cornerstone of income in retirement, and ensured that it has kept up with the increase in prices. In addition, of course, I accept that for many people the state pension is not intended to be the sole income. That is why, in preparation for the future, we have encouraged personal responsibility and additional pension provision and why, for the present, we have targeted additional resources on the safety net of income-related benefits for people who have no resources other than the state benefit. That is apart from the entitlement that they would certainly have to council tax benefit and housing benefit, so we have targeted a great deal of additional resources to ensure that people who do not have a substantial income and who perhaps depend entirely on the state pension have additional help.

Mr. Carrington: As my right hon. Friend knows, millions of ordinary people own shares in privatised utilities. Does he agree that a windfall tax on those utilities would damage those investments and push up prices for the consumer?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt about that. It is no good promising on the one hand to cut VAT on fuel while, on the other, proposing a windfall tax on the utilities which would put up the price of fuel by more than any potential reduction in VAT. Thus far, the shadow Chancellor seems to be spending the windfall tax on a number of different things, including helping the long-term unemployed back to work, improvements in child care provision—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]—new environmental tasks, small business VAT relief—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]. I am glad to hear Labour Members cheering. How much will the windfall tax be, and upon whom will it be levied? What will it do to the price of the utilities, which are used by everybody in the country? The more Labour Members cheer the spending, the more we know that the windfall tax will rise.

Q3. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 5 November. [640]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mrs. Ewing: On this historic day when a certain individual tried to set fire to the House of Commons, will the right hon. Gentleman give some serious consideration to the thousands of pensioners and disabled people who, this winter, will be afraid to put on the fires in their houses? Will he give serious consideration to a reduction of VAT on fuel, a review of the home energy efficiency scheme and an automatic payment, thereby giving us a better reason to remember 5 November?

The Prime Minister: I have always rather fondly hoped that we celebrated Guy Fawkes day because he failed to blow up the House of Commons. The hon. Lady's point is similar to that raised a few moments ago by the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), and I hope that I can rest on that answer.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that you will have noticed that I have Question 3 to the Prime Minister on Thursday. We can all see your concern at the fact that the questions and exchanges during Prime Minister's Question Time appear to be getting longer and longer, particularly from the Leader of the Opposition. I have counted the number of words: on Tuesday, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) used 342 words to put his three questions and, on Thursday, he used 380 words, and that was after *Hansard* had cut it down a bit. I wonder whether you would use the sensible device whereby, once the right hon. Gentleman has used over 150 or 200 words, you do not call him for a third time.

Madam Speaker: I also keep records, not just once in a while, but daily. I know all those hon. Members—Government Front-Bench, Opposition Front-Bench or Back-Bench—who take far too long to put their questions or give their answers, and it would take me a long time this afternoon to name them all.

Mr. Jim Dowd (Lewisham, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. This is a matter that has been raised with you on numerous occasions, and your views are well known, but I seek clarification.

During the past couple of weeks, the Secretary of State for the Environment paid a visit to my constituency on official business, and just last week, the Secretary of State for Transport did the same. On neither occasion was I extended the courtesy of a telephone call or a note to inform me that they were undertaking those official duties. Although I feel that ordinary Back-Bench Members need not be bound by this, Ministers have staff precisely to deal with such matters. Can you tell the House whether you have received notice from the Government that they intend to discontinue the previous practice, or is this further proof not only that they have run out of ideas and energy, but that they have no manners?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman and the House are fully aware of my views on this matter, but I do not agree totally with what he has said. I think that it is a matter of courtesy for Back Benchers, just as it is for Ministers, to inform other Members of Parliament of visits to their constituencies. I am disagreeably surprised to learn that private offices did not inform the hon. Gentleman of those visits. No doubt he will take up the issue directly with the two private offices concerned.

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Do you believe that the Leader of the Opposition or the deputy Leader of the Opposition should notify hon. Members whose constituencies they visit—

Madam Speaker: Order. This matter can become very tiresome, not only for hon. Members but for the public. I have made my views on this matter known on numerous occasions. I do not discriminate: as far as I am concerned, every hon. Member is equal. Let us leave it at that. Hon. Members should notify an hon. Member before they visit a constituency. I cannot continue emphasising that point, and I refuse take it any further now.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Has a decision yet been made whether it is in order for the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) to be a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee, after he has admitted receiving assistance from a solicitor for Mr. Al-Fayed for the drafting of 58 early-day motions?

Madam Speaker: It is my understanding that the Committee discussed that matter, in addition to matters relating to one or two other hon. Members who are on the Committee, and decided that there was no reason why the hon. Members concerned should not remain on the Committee.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

RAILTRACK GROUP

That the Railtrack Group PLC (Target Investment Limit) Order 1996 (S.I. 1996, No. 2551) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation—*[Mr. Brandreth.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.35 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Michael Forsyth): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before describing the Bill's provisions, I thought that I should deal briefly with the two reasoned amendments that have been tabled by the Opposition parties. I hasten to say that I use the word "reasoned" to refer to the procedure of the House rather than to the nature of Labour's amendment.

I am struck by the fact that the Opposition have declined to give this Bill a Second Reading. Their refusal seems to be in stark contrast to their behaviour yesterday in relation to the Crime (Sentences) Bill introduced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary, because the provisions of that Bill are almost identical, except in some specific, key areas—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) seems to confirm that that is the reason why he and his colleagues oppose this Bill.

The key provisions with which the Opposition disagree are restriction of liberty orders for adults, reform of criminal legal aid, and police powers to confiscate alcohol from people under 16 years. I find it extraordinary that the Opposition are seriously saying that they oppose the Bill on the grounds of those measures. What conceivable opposition can there be to giving police the power to confiscate drink from youngsters under the age of 18 congregating in public places? What conceivable reasons can there be for opposing restriction of liberty orders?

I have read the Opposition's amendment, and I found that they are opposed to the Bill because it

"proposes to introduce, without any Scottish piloting or examination, electronic tagging for offenders and lays the way open for electronic tagging of offenders under the age of 16, thereby threatening the operation of Scotland's unique Children's Hearings system".

I ask the hon. Member for Hamilton to read the Bill. He will find that it makes specific provision for people over the age of 16. The Bill contains no provision for electronic tagging of individuals under 16. It is true that the Government have said that they will consult on those matters and consider their introduction at a later stage, but—as the Bill does not contain such provisions—that is not a reason to vote against Second Reading.

The other explanation that we are offered for this volte-face by the Labour party—*[Interruption.]* It is a volte-face. Only three Labour Members voted against the Crime (Sentences) Bill, not one of whom was Scots. The only people who opposed that Bill were the Liberals, who divided the House on their amendment and on the Bill's principle on Second Reading.

It was not opposed by the Labour party, and I find it extraordinary that the Opposition should be seeking to oppose these measures which are to apply to Scotland. The hon. Member for Hamilton may, however, rest on the fig leaf that, according to Labour's reasoned amendment, the Bill

"seeks to reverse the key reforms introduced in the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 passed in this Parliament".

The hon. Gentleman is seeking to justify his opposition to a Government measure on the grounds that, he says, it "reverses the key reforms" of a previous Act. It does no such thing—it builds on them. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head; I will happily give way to him if he will explain what the 1993 Act did in respect of sentencing, and why he believes that this Bill is a reversal of it.

Mr. George Robertson (Hamilton): The 1993 Act provided for automatic remission. The Minister's own notes for the Bill say that prisoners are to be denied automatic remission. That is one aspect of the reversal; I shall later give details of others. Instead of blustering about a reasoned amendment, why does the Secretary of State not try to defend the legislation?

Mr. Forsyth: I shall come on to that. The hon. Gentleman says that the 1993 Act provided for automatic remission, but surely he must know that it restricted people's ability to get parole, especially if they were the more serious offenders. It also introduced new provisions whereby, if people were released from prison but reoffended within the period of the sentence, they should be returned to prison. That made it harder for people to be released from prison early, and at the same time ensured that, if people were released from prison, they were subject to proper supervision.

How the hon. Gentleman can put his name, under that of the Leader of the Opposition, to an amendment which argues that the Bill is reversing the key reforms of the 1993 Act, I do not understand. In what way is it reversing them? It is in fact going in the same direction and making the meaning of a sentence clear. It makes prisoners more subject to the sentence of the courts. It is travelling in the same direction as the 1993 Act, not trying to reverse it. I invite the hon. Gentleman to explain his position.

Mr. Robertson: I thought that the decline of the Conservative party since the Secretary of State took office might be worth referring to. The background note to the Bill, issued by his Department, states that the Bill would abolish the current system of parole and early release and replace it with a system whereby prisoners would be able to earn a maximum of one sixth of their sentences through good behaviour. They are the words of the Government's own document, and if it does not mean abolishing the system, what does it mean? What is this semantic rubbish? Will the Secretary of State kindly tell the House and the country why this electioneering Bill has been introduced in the first place?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman has not explained why he uses the word "reverse". I accept that it goes further—[HON. MEMBERS: "You are abolishing parole."] Indeed we are abolishing parole, but if the hon. Gentleman understood the 1993 Act, he would realise that it tightened the system. It required—*[Interruption.]*

If the House is not prepared to take my word for it, let me remind it of what my right hon. Friend the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Lang),

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the previous Secretary of State for Scotland, said on Second Reading of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Bill. He said:

"An even more important change made by the Bill is to provide for the full outstanding portion of any sentence to be served, should the offender commit another offence punishable by imprisonment after his release, but before the full period specified in the sentence has elapsed. It is this measure that restores meaning to the full sentence of the court, and ensures that the deterrent effect of the sentence lasts for the full period intended by the court which passed it."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 239.]

The hon. Gentleman has acknowledged—

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth and Kinross) *rose—*

Mr. Forsyth: I am dealing with the hon. Member for Hamilton.

He has acknowledged that the progress being made in this Bill is that it is to continue the principle, established by my predecessor, of restoring the meaning of the sentence of the court.

Is the hon. Member for Hamilton seriously trying to tell the people of Scotland that the Labour party is tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime when he is going to vote against provisions to give the police powers to deal with juvenile under-age drinkers and provisions for hooligans and others who could be dealt with by electronic tagging? We can see the nature of Labour Members' rhetoric and their behaviour in the House.

The hon. Member for Hamilton has still not explained why, if he is concerned about honesty in sentencing and the other matters in the Bill, he and his party have not voted against the measures.

Ms Cunningham: I am now entirely puzzled. As I recollect, 50 per cent. automatic remission was brought in in 1993 for those whose sentences were four years or shorter. That policy has operated between 1993 and 1996. Will the Secretary of State's new proposals change that? Our clear understanding from everything that has been said is that the proposals will change that policy and that the Government are going back on a measure that they introduced three years ago.

Mr. Forsyth: The Bill certainly changes the situation. If it did not, we should not be introducing it. We took a step in the right direction in 1993, and we are taking a further leap in the Bill.

To complete the education of the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross (Ms Cunningham) on the matter, under the 1993 Act, parole ceased to be available at one third of sentence. I am sure that she knows that. She seemed to be following what the hon. Member for Hamilton implied about changes to parole. The 1993 Act made parole available after half the sentence rather than one third of it. Parole will now no longer be available, and we are requiring remission of one sixth of the sentence to be earned. We think that people should serve the sentences passed by the courts.

I hope that the whole of Scotland knows that the Labour party thinks that prisoners should not serve the sentences passed by the courts and is opposed to the principle of the Bill that any remission, which will be limited to one sixth of sentence, must be earned.

Mr. George Robertson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I shall give way in a moment. I want to finish my answer to the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross, who seems confused about the 1993 Act.

That Act also required all prisoners serving four years or more to be subject to supervision on release, and introduced supervised release orders for short-term prisoners at the court's discretion. In addition, it required any prisoner convicted of a further offence after release but before the end of the sentence to be returned to prison.

It is wrong for the hon. Lady to say that we are going back on our previous position. We are going ahead and building on the principles that we established, that the court's sentence should have real meaning and that prisoners should be required to serve their sentence. When remission is granted, it should be subject to supervision. Those principles are maintained.

Mr. Robertson: Tomorrow's *Hansard* will show the words that the Secretary of State has just uttered alongside those of the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, now President of the Board of Trade and formerly Secretary of State for Scotland, who said, on Second Reading of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings Bill:

"There are those who argue that the sentence of the court should mean precisely what it says—a fixed number of years in custody."

He must have been referring to the current Secretary of State for Scotland, who was then a junior Minister at the Home Office. He went on:

"The Government believe, however, like the Kincraig committee, that a better approach is to allow, within the compass of the total sentence, for a period in custody, and a period in the community during which the offender will be encouraged to resettle under supervision."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 238.]

Now, however, the Government background note says that the Bill would abolish the current system of parole and early release and replace it with a system whereby prisoners would be able to earn a maximum of one sixth off their sentence through good behaviour.

Why is the Secretary of State wasting time at the beginning of this important debate trying to defend the indefensible? He is turning his back on a measure that was passed by this Parliament and abolishing what his predecessor put in place.

Mr. Forsyth: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has now found his briefing. If he continues to read the quote beyond the next two paragraphs, he will find the quote that I gave the House. I will not read it all again, but I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to it. The most important sentence is at the top of column 239:

"It is this measure that restores meaning to the full sentence of the court, and ensures that the deterrent effect of the sentence lasts for the full period intended by the court which passed it."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 239.]

The hon. Member for Hamilton is trying to make bricks without straw. No one is arguing that we are not going beyond the 1993 legislation. We are determined that people should serve the sentences of the court and that any remission, which should be limited to one sixth, should be earned. Even 93 per cent. of *Daily Record* readers support the Government in that respect. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman does not seem to be in touch with public opinion on the matter, just as he is not, I believe, in touch with public opinion in respect of a number of the Bill's other provisions.

The hon. Member for Hamilton implies that I am wasting my time in dealing with these trivial matters. I am dealing with the amendment he tabled and I am trying to show him how absurd it is for him to argue against this Bill when he was not even here in the House last night to vote against similar provisions applying to England and Wales.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Port Glasgow): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I would like to make a little more progress. I am still dealing with the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hamilton.

The amendment talks about the Bill providing

"hopelessly optimistic and unrealistic estimated costs and manpower implications".

That is completely untrue. We have made our estimates on the worst-case scenario—that is, that there will be no judicial compensation for the proposed changes to the rules that apply to remission.

Not all judges agree. Some judges take into account the fact that at present, when there is automatic release at the halfway point, someone who has a sentence of eight years will automatically get out after four years. Some judges say that, under the new system, in which the criminal will serve the full sentence apart from one sixth, they will not take account of that fact. Others say that they will. We have based our manpower and cost estimates on the assumption that there will be no judicial compensation.

The Government are fully prepared to ensure that prison places are provided to meet the disposals of the courts. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Hamilton is not prepared to sign up to that principle—a principle that is central to government. It has to be right for hon. Members on both sides to acknowledge that prison is necessary, that those who ought to go to prison should be put there, and that, if that means more prisons, more prisons must be built. That must be right.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. I was quoting the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), who said in 1993:

"Prison is necessary; those who ought to go to prison should be put there, and if that means more prisons, more prisons must be built."—[*Official Report*, 23 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 344.]

Those are the words of the Leader of the Opposition. That, presumably, is why the Leader of the Opposition was not in the Lobby voting against the Crime (Sentences) Bill last night.

I wonder whether the Leader of the Opposition is aware of what his name has been put to today, because it seems extraordinary that he could oppose a Bill for Scotland one day while appearing to support a similar Bill for England the previous day.

Dr. Godman: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I am still dealing with the amendment. When I have finished, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The amendment also says that the Bill

"fails to address the real problems of crime".

I do not know whether the hon. Member for Hamilton is aware that 1995 is the fourth successive year in which recorded crime has fallen. The amendment talks about 17 years of rising crime. Where has the hon. Gentleman been for the past four years? Has he not seen the success of the policies pursued by my right hon. Friend the Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, now President of the Board of Trade?

The hon. Member for Hamilton talks about the clear-up rate falling. In fact, the clear-up rate rose in Scotland from 1994 to 1995. Six out of eight of Scotland's police forces showed a fall in the number of crimes recorded in 1995. It is sad that the hon. Gentleman is so intent on playing party politics that he is not even prepared to give the Scottish police credit for their outstanding job in improving the clear-up rate and reducing the incidence of crime in our country.

Mr. Robertson: The Secretary of State said that I made reference to the clear-up rate; where and when?

Mr. Forsyth: If the hon. Gentleman is acknowledging that he has not made reference to the clear-up rate, I accept that. In the amendment, he says:

"and miserably fails to address the real problems of crime in Scotland which have so greatly increased in the last seventeen years."

I am pointing out to him that the clear-up rate has risen, and that the incidence of crime has fallen. If he says that he has not mentioned clear-up rates specifically, I accept that, but I hope that he will acknowledge that the clear-up rate, which is improving, and the crime rate, which is falling, do not bear out the situation suggested in the amendment.

I said that I would give way to the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman), and I now do so.

Dr. Godman: I am pleased to give the Secretary of State a breather.

My question relates to a matter of deep concern to me. Clause 23 offers welcome additional assistance to child witnesses, and I readily acknowledge that sympathetic and compassionate changes have taken place in the way in which children are cross-examined in our courts; but why do the Secretary of State and his Ministers and officials so stubbornly refuse to extend such protection to others who are equally vulnerable? I refer to people with learning difficulties, for example, or those with mental handicaps. Why are they not given the same protection? That could surely have been provided in the Bill.

Mr. Forsyth: I shall be happy to investigate the matter, and to discuss it with the Lord Advocate. It may be a

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matter that the hon. Gentleman would like to explore in Committee; I hope that he will have the opportunity to serve on the Committee and make just such points.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton complain about the length of my speeches. One reason why my speeches are so long is that I give way to the hon. Gentleman. I do not intend to do so now.

Mr. Foulkes *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State said that he would not give way.

Mr. Foulkes: I am trying to help him.

Madam Speaker: Order. He does not need any help. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

Mr. Forsyth: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Foulkes *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not persist. He knows full well that the Secretary of State said that he would not give way at the moment.

Mr. Foulkes: I was giving him another chance, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will get his chance to speak later.

Mr. Forsyth: I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker.

Having dealt with the Labour party's amendment, I turn to that of the Liberal party. I have to say—

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North–East): This is a Second Reading debate.

Mr. Forsyth: Indeed, and I think that I have a perfect right to complain about the nonsense being put about concerning our Bill. The Liberal Democrats' amendment says that the Bill

"will require the building of unnecessary new prisons".

That is a concept with which the Leader of the Opposition would certainly not agree. What are unnecessary new prisons—prisons used to house people who are a threat to our society and who have been convicted by the courts? The Liberals appear to think that we can be protected by having people outside prison rather than in.

Mr. Campbell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: In a moment—then the hon. and learned Gentleman can deal with both parts of what I am saying.

The amendment also states that the Bill will

"damage the process of parole leading to a greater risk to the public".

The hon. and learned Gentleman seems to think that people are less likely to be a risk to the public if they are out of prison on parole than if they are inside, behind bars, secure and locked away from the public. That is an extraordinary position, which I never thought to see reflected in a Liberal Democrat amendment.

Mr. Campbell: May I draw the Secretary of State's attention to the part of the Bill entitled "Financial effects of the Bill", which refers to the resource implications flowing from the proposals in part III on the early release of offenders? As he knows, the Opposition contend that that is a reversal of the policies adopted by the Government in 1993.

The same paragraph in the explanatory memorandum states:

"They are likely to result in an increase in the prison population . . . of 2,200 five years after implementation. An increase of this order would add £65 million to £100 million per annum at current prices to expenditure on prison places."

That is unnecessary expenditure. The money should be spent on the prevention of crime, not on punishment arising out of a ludicrous reversal of policy.

Mr. Forsyth: The best way of preventing crime is to keep criminals behind bars.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: No, it is not.

Mr. Forsyth: Reoffending rates clearly show that, if burglars and others are behind bars, they are not out burgling people's houses.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland) *rose—*

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman must not get too excited. I am still dealing with his hon. and learned Friend.

The hon. and learned Gentleman seems to think that money should govern the number of prison places and the disposals of the courts. We, by contrast, think that the courts should make the punishment fit the crime, and that we should find the resources to meet the disposals of the courts. It is ludicrous to argue that the disposals of the courts should be governed by considerations of finance. It is the first duty of government to protect the public; that means that dangerous criminals should be put behind bars for as long as the courts think appropriate to the nature of the offence.

Mr. Campbell: I shall take no lessons from the right hon. Gentleman on the responsibility for putting criminals away. I spent four years as advocate-depute in the Crown Office, prosecuting in the High Court, and I venture to suggest that I have put away more criminals behind bars than the right hon. Gentleman has had hot dinners.

The point is: we are in a period of scarce resources, the Government tell us. That being so, we should apply them in the most effective possible way. The most effective way of bringing comfort to the population is by preventing crime, not by punishing those who commit it.

Mr. Forsyth: I do not disagree about preventing crime. As for putting away criminals, and hot dinners, I have no

doubt about the hon. and learned Gentleman's achievements—although I hope that his advocacy in the courts was somewhat better than it has been in respect of this Bill.

Mr. Campbell: That is a personal attack.

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. and learned Gentleman is concerned about putting criminals away. My concern is that, once they are put away, they should stay away behind bars. It is no earthly good securing a sentence of 10 years in the court if people are let out after five years. We think that they should serve their sentences and not return to the community after five years, subject to supervision or anything else. I repeat: they must serve their sentences, and if they get remission it should be earned by their behaviour in prison—working, dealing with their reoffending behaviour, alcoholism, drugs and so on.

Mr. Campbell: The right hon. Gentleman must understand that, when resources are scarce, the public are much more likely to be confident of the judicial and legal system if they believe that the resources are being spent on prevention.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about people earning their remission. Why, then, does he not acknowledge that early remission will depend on the subjective view of prison officers, who, as a result, will be open to charges of favouritism or—more seriously—to the threat of intimidation?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. and learned Gentleman is strengthening the case against himself. First, he tells us that we must let prisoners out early because that will save resources which can then be spent on crime prevention. It is not a matter of either/or. We need to do both; and we need to keep prisoners in prison.

Secondly, the hon. and learned Gentleman seems to imply that it is not right that prison officers should decide whether prisoners have earned remission through good behaviour. Nothing could more clearly show how the system needs to be changed and why this Bill is the right measure to bring before the House today.

I turn now to the provisions in the Bill—in particular, to the provisions in respect of automatic life sentences.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foulkes: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty), as he is an old sparring partner.

Mr. Foulkes: I am an old sparring partner, too.

Mr. Connarty: The Secretary of State must clear up one point. He has said that the previous Bill in 1993—I sat on the Committee on that Bill, and was convinced by the Government and by my own side that it was a good measure—was going to have people out in society for 50 per cent. of their sentence. They would be serving their sentence, but in society, under licence.

The logic advanced very strongly by Conservative Members was that the sentence would continue to its final point, but 50 per cent. would be served in the community. That was said to be a good thing, because, out in society, people would be forced to rehabilitate themselves properly and not return to crime. Is the Secretary of State now rejecting that principle in this Bill?

Mr. Forsyth: No. Indeed, the only change is that we think that criminals should spend longer in prison and that their remission should be earned, not automatic. As for sentences served in the community, yes, there will be supervision, and we plan to extend that. The hon. Gentleman will hear more of that later if I can make progress with my speech.

It is, of course, for the courts to ensure that the punishment fits the crime. I am none the less persuaded that there are occasions when the only appropriate sentence is a life sentence—occasions when an offender has committed a violent or serious sexual offence following conviction for a similar offence. In such cases, we need a sentence that will ensure that he or she will not be set free to walk the streets again until it is judged safe to do so; a sentence that ensures that the criminal will not escape the threat of being returned to prison until the day he dies; and a sentence that ensures that the public have the long-term protection they deserve from the most dangerous offenders.

I shall give the House an example—one that, I know, is of concern to several hon. Members, especially those from Ayrshire. I refer to the Maguire case. In February 1977, Gavin Maguire was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment on two charges of rape, a charge of assault to ravish and other charges. In October 1983, he was released after serving two thirds of his sentence. In November 1986, he was sentenced again to to 10 years imprisonment for attempted rape and serious assault. In July 1993, Maguire was again released after serving two thirds of his sentence. In August 1995, he was charged with another sexual assault, with which the Crown decided not to proceed at that time because of limited evidence. On 28 November 1995, Maguire was released from custody—18 days later he murdered a 15-year-old girl.

Under our proposals in the Bill, Maguire would have served his initial sentence in full, and to receive one-sixth early release he would have had to participate in prison programmes that addressed his offending behaviour. He would have received an automatic life sentence for the second offence, and would not have been released until he was judged to be no longer a risk to the public. Even if he had been released from custody, it would have been on life licence, and the circumstances that led to his being charged with the third offence would almost certainly have been sufficient to justify his recall to custody. Had that happened, he would have been unable to murder a young teenager. That is the point of these proposals. Tragically, it is too late for Maguire's young victim, but we in this House can act to save the lives of others.

There were 23 cases in 1994 alone in which a second serious offence was committed and in which the provisions in the Bill would have applied. Five of those 23 cases involved people convicted for at least the third time.

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): Was my right hon. Friend as surprised as I was to hear the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) saying that he does not believe in punishment, but only in prevention?

Mr. Menzies Campbell: That is not what I said.

Mr. Stephen: Read *Hansard* tomorrow.

Does my right hon. Friend think that there is any way in which Maguire could have been prevented from committing that terrible crime, save by being locked up in prison?

Dr. Godman: You spoilt a good intervention.

Mr. Forsyth: I did not hear what the hon. Gentleman said.

I know that we are in the run-up to the general election, but such measures should not be a matter of controversy across the Floor of the House; they involve the protection of the public. It does not seem unreasonable to require an automatic life sentence in circumstances such as the Maguire case.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Forsyth: I must make some progress; then I shall give way.

It does not in any way fetter judicial discretion as to the period that should be served by the person, once convicted. It will still be for the judge to set the relevant period—the minimum number of years that should be served. It is a life sentence, but the minimum number of years spent in prison will be determined by the judge and release will be granted only on the basis of an assessment that the person involved no longer represents a risk.

I find it difficult to understand why Opposition Members are not prepared to support the Government on the legislation. It requires the High Court to impose a sentence of life imprisonment on an offender convicted of a second qualifying serious sexual or violent offence unless there are exceptional circumstances that justify not doing so. The judge will set the minimum period and the parole board will decide when it is safe to release, subject to the continued sanction of the life sentence.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way on this occasion, as I wish to be helpful. I am sure that he would agree that it is important not only to get the sentence right, but to get convictions. I had a helpful meeting earlier this afternoon with the Lord Advocate about a particular case in my constituency involving four alleged rapes. I shall not go into detail, but the case involved the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) on the importance of making it easier for people with learning difficulties to give evidence—such people are particularly and peculiarly vulnerable.

I wish to ask the Secretary of State a question in support of what my hon. Friend said. The Lord Advocate was helpful this afternoon, and said that he personally thought that the Government should consider an amendment to enable people with learning difficulties to give evidence using a video room or screen. I hope that the Secretary of State will consider an amendment or a new clause to take account of that matter, which is not party political.

Mr. Forsyth: I have already told the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow that I will be happy to consider the matter in Committee—I shall also happy to hear representations from him. I hope that the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) will have an opportunity to serve on the Committee that considers the Bill—he is shaking his head, but these are important matters, and it would be his chance to give us the benefit of his advice. We would welcome his appearance in the Committee, as it would liven up our proceedings. We always welcome the way in which he robustly outlines his position in the Scottish Grand Committee.

Mr. Foulkes: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman again—he can make his point in Committee.

Mr. George Robertson: I merely seek information from the Secretary of State on the statistic he gave us. He said that, during 1994, there were 23 cases of individuals being convicted for more than a third time. The Crown has the power to appeal against the leniency of sentences. On how many occasions did the Lord Advocate appeal in relation to the leniency of the sentences on which the law is now being changed?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman has a brass neck. He voted against the provisions enabling the Lord Advocate to appeal against lenient sentences. The Labour party opposed the Crown's right of appeal against lenient sentences, just as it has opposed every other major measure that we have introduced to toughen the position. The hon. Gentleman now has the brass neck to argue that the Crown should appeal in particular circumstances as a justification for opposing what we are proposing. [HON. MEMBERS: "What is the answer?"]

The answer that we are proposing is that I said that there were 23 qualifying cases, of which five involved people who had been convicted for at least a third time. The Bill contains provisions that will make life sentence automatic. No one has ever suggested that the Crown should use its right of appeal except in the most exceptional circumstances. We are making a general provision that will provide for the protection of the public—the proper way to deal with that is in the Bill, which the hon. Gentleman is going to vote against tonight.

If the hon. Gentleman votes against the Bill tonight, we will harry him all the way to the election and beyond, and tell the people of Scotland that he was not prepared to give them the protection to which they are entitled from sexual and violent offenders who repeatedly carry out villainous crimes in Scotland.

The crimes that lead to automatic life sentences are the worst, most offensive crimes against people. They are listed in clause 1. Drug traffickers can exact as high a price from our children as murderers can. A clear message must be sent to repeat drug dealers that they, too, will be dealt with severely.

Under clause 2, anyone convicted for a third time of a class A drug trafficking offence will receive a minimum sentence of seven years, unless there are exceptional circumstances. The maximum will, of course, remain life. Such offenders must be taken out of circulation for a very long time, to keep them away from those they seek to harm.

Mr. Wallace: The whole House would share the view that the war against drug traffickers must be pursued relentlessly. If some of the resources that are being devoted to the Bill were applied to keeping open Customs and Excise posts in the most vulnerable parts of Scotland to prevent illegal drugs from being smuggled in, that would be a far more effective way of tackling drug traffickers than some of the measures in the Bill.

Mr. Forsyth: That is a point of view, but it does not absolve the hon. Gentleman of the responsibility that he and the Labour party will have tonight. They will vote against the Bill—against the provisions that will require a minimum sentence of seven years for repeat drug dealers.

Mr. Wallace: They cannot be sentenced until they are caught.

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman says that drug dealers cannot be sentenced until they are caught, but he will vote against measures that will impose a severe sentence. As for his point about catching drug dealers, I prefer to take advice from those on the front line—the Customs and Excise officers, who have been remarkably successful. The advice that I have received from Customs and Excise is that it is more effective for them to concentrate their resources on detection, intelligence and surveillance, as that will produce better results.

Customs and Excise has had some spectacular results, and I am guided by it, although I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's point. It is disgraceful for him to use that argument as a screen for his failure to walk through the Lobby to vote for tougher sentences for repeat dealers in class A drugs.

Mr. Wallace: Most of the customs officers to whom I have spoken believe that it is essential for them to maintain a presence in the remoter parts of the highlands and islands of Scotland, so that they can gain intelligence in order to catch drug traffickers. The newly appointed chief constable of the Northern constabulary believes that we are opening ourselves up to illegal drug smuggling if we allow those areas not to have a customs presence. What regard does the Secretary of State have for the advice of such people?

Mr. Forsyth: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I must take advice from the senior officials in Customs and Excise, who have been so spectacularly successful and whose responsibility it is to decide how to deploy the resources. They have taken that decision.

The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to say to Customs and Excise, "You're doing a brilliant job dealing with the drug traffickers and drug dealers. You've had some spectacular successes, but the chief constable in the north of Scotland has a different view, so the Government are taking a different view." We should be guided by the people who are charged with those responsibilities, and who have carried them out so successfully.

May I say to the hon. Gentleman, who represents a fishing constituency, that that is a red herring. He is taking us away from the Bill. Everyone in Orkney and Shetland should know that the hon. Gentleman will go through the Lobby tonight to vote against tougher sentences for drug dealers in Scotland.

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North) *rose—*

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Govan) *rose—*

Mr. Forsyth: I will give way to the two hon. Gentlemen, but then I must make progress.

Mr. Hughes: Does the Secretary of State accept that what matters is not only what is in statute, but how statute is applied? Will he comment on the provision of an earlier Bill, which I supported, that allowed the proceeds of drug dealing to be confiscated from high-up drug dealers? How often has that provision been used in Scotland, and what is the value of the assets that have been seized?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. We have provisions to confiscate assets from drug dealers and other serious offenders. Those provisions have been used and I would be happy to give the hon. Gentleman the precise details if he tables a written question. I certainly share his determination that the assets—the ill-gotten gains of drug dealers and others—should be confiscated, but he will know that that is a matter for the courts, and I would be the last person to get involved in criticising the decisions of the judiciary.

It is not only in the case of life prisoners that we want to identify offenders who may pose a continuing threat. We will target resources on those judged a risk, and do our utmost to stop them from reoffending. The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell) was keen to make that point. Clause 3 enables the court to impose a supervised release order of between three months and two years, or one sixth of sentence—

Mr. Brian Wilson (Cunninghame, North): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Forsyth: I have said that I will not give way again.

Mr. Davidson *rose—*

Mr. Forsyth: I did, however, say that I would give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan.

Mr. Davidson: Does the Secretary of State accept that tougher sentences for drug dealers take effect only from the date of sentence? In parts of my constituency are dealers who have been charged by the police, yet it takes up to two years before they appear in court to be sentenced. That is demoralising, not only for the police but the local inhabitants, who see dealers being pursued and caught by the police, yet nothing happens and they continue to peddle death from council houses or owner-occupied houses in residential areas. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to speed drug dealing cases through the courts, to ensure that longer sentences are applied more quickly?

Mr. Forsyth: The first step is not to let them out early—a proposal which the hon. Gentleman will vote

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against. The second step, as he rightly says, is that we need to improve the speed with which the procedures are carried through the courts, and he will find in later provisions of the Bill reforms in respect of legal aid, which I believe will make a considerable difference to the procedures in the courts. We are also looking to provide more resources for the courts.

I accept that the implication of our law and order package is that more people will end up before the courts. The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I share his frustration at the speed with which the legal processes grind on. Some of that is within my area of responsibility; some of it is the responsibility of others. I share his concern that these matters should be addressed, and some of the provisions in the Bill will help that.

Mr. Wilson: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman has only just come into the Chamber.

Mr. Wilson: I shall keep trying.

Mr. Forsyth: The hon. Gentleman can keep trying, but I shall not give way to him. If he has not the courtesy to be here from the beginning of the debate, I shall certainly not give way.

Mr. Wilson: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I think that all hon. Members, including the Minister, know that there are other duties in the House that prevent hon. Members from coming in for a few minutes of a debate but where vital constituency interests are at stake. The idea that the Minister should use that as an excuse for not accepting a legitimate intervention seems very poor indeed.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order for me, but the Minister is entitled not to give way. I have to say that he has been enormously generous this afternoon.

Mr. Forsyth: I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker. If the hon. Gentleman is able to catch your eye, perhaps he will be able to make a contribution. My right hon. Friend will be happy to deal with any points that the hon. Gentleman has to make, but that does mean that the hon. Gentleman will have to remain for the debate.

As I was saying, clause 3 enables the court to impose a supervised release order of between three months and two years, or one sixth of sentence—whichever is greater—on any offender receiving a determinate sentence where it considers it necessary for the protection of the public. Also, unless there are exceptional circumstances, an order will be mandatory for offenders who have been convicted on indictment of a qualifying violent or sexual offence. In relation to sexual offences, courts will have the power to impose an order lasting up to 10 years. That is quite a step forward.

Even determinate sentence prisoners who are not judged to be a serious risk on release will have a major incentive to behave. They will need to understand that any reoffending during a one-sixth period after release will be treated extremely seriously. Under the terms of clause 33, any new offence during this period will be treated as an aggravated offence for the purposes of sentencing. That is an important provision, which emphasises the way in which the Bill is an extension of the strategy set out in the 1993 Act.

I come now to the provisions in respect of DNA testing. Experience sadly shows that convicted sex offenders may have established a pattern of repeat offending. We have learnt from that, and have developed DNA technology and a national DNA database. The police already have power to take DNA samples from newly convicted offenders, and clause 43 allows them also to take samples from convicted sex offenders who are currently serving prison sentences. Those will be stored on the database and increase the likelihood of matching crimes with criminals—an important tool in the fight against crime, and something which I should have thought would be welcomed by Liberal Democrats, given their earlier remarks, but against which they will vote tonight.

Mr. George Robertson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who has given way several times, but before he leaves mandatory minimum sentences, there is an important point with which I hope he will deal.

Yesterday, in his Crime (Sentences) Bill, the Home Secretary proposed that three convictions for burglary would lead to a minimum sentence of three years. There is no such provision in the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill. Last Monday, the Minister of State said that that was because burglary—house breaking—was not such a serious problem in Scotland. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us why such determined action has been taken against burglary in England, but not in Scotland?

Mr. Forsyth: As the hon. Gentleman tabled an amendment which refers to rising crime during the last 17 years, he will not know that the number of burglary cases has fallen by about 35 per cent., and that the police have been successful. If the hon. Gentleman wants to press me on extending mandatory sentences to include burglary, I should be happy to consider that in Committee. I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Would he like me to do so?

Mr. Robertson: This is the right hon. Gentleman's Bill and, believe it or not, he is still the Government, temporarily notwithstanding.

I want to know from the right hon. Gentleman why he has not put that provision in the Bill. Was the Minister of State right last Monday when he told the House that there was no need for it, because the courts already had the power under Scottish common law? If that argument applies to burglary or house breaking, it applies to a range of other things as well. Will the right hon. Gentleman come clean, instead of asking debating questions?

Mr. Forsyth: I think that that was a no.

The answer is straightforward. I thought that the former Labour Solicitor-General, Lord McCluskey, who sits on the judicial bench, had been busily arguing that we are slavishly following the English, so I was slightly surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman criticise my Bill because it does not have the same provision as that in the Bill which he did not vote against last night.

This may be the explanation. I asked the hon. Gentleman that question because I thought that I had found the answer to why he intends to vote against this Bill tonight but did not vote against the Crime (Sentences) Bill last night—because it does not have the same provision in respect of mandatory sentences for repeat burglars. If that is the case, I would be happy to help the hon. Gentleman in some way. *[Interruption.]*

The right hon. Member for Glasgow, Garscadden (Mr. Dewar) has decided that there may be fun to be had here. We may have an amendment in respect of repeat burglary. But the answer, as the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East will be able to tell hon. Members, is that the provisions in respect of mandatory minimum sentences for drug offences are being applied in the Bill because drug offences have always been dealt with on a United Kingdom basis.

Drug dealers are mobile and operate across borders, while burglars tend to get around Scotland, but I do not know that there is a great traffic between Scotland and England. *[Interruption.]* I am not aware of a load of burglaries being committed by people who have come from England. That is more like the kind of remark that I expect from the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross (Ms Cunningham). The answer given by my right hon. Friend was that the incidence of repeat burglaries in Scotland was less than in England. That is quite right.

The hon. Member for Hamilton asked me why we were not providing a mandatory sentence. I knew that his next question would be about drugs, so I explained the position. On mandatory life sentences, I went at great length through the Maguire case in Ayrshire, which shows that we need these provisions in Scotland as much as they are required in England.

If the hon. Gentleman were to press me on the issue of burglaries, I would certainly consider it. He may like to reflect on that.

Building on the principle that the full sentence must be served, we want to strengthen the protection of the public by the introduction of a hospital direction. That will ensure that mentally disordered offenders who respond to treatment are transferred to prison, and are not released until their prison sentence has expired.

Clauses 5 to 10 provide for the introduction of the new disposal for courts in sentencing an offender who is well enough to stand trial, but who is suffering from a mental disorder that warrants admission to hospital. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Falkirk, East says, from a sedentary position, "Cure them, and then put them in prison." If someone is fit to plead and has committed a serious offence, he should serve the sentence of the court to the full extent once he has been dealt with in hospital.

That is an important new disposal that combines elements of custody and treatment by attaching to a sentence of imprisonment an immediate direction to hospital. For the first time, we are making available a disposal that helps the courts to deal with those who should be sentenced to prison, but who first require a period of hospital treatment.

We must ensure that the courts are equipped to hand down the most appropriate disposal in each case, and that there is sufficient flexibility in the court system. To enhance that, clause 11 increases the sentencing powers of sheriff courts in solemn cases from three to five years. The powers of sheriffs sitting alone and of stipendiary magistrates will also be increased from three to six months, and from six to 12 months for certain repeat violent offenders.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: The Secretary of State's proposal to increase the powers of the sheriff court in solemn procedure to sentence up to five years constitutes a substantial change in the present arrangements. As there are now more temporary than full-time sheriffs in Scotland, will he give an undertaking that any person who is liable to face a sentence of up to five years will have the advantage of having his or her case tried by a full-time professional judge?

Mr. Forsyth: If the hon. and learned Gentleman is arguing that temporary judges should not be ranked alongside other judges, he is getting into dangerous territory. I hear what he has to say, but I assume that anyone sitting on the bench is competent to deal with the cases before him.

I know that the problem of under-age drinking in public places is of considerable concern to some hon. Members; notably my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) and the hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell). We are determined to clear up street corners, derelict property, shopping centres and all the other favourite haunts of those nuisance makers. Clause 53 provides new powers for the police to confiscate drink from under-age drinkers in public places, and, importantly, from those suspected of supplying alcohol to people under the age of 18.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr will be in the Lobby tonight voting for these measures. The hon. Member for Monklands, East—she of Buckfast Abbey fame—will be in the Lobby voting against them. That is the difference. Say one thing, do another.

There are times when custody is essential for the protection of the public and for deterrence. Where that is not necessary—this point was made by the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East—custody should not be used for want of suitable community-based disposals. That is why we introduced supervised attendance orders as an alternative to custody for fine default. Last year, 1,400 orders were made, and we expect 3,000 to be made this year. I am happy to tell the House that we will extend supervised attendance orders to cover the whole of mainland Scotland by spring 1998. I am making available additional resources of up to £1 million to achieve that.

Clause 4 provides a further disposal for the courts, which will provide an alternative to custody. It will be called a restriction of liberty order, and will enable the courts to curtail an offender's movements for up to 12 months, using electronic monitoring. For months and months, we have heard from the Opposition that we do not take account of the alternatives to prison, but when we produce a new alternative to prison—electronic monitoring—they decide to vote against it.

As I have said, I shall be consulting on extension of the orders to under-16s. The hon. Member for Hamilton seems to be against such an extension. I should be happy to hear his response to the consultation, but how better to

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keep a well-known convicted football hooligan away from the terraces on a Saturday afternoon than to confine him to his front room?

Mr. Menzies Campbell: What about Gazza?

Mr. Forsyth: I was not thinking of any players in this context. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] I had better not be tempted down that road.

As a further disposal for the courts, I am considering how disqualification from driving should be made available as an alternative disposal for a wide range of offences beyond driving offences, and for fine default. I shall be consulting the judges individually before deciding on detailed proposals, which I hope to present during the passage of the Bill.

The costs of criminal legal aid must be brought under better control, and the Bill contains a range of powers to assist in that process. We must ensure that the system of legal aid rewards lawyers who progress cases fairly and efficiently, while upholding the right of every accused person to a fair trial.

Clause 44 sets a framework for ensuring a good quality of service from solicitors and their firms. Only those who comply with a published code of practice will be able to register to provide criminal legal assistance. Clause 46 will enable the Secretary of State to prescribe fixed fees for criminal legal assistance, and clause 47 will enable bulk contracts to be made with firms on the register. Clause 48 gives the board increased powers to investigate suspected fraud and abuse, and to enforce compliance with the code of practice.

Clause 45 enables us to evaluate the benefits of establishing a public defender scheme in Scotland, as recommended by the Hughes Royal Commission on legal services in 1980. The Government do not believe that it would ever be appropriate to provide criminal legal aid entirely through a salaried service, but pilot schemes employing a small number of solicitors in one or two areas will help realistic assessment of the costs and benefits of providing legal aid through directly employed solicitors.

No one can accuse me of introducing this measure for reasons of dogma or ideology. It provides a degree of competition for the private sector. The Labour party has called for such a measure for years, but tonight it is going to vote against the Bill that introduces it.

The Bill contains two clauses—clauses 14 and 17—that result from the recommendations of the Sutherland committee on appeals criteria and miscarriages of justice. They extend the statutory criteria against which a convicted person may appeal. Part II also provides for a right of appeal by the Lord Advocate against a court's decision not to impose an automatic life sentence, a minimum sentence for drug trafficking, a supervised release order or a hospital order.

I have outlined what I consider to be the main provisions in the Bill. In addition, chapter II of part III provides for the testing of prisoners for alcohol, and the provision of medical services in prisons. Part IV amends police funding powers to allow more flexibility in the use of the £700 million that we spend on the police in Scotland. It also allows fingerprints to be taken electronically to be used as evidence in criminal trials. Clause 12 increases the maximum penalty for certain statutory sexual offences; clauses 21 to 24 make changes in the law on evidence. Other minor procedural matters are also dealt with in other clauses, and in the schedules.

The Law Society of Scotland has described the White Paper that heralded this legislation as one of the most important documents produced in the past 10 years in terms of its impact on the Scottish legal system, the consumers of that system and the legal profession. I agree with that assessment, and think that it will have an impact for the better.

It responds to the needs of the Scottish people and to their expectations of being afforded real protection from the perpetrators of evil. It also responds to their desire for a criminal justice system that they understand and of which they can be proud. It seeks to inspire confidence in them that the rights of the victims of crime will be put before those of offenders and that our prisons will be kept for the most dangerous prisoners, who will not be released until it is safe to do so. It will give them the confidence that we shall responsibly with public money.

These are fundamental rights and expectations and surely the people of Scotland deserve no less. The Government think that and we will deliver. I hope and trust that, in doing that, we will be aided by all hon. Members who claim, at least in public, to have the interests of the whole community at heart.

4.40 pm

Mr. George Robertson (Hamilton): I beg to move, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill which, without proper review or study, seeks to reverse the key reforms introduced in the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 passed in this Parliament; proposes to introduce, without any Scottish piloting or examination, electronic tagging for offenders and lays the way open for electronic tagging of offenders under the age of 16, thereby threatening the operation of Scotland's unique Children's Hearings system; provides hopelessly optimistic and unrealistic estimated costs and manpower implications; and miserably fails to address the real problems of crime in Scotland which have so greatly increased in the last seventeen years."

This is a strange day for the Secretary of State for Scotland to allege that the Opposition are out of touch with public opinion, because the Conservatives have gone back down the ladder to 11 per cent. in today's Scottish public opinion polls. I am reminded of the caution that politicians should always bear it in mind that opinion polls are only a snapshot of opinion. However, if this snapshot was a postcard, it might come from Westminster city council saying, "Wish you were here." It marks the beginning of the end.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): Nobody will understand.

Mr. Robertson: That is an interesting intervention. Perhaps that is correct, because the Secretary of State has been quite clever at covering his tracks. He was one of Lady Porter's solemn lieutenants as a member of Westminster city council. I am glad that the hon.

Gentleman reminded me to remind the House and the wider public that, in a good year, the Secretary of State might just manage to get back on to that council.

After 17 years of getting crime and punishment all wrong, the Government say that the Bill purports to stem the tide of criminality that affects so much of Scottish life. It does nothing of the sort. It is not designed to protect the public but to protect the wafer-thin majorities of Tory Ministers. It is not about solutions or about why crime is still so bad but about slogans for the election. The Bill does not contain policies to get to the root of criminality and lawlessness. It is about headlines and soundbites to wrong-foot the Opposition parties.

The Government have had 17 years to tackle crime and if they have not got it right by now they will never get it right. I should like to read a quote to the House.

"When parents dare not let their children go out to play; when senior citizens who have given a lifetime of service to the community are forced to spend their sunset years . . . as prisoners in their own homes; then we have reached a point where action must be taken."

Those are not scaremongering words by Opposition Members and they did not come from the Liberal Democrats or from the liberal do-good lobby. They are the words of the Secretary of State for Scotland last year when he came back to Scotland and described it after 16 years of Conservative government. I do not disagree with the Secretary of State's description.

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): If the hon. Gentleman's assessment that the Bill is designed to improve Conservative prospects in Scotland is right, what is it about the Bill that appeals to the people? If it appeals to people and gives us votes, it must be right. If, as he claims from opinion polls, it does not appeal to people why is he opposing it?

Mr. Robertson: The idea that the Conservative party in Scotland has ever done anything that successfully managed to get on the side of public opinion is a myth that only the hon. Gentleman can live with. The Secretary of State said that the poll tax would have people dancing in the streets, but it had Mrs. Thatcher dancing out of Downing street, and it was the rage of Scottish people that made the Government as unpopular as they are today. The hon. Gentleman would be well-advised not to make any more such interventions.

Which Government, supported by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) in part, have been in power for 17 years and have brought Scotland to the position that was described by the Secretary of State in the magazine "Flourish"? It is the hon. Gentleman's Government, and they have supervised Scotland's criminal justice system and allowed that picture of domineering lawlessness to happen and endure and to cause so much misery to mothers and old people. Which Government have fractured our society, divided our local communities and destroyed the jobs and hopes of young people and have seen the right to peaceful streets and homes for the elderly denied? It is the hon. Gentleman's Government.

The Government have brought in one criminal justice Bill after another, one failed experiment to follow the last one, and every one of them was supposedly the definitive answer to the problems of law and order. But the Government now confess, without any contrition or apology or morsel of regret, that they have failed the Scottish people on crime. That is what the Secretary of State's article said, and his words in "Flourish" are a confession of failure.

The Secretary of State and the Government are looking into an electoral abyss and plaintively tell us that the Bill is the magic solution and that the serial bunglers of the past 17 years who have 1,000 offences to be taken into consideration have, at the last second of their government, got it right and that they should be trusted.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: If the measures that were introduced last night were right for England—the Labour party did not vote against them—why does the hon. Gentleman intend to vote against measures that seek to address those problems?

Mr. Robertson: It has taken the Minister a long time to get round to mastering procedure. Ours is a reasoned amendment and I intend to deal with the points in it. We will not oppose the Second Reading. A reasoned amendment is the traditional way to make points about the bad features of a Bill and I shall also be clear about the bits of the Bill that we accept.

Mr. Forsyth *rose—*

Mr. Robertson: The right hon. Gentleman is bouncing up. He spoke for nearly an hour and 10 minutes, admittedly with interventions, but it was still one of the longest Front-Bench speeches for a long time.

There are clear differences between the Bill that was presented yesterday and the one that we are debating. Those differences are in the reasoned amendment and that is why we shall press that amendment to a vote.

Mr. Forsyth: I am rather puzzled. The hon. Gentleman has said that he will not vote against Second Reading, but the amendment reads:

"That this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill".

May we take it that the hon. Gentleman will not vote for his own amendment?

Mr. Robertson: I know that it has been a bad day for the Secretary of State, but he and every hon. Member knows the purpose of a reasoned amendment. Other parties may take a different view from us and that is quite realistic. In last night's vote fewer than half of Conservative Members voted for Second Reading of the Home Secretary's Crime (Sentences) Bill. *[Interruption.]* The good boys were there. In addition, 16 fewer than the number who voted against the reasoned amendment voted for Second Reading, and the President of the Board of Trade did not vote on either occasion. What a surprise.

Mr. Forsyth: People outside should be aware of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He seems to be arguing that, if the House votes for his amendment, which declines to give the Bill a Second Reading, that will be all right. If his amendment were passed, the Bill would fall. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman has moved an amendment whose purpose is to prevent the Bill from going ahead. Not only has he moved the amendment, but he is

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wriggling in trying to pretend to the people of Scotland that he is not doing what he is doing, which is trying to defeat the Bill.

Mr. George Robertson: I notice that the right hon. Gentleman had to send a junior Minister to the Table to get an explanation for this. The point is that, if the reasoned amendment is carried and the Government care to deal with the issues in the amendment, they can redraft the Bill and bring it back, and we would support it. It is sad that the right hon. Gentleman will not have more time in the House of Commons to learn more about procedure. When it was in opposition, his party used the method of a reasoned amendment to get its case over, and I dare say that it will do so again when it goes back into opposition next year.

The Government are trying to say that, at the last minute before the election, they have got the policy right and that they should be trusted. I say, "No chance." The Bill seeks to reverse the major reforms put through this Parliament only four years ago by the previous Secretary of State for Scotland. However the present Secretary of State wriggled around on that, the background notes to the Bill make it clear without any doubt that the Government are abolishing the provisions of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993.

Hardly had that "complete answer" found its place on the statute book, and long before it could even have been tested or reviewed, or its efficacy assessed—indeed, before a single case had come up for sentencing under the new sentencing guidelines—the Act is to be swept away as if it had been the work of the do-gooding liberals that the Secretary of State so despises, and replaced by yet another magic solution. It simply will not wash.

If the Secretary of State believes that our present sentencing system is a dishonest charade, what does that say about his predecessor, now the President of the Board of Trade? The Bill will sweep away the provisions for parole and early release. Those provisions were not the grand design of the judges. They were not the design of the Law Society, of the Labour party, of Liberal Democrats or of the Scottish Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, but the brainchild of the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Lang). *[Interruption.]*

The provisions were the considered view of Lord Kincraig and his Committee, which sat and considered them in detail. They were then adopted with enthusiasm by the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, now the President of the Board of Trade. Perhaps, if he was not in office but had been sacked, like all the other Tory grandees who in the House last night told the Home Secretary how defective his Bill was, he would be saying tonight that the Secretary of State for Scotland has got it wrong as well.

Perhaps we should call this Bill, "The Repeal of Ian Lang Bill". That might have been its proper title. It is noticeable, however, that this Bill's parent—the President of the Board of Trade—is not here. He was here at the birth.

Mr. Forsyth: I will try to make this the last time that I intervene. While we are exchanging quotes from our predecessors, perhaps I could draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the hon. Member for Monklands, West (Mr. Clarke), his predecessor as shadow spokesman on Scotland, complained:

> "The incompetence in the Government's administrative approach has left Scotland yet again following behind England and Wales."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 245.]

On this occasion, the measures for Scotland are being introduced alongside those for England and Wales, so presumably the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) will at least absolve us of the charge that was made at that time. If the 1993 provisions are being changed by this Bill and if he is against it for that reason, why did Labour not vote against the legislation of my right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Lang), which did the same in respect of the English 1991 legislation?

Mr. Robertson: The 1991 legislation was at least in a previous Parliament. There was a general election between the two pieces of legislation. The Government are repudiating legislation that was put through in this Parliament by the Secretary of State's predecessor. The Bill would abolish the current system of parole and early release and replace it with a new system—to use the Government's own words. They are throwing out Lord Kincraig's considered conclusions and the views of Ministers at the time. Of course we supported the legislation at that time, because it was based on a committee, on a review and on evidence, and there was a study on which we could come to a conclusion.

At that time, the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale commended and thanked my hon. Friends the Members for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) and for Monklands, West (Mr. Clarke) for their support in getting that Bill through. The Secretary of State for Scotland should perhaps consider that precedent and reflect on why this has become a matter of party political controversy. As the President of the Board of Trade did not manage to vote last night in either of the Divisions in the House, I wonder whether he will be in the Division Lobby tonight. If he could not support the Home Secretary, will he be able to support his successor, who is doing him down?

In this position, I am bound to ask the Secretary of State for Scotland: how can he attack us for not supporting Conservative criminal justice Bills when he does not support them himself? He is damning them, so before he starts lecturing us about the need for honesty in sentencing, let us have some honesty from Tory Ministers first.

Of course we should be tough on crime. I and every Labour Member share the frustration of our constituents who are fed up with seeing violence, who are angry at having their houses broken into, not once but time and again, and who despair at vandalism, disorder and the drugs menace that seems to be spreading like a modern plague. The people of Scotland, the ones whom the Secretary of State talked about in his "Flourish" article last year, woke up last Monday to the *Daily Record* headline: "Murder mayhem as five are killed" in one weekend in Scotland. They share the Secretary of State's view expressed in his article last year, but, after 17 years of this Government, Scotland has got to that position. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin), who sits silently behind the Secretary of State, should simply wait.

There are some welcome provisions in the Bill, which I will come to. It is not all bad, and that is why we will not vote against Second Reading tonight. There are, however, other provisions about which we have serious concerns. We will seek to amend them in Committee, unless the Government can present solid evidence to justify their case. We will then review our position after Committee and on Third Reading.

Let us consider what the heavyweight critics have said. Rarely have we heard such a deafening chorus of condemnation against a Scottish criminal justice Bill. Lord Ross, the Lord Justice Clerk, has described these plans as "superficial", "ill thought-out" and based on "ignorant, selective, shallow populism." Lord Hope, the former Lord Justice General of Scotland, has spoken of his "serious concerns" about the practical difficulties surrounding the plans' implementation and has spoken out against what he regards as the importation of English law and order measures into the Scottish system. The Scottish Prison Officers Association has expressed its concerns about the impact on Scottish prisons.

Do Ministers not yet understand that they should be squaring up to criminals instead of to Scotland's judges? Do they not understand that to ignore the views of people who work at the sharp end of Scotland's justice system is to flirt with disaster? The reform of our criminal justice system should be based on consensus, not on Tory conference clapometers.

Mr. Stephen: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), who said yesterday that judges "must be listened to", but that "their voice is not decisive. In the end, Parliament must decide."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1996; Vol. 284, c. 934.]

Mr. Robertson: Of course and Parliament is discussing the matter, but, as the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) said in a devastating speech that was critical of the Home Secretary's Bill, the judges must be listened to. It would be nice to think that the Government Scottish Front-Bench team ever listened to those judges at all.

Reform of our criminal justice system should be plugged into what is appropriate for Scotland, and not be a throwback to the Secretary of State's former role as bag carrier for the Home Secretary, when the right hon. Gentleman was Minister for prisons—again something that seems to have been lost in the mist of time. I think that people used to call him the Minister for prison escapes rather than the Minister for prisons.

Mr. Bill Walker *rose—*

Mr. Robertson: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. Generosity knows no bounds, but I am not giving way again.

Of course, there should be honesty and consistency in sentencing, but to cut remission drastically will lead to a dramatic increase in the prison population, as we know, turning our already crowded prisons into powder kegs. That point was made last night by the former Foreign Secretary, by the former Home Secretary and by the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), the Secretary of State's former colleague as Minister of State at the Home Office. That is not only our view; the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) has also made that point, and it was put vividly by Conservative Privy Councillors in yesterday's debate. The increase in the cost of prisons will lead to a damaging cut in police budgets, crime prevention programmes and education programmes inside prisons.

Mr. Michael Forsyth *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Robertson: The Secretary of State, from the majesty of his position, says that that is not so. Of course, sentences should mean what they say.

Mr. Phil Gallie (Ayr): The hon. Gentleman has made much of the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), but he has also been critical of the Conservative Government's performance on law and order issues. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney did not always get it right—*[Interruption.]* I am sure that he did not. That apart, I must point out that crime figures have been falling in recent times and clearance levels have been picking up. The hon. Gentleman seems to close his mind to those facts.

Mr. Robertson: That was a helpful intervention, which I am sure that others will read in the morning with great interest. The dispute between the doomed Conservatives will be of interest outside, but the wise words offered by those distinguished Tory grandees yesterday are likely to carry some weight when the present gimmick-ridden and election-based legislation is properly examined by those outside.

I had intended to use this later, but since the hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) has intervened, this seems to be an ideal opportunity. In November 1994, the hon. Member for Ayr asked the Home Secretary

"what plans he has to set minimum jail sentences for those who sell category A drugs; and if he will make a statement."

The answer was provided by a junior Minister in the Home Office who, at that time, happened to be the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mr. Forsyth). The answer said:

"None. The courts should be left to determine appropriate sentences in individual cases.

The maximum penalty for supplying category A drugs is life imprisonment. We look to the courts to pass very long prison sentences in the most serious cases."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1994; Vol.248, c.1334.]

I am sure that the hon. Member for Ayr remembers that vividly, as will others who look for any degree of consistency in the Government's policies.

Mr. Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the greatest gap between rhetoric and reality is in sexual offences and rape, to the enormous detriment of my constituents? Does he recognise that the Tories' failure to act against recidivist rapists, in spite of repeated pleas and warnings, has led to terrible tragedies in my constituency in Ayrshire? They have done nothing to deal with the problem of repeat rapists, but now have this deathbed repentance.

For all these years, repeat rapists have been allowed out of the gaol at Peterhead without any indication of whether they have mended their ways. To come along now and say that they have found a solution only heaps insult upon the injury done to my constituents. To point to the Bill now—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. Interventions should be shorter than that.

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is right. It is all very well for Ministers to come along now and say that they

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have an answer. In an interesting answer earlier in the debate, the Secretary of State quoted 23 cases, of which five would qualify under these provisions. We can take it from his non-answer at that time that the Lord Advocate did not appeal against the leniency of any of the sentences handed down by *the court in those cases. Is that right?*

Mr. Michael Forsyth: There were 23 cases, five of which involved three or more offences, so 23 would fall within the provisions of the Bill. I am not clear whether the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) thinks that his hon. Friend is in favour of this. Does the hon. Member for Hamilton intend to support these provisions? If not, what will he say to his hon. Friend?

Mr. Robertson: I will answer that, and the Secretary of State may find out something at that time.

The Secretary of State keeps asking questions instead of answering them. He seems to think that he is already in opposition. The right hon. Gentleman said that in 1994 there were five cases that fell into the category of repeat offences. In not one case—23 or five—was there an appeal. That point must be taken on board. We deserve to know whether the sentences were right or wrong. The court had the discretion to impose life sentences, but there was no appeal by the Lord Advocate.

The impact of the Government's proposals will simply be to increase sentences across the board. As the Secretary of State reflects on the opinion poll rating today, I wonder why there are so many gaps in the Government's crime strategy for Scotland. Why is there nothing about bail and the perennial complaint from the police and the prosecutors about criminals offending and reoffending while on bail? *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman may say that it was in the last measure, but he is busy tearing that up. If the problem still exists, why is he not doing something about it?

If the right hon. Gentleman is serious about tackling crime, surely, in this year of all years, he should be looking at the broader picture of what causes crime and the sources of crime. What about the wider, comprehensive approach that was promised in the White Paper before it fell down the drain of empty soundbites?

In the 89 pages of the White Paper, why did the Government devote only 22 short paragraphs to the critical wider social issues and only 10 lines to training and unemployment, which are the most fundamental issues underlying the growth in crime? Why is there so little attention to crime prevention—only 13 paragraphs in the White Paper and nothing in the Bill? Why is there nothing about the persistent problem of anti-social neighbours—small numbers of people can pollute and destroy whole communities? Has he no comfort to offer those whose lives are made a misery? In towns all over the country, underpinned by poverty and deprivation, the problems of crime and disorder breed.

The Bill has gaps. There is nothing about the punitive strategy against criminal injuries compensation for which the Government were responsible and which came into play this year. There is nothing about witness protection when we know that that is a considerable problem in Scotland. There is nothing about the recommendations of the Sutherland committee report on how miscarriages of justice should be handled.

We have some of the fig leaves produced by the Government, but not the central recommendation of that distinguished committee, which is that there should be an independent body to consider such matters. Those issues need to be tackled and will be tackled by a Labour Government. The sooner we get the chance to do that, the better it will be for Scotland.

I want to make another serious criticism about something else that is not in the Bill but which was promised through a medium from which we expect to hear all the Secretary of State's new thinking—*The Sunday Times*. The Secretary of State has already told us that the Bill promises electronic tagging for Scotland, but there has been no piloting, no research and no attempt to run trials. Instead, we are to use the inconclusive English experiments as the basis for reform in Scotland. Instead of rushing into measures without proper trials, why do not the Government base their arguments on proper pilot studies and research? Why has not the Secretary of State run pilot schemes first?

Mr. Forsyth *rose—*

Mr. Robertson: Before the right hon. Gentleman jumps up again, let me tell him that we are prepared to consider electronic monitoring if it can be shown to work, but not at any price. I will give way for the last time.

Mr. Forsyth: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening to what I said earlier—which was that, in the Bill, electronic tagging applies only to people over 16, but that we will consult on extending the provision to those under 16. We have made it perfectly clear that our intention is to pilot those provisions in Scotland. However, it is not possible to have a pilot without the power to have one, and the Bill provides that power.

The hon. Member for Hamilton is in the ridiculous position of wanting to vote down the Bill, through his reasoned amendment, because it does not provide for piloting the provision for those under 16 years old. The Bill provides for electronic tagging for those over 16, and the Government have always made it clear that that provision would be subject to a pilot. If the hon. Gentleman got his facts right, he would not be wasting the House's time.

Mr. Robertson: The fact does not seem to have penetrated through to the Secretary of State that we will not be voting against the Bill: we will be voting for a reasoned amendment that asks the Government to go away and think again on the critical issues—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Gallie: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Today I will have to make a decision on which way I vote on the Bill. At that point, I will be faced with an amendment that says:

"That this House declines to give a Second Reading"

to the Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not for the Chair to give guidance to any hon. Member on how they may wish to vote on any subject debated in the House.

Mr. Robertson: I am not surprised that the hon. Member for Ayr is seeking guidance on how he should

vote. With the Tory party on 11 per cent. in public opinion in Scotland, and with the size of the hon. Gentleman's majority, I would advise him to vote Labour.

Mr. Bill Walker: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it correct that, if the reasoned amendment is successful, the Bill will fail?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: In one word, the answer to the question is yes.

Mr. Robertson: After reflecting on the reasoned amendment, the next Government, or this Government, can introduce a Bill—*[Interruption.]* That is the purpose of a reasoned amendment. The synthetic noise by Conservative Members today—a very bad day for the Scottish Tories—is what will be remembered—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says that it is getting better. Public opinion was 11 per cent. when he started his frenzied bid to grab attention, and it is back to 11 per cent. today. Yes, things are getting better. Things are getting better for Scotland, when the Labour party is on 45 per cent. and the Tories are on a mere 11 per cent.

I should tell the Secretary of State that it is all very well to tell the House, "We have not proposed tagging for people under 16, but we might consider something later on." The seriousness of what is being suggested should not escape even him. The Secretary of State's "senior sources" have said:

"We are now exploring with officials the dispersal of electronic tags for children."

He says that he will consult on that measure. The Government consulted on the poll tax, but they rejected the results of that consultation. They consulted on nursery vouchers, and they rejected the virtually unanimous opinion that was expressed. They consulted on water "quangoisation", but—despite the fact that 97 per cent. of the people in half of Scotland voted against it—they rejected that consultation.

People who believe that the children's panel system is good and that it has worked well, who believe that it is the envy of countries across Europe and who are deeply concerned that tagging offenders and children under 16 will put an articulated lorry—never mind a horse and cart—through that system will take no comfort from the thought that the Secretary of State will consult on the matter. The Secretary of State knows only too well—because the headquarters of the reporters administration is in his constituency—that the system will be irreparably harmed if the experiment proceeds. A knife placed at the heart of the youth justice system should not be his legacy when he leaves Stirling.

As for the Government's other proposals, we want there to be honesty, consistency and progression in sentencing through the provision of guidelines, as well as a proper licence system for sex and violent offenders. We will, of course, support additional targeting and supervision of those who are deemed to be of greater danger to society, in addition to new measures on DNA samples and the registration of convicted sex offenders. Similarly, few people would object to proposals to create a new offence of seeking employment with children for those who are convicted of a sexual offence against a child.

We are also committed to tough sentences for those who commit serious crime, and we support the use of indeterminate, reviewable sentences for repeat rapists.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robertson: No.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman has not given way to me in this debate.

Mr. Robertson: It is a rare display of taste on my part.

I question whether the Government's decision to remove all judicial discretion in such cases might make automatic sentences counter-productive. Lord Ross, the Lord Justice Clerk, has suggested that juries might be reluctant to convict sex offenders if those offenders face a mandatory life sentence. That reluctance was demonstrated by juries in capital murder cases. Given that it is already difficult to obtain convictions in such cases, should not we consider the danger that the proposals might lead to further acquittals?

Moreover—as various rape crisis and women's aid groups have pointed out—it is possible that the perpetrator, the rapist, might go further than committing rape and eliminate the witness. Is there not a danger that the provision will result in further horrific cases in which the rapist goes on to murder his victim?

Mr. Maxton: The Secretary of State was shaking his head when my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton made the point about a rapist killing. It is worth reminding the House that yesterday, in the debate on the Crime (Sentences) Bill, the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker), a former Home Secretary, made exactly that point.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, because there is a case to be made that that will happen. Such views have been expressed not only by women's groups, but, as he said, from such Conservative Back Benchers as a distinguished former Home Secretary. The point should be considered, at the very least, as part and parcel of our consideration of the Bill.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman mentioned an issue that—in his effort to be brief—he rather passed over. The issue is whether a jury would be reluctant to convict someone on a second occasion if they were aware that the consequence of a conviction would be a life sentence. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that any advocate conducting the defence would be bound to put in evidence before the court the fact that the accused had a previous conviction, to bring that very point to the forefront of the jury's consideration?

Mr. Robertson: The hon. and learned Gentleman has, in the context of the practicalities of the Bill, made an important point. As we already know, the Bill has been very poorly thought out, and it has been condemned by those who deal with such crimes.

I remind the House that Scottish courts already have power to deliver life sentences for repeat offenders. I have repeatedly asked the question—which has not been

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answered—whether the wish to turn that discretionary power into an obligation is meant to imply that the courts have been too lenient. The Government have not produced any clear evidence to justify that conclusion.

Ministers have said that, in practice, Scottish judges have only rarely used their powers. I can cite a few cases involving repeat offenders in which no life sentence was delivered. In each of those cases, however, the relevant question was not whether the court delivered a life sentence but whether it should have delivered such a sentence.

Moreover, in each of those cases, the Crown had the power of appeal. How many times—I have asked this question repeatedly, and I have received no answer—has that power been used? In his reply, I hope that the Minister will give us a specific answer and the reasons for it. I hope that the Minister will also respond to the concerns expressed by Lord Hope, who pointed out some of the serious anomalies that would be created by the Government's proposals.

Perhaps because of the anomalies that have arisen, which even Ministers have noticed, the Government have conceded that they will have to allow judicial discretion in "exceptional circumstances"—although the Government have given absolutely no indication of what that will mean. The discretion could be allowed in every case; or it could result in very lenient sentences by judges who initially set the tariff. If sentences are to be not automatic but discretionary, what is the purpose of the Government's proposal?

We are opposed to the use of inflexible, automatic determinate sentences, on the practical grounds that they are very likely to result in an increase in acquittals—as has happened in the United States—and, as Ministers have acknowledged, they require exceptions to avoid patent injustice. In fact, the Government rejected mandatory minimum sentences for such crimes as burglary during the passage of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993.

I repeat the words of the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, the former Secretary of State for Scotland, in 1992:

"There are those who argue that the sentence of the court should mean precisely what it says—a fixed number of years in custody. The Government believe, however, like the Kincraig committee, that a better approach is to allow, within the compass of the total sentence, for a period in custody, and a period in the community during which the offender will be encouraged to resettle under supervision."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 238-9.]

That was the position in 1992, but now, only a few years later in the same Parliament, the Government have completely changed their position on minimum sentences, and for no apparent reason.

The Secretary of State did not even bother to include his proposals for drug traffickers in the White Paper; we had to read about them in the Scottish *Daily Mail*. They fly completely in the face of the answer he gave to the hon. Member for Ayr in 1994. We read about serious new proposals on the front page of the Scottish *Daily Mail*, yet the Secretary of State has the cheek to ask Opposition Members to grant the Bill a quick and speedy passage.

I am glad that the Secretary of State has now established the Criminal Justice Forum, but what is the point of establishing a new consultative body when he and his predecessors have shown a cavalier approach to any form of consultation on sentencing or anything else? We need consistency in sentencing, which is why we shall continue to support moves towards a formal system of sentencing guidelines using current statutory powers as well as a sentencing information system for the use of High Court judges.

Why does the Secretary of State ignore the special nature of Scotland's legal system when, as the Minister of State, Scottish Office said last Monday when giving an alternative explanation for there being no mandatory sentences for burglars, many of the cases are based on common law? The Minister of State said in reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall):

"Moreover, Scots law has traditionally relied much more on common law. We believe that all the necessary powers are properly in place."—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 427.]

Our system is based on a common law for which there are no tariffs or sentences. In those circumstances, one has to understand the full background of an individual case and know what the plea in mitigation is before one can say whether a sentence is appropriate. However, that does not appear to concern the Secretary of State in his drive to pursue the same unthinking law and order agenda in Scotland as he did in England and Wales when he was at the Home Office.

We need a Government who recognise the special nature of the Scottish criminal justice system and who are prepared not just to be tough on criminals but to tackle the underlying causes of crime, too. Crime and criminality cannot be excused and, under Labour, never will be. We will attack those who defy society's rules of order and get to grips with what lies behind the situation acknowledged by the Secretary of State and everyone else in Scotland.

After 17 years of failure, we are told that the Bill is the answer to Scotland's crime problem. It is not. The Government have no arguments and no answers left. It is high time that they went and gave someone else the chance to deal with a problem that affects so many people in Scotland.

5.23 pm

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): Scottish people who may have the misfortune to see the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) on "Scottish Lobby" on Sunday will be wholly mystified about what he is doing in his party. As you rightly ruled, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were the reasoned amendment to be accepted, the Bill would fall. Those of us who have been here for some time know that perfectly well. It is no use the hon. Gentleman saying, "Fine; the Government can bring in another Bill tomorrow," when he knows that that is not how the House works. The House has a legislative programme and, if a Bill of such importance fell, it would be very serious for the Government.

I have read in the newspapers that the Leader of the Opposition is to harry the Government morning, noon and night. I presume that the hon. Member for Hamilton expects to win the vote tonight. I think that he is in for a rude awakening when the amendment falls, but the fact that he has revealed that he wishes to defeat the Bill proves to the people of Scotland that Labour is, as ever, very vulnerable on anything to do with law and order and crime.

It is important that the people of Scotland realise that, in the past 17 years, the Labour party has voted against the majority of Bills relating to crime—there have been many—and terrorism. Even today, despite having spoken about the Bill for nearly an hour, the hon. Member for Hamilton said hardly a good word about it. Indeed, he indicated his opposition to almost every clause, one way or another. No one listening to him could feel that in his heart he supported the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has worked very hard to bring law and order to Scotland, and has introduced a Bill that the people of Scotland want.

This is, after all, a Bill to protect the public from dangerous and persistent criminals. Why should the Labour party vote against it?

Mr. Wallace: Because it is important.

Sir Hector Monro: Or why should the Liberal party, for that matter, vote against it?

The Bill will bring in automatic life sentences for second-time serious violent and sexual offenders, including, of course, rapists and armed robbers. Why should anyone want to vote against such a proposal? The Bill will ensure that criminals are not released from prison if they remain a danger to the public. Why should anyone want to vote against that? The abolition of early release from prison will help to increase public confidence in the criminal justice system. The Bill will ensure that the sentences served match what the court said and are not reduced after the prisoner has served 50 per cent. of his sentence.

Mr. Maxton: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the speeches of the right hon. Members for Witney (Mr. Hurd), for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) and for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) last night rehearsing the arguments against mandatory life sentences.

Sir Hector Monro: I thought that my right hon. Friends made excellent speeches. The hon. Gentleman should remember that this is a Parliament and that we are here to discuss issues. Everyone has a right to express his view. My right hon. Friends are perfectly entitled to speak and to give the House the benefit of their experience gained in office, but things have moved on. Crime is a dynamic—it does not stand still. It changes every year, especially where drugs are involved. Every day, we learn new ways to defeat the drugs problem.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my right hon. Friend not think it extraordinary that the Labour party chose not to vote against the Crime (Sentences) Bill yesterday and did not table a reasoned amendment then, but it did so today? Given that the Labour party seems to disagree with the concept of a minimum sentence scheme, does my right hon. Friend think that this exposes a split between the Scottish element of the Labour party and the rest of the party?

Sir Hector Monro: Logic leads one to that assumption. We see Opposition Front Benchers perform U-turns morning, noon and night. They play everything off the cuff and get half of it wrong.

It is disappointing that the hon. Member for Hamilton is to oppose the Bill's provisions to promote the defeat of crime. Clearly, that is something with which we shall have to deal in Committee, but I hope that he will adopt a more positive attitude to my right hon. Friend's ideas, so that we can further reduce crime in Scotland.

My right hon. Friend's points on early release follow consultation in the document "Making the Punishment fit the Crime" and the subsequent White Paper. The change in parole is indeed an extension of the present arrangement, because it replaces automatic parole with earned release for good conduct. We must take that seriously and ensure that prisoners make a genuine attempt to face the community that they are to join after they leave prison.

It is right that individuals should be assessed and should not have an automatic time scale for release. It would be good to have the resources and accommodation for phased release or for more places to be available for certain types of offender in open prisons, which are a good stepping stone back into the community. I suspect that the prisoners about whom we are talking would never be granted the privilege of going to an open prison.

I hope that we do not let up on training in prisons. I have seen effective training in painting, carpentry and other trades in the Dumfries young offenders institution.

I know that, like my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State takes a great interest in post-release supervision arrangements. I hope that he will tell us more tonight about supervised release orders. I am not sure whether such orders will be initiated when a case is heard in court or whether the issue will come up later through the parole board when release is considered.

On automatic sentencing, it is right to impose a mandatory sentence after a second serious sexual offence, while still leaving the court discretion if appropriate. I am not sure that a third offence relating to a class A drug should not be treated in the same way as a second serious sexual offence. The only way to beat the drug problem in Scotland is to be draconian and to make certain that people realise that being caught with drugs means that they are in for a serious sentence.

Mr. Wilson: May I take the right hon. Gentleman back to the argument on sex offenders? Does he appreciate that the problem with the offences alluded to was not that people were released on licence but that they were released under no form of supervision? Does he recognise the argument by women's organisations that, when a recidivist rapist attacks a woman who recognises him, a mandatory life sentence provides an incentive, arguably, for that person to go the whole hog and kill her? That is the argument against mandatory life sentences.

Instead of 17 years of inactivity, would it not have been better to introduce a measure that prevented recidivist rapists from coming out of gaol without being reported to social work departments or to the police, leaving them under no supervision? Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that the rhetoric of leaping from one extreme to the other is not necessarily the cure?

Sir Hector Monro: The hon. Gentleman is making a case that needs careful thought and argument. Before he came into the Chamber, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained that there had been a

[Sir Hector Monro]

discussion with the Lord Advocate today about the case to which he alluded. There seemed to be a prospect of some way forward.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The key point is that the courts have always been able to require such supervision. We are debating an instruction from Parliament—an instruction that the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) intends to vote against—that the courts should always impose a minimum automatic life sentence in such cases. The difference between that and a mandatory life sentence is that the judge would then set the period to be served.

The argument that there is no incentive not to commit murder is wrong. The judge would set a minimum period to be served in prison, reflecting the seriousness of the offence, but after that the prisoner would be out for the rest of his life on licence because he had a life sentence. The hon. Member for Cunninghame, North is trying to wriggle out of the fact that he is not prepared to vote for a measure that would have provided protection for his constituents.

Sir Hector Monro: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for putting so clearly a point that he also put in his speech. He is absolutely right. The measure may occasionally result in rough justice, but I should be much happier if someone who caused a third serious sexual offence was locked up for life with no argument. The public want that, and the Bill will give them that.

The proposals on electronic monitoring orders are also right. We must prepare the way ahead. I do not understand why the hon. Member for Hamilton opposes the proposals. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear that they do not apply to those under 16. Once the legislation is in place, we can set up pilot schemes to see how it works. This could be a worthwhile measure, particularly for dealing with the young hooligans who are causing so much mayhem throughout the United Kingdom. We can also learn from experiences in England and Wales.

I read with interest the clause about mentally disordered offenders going directly to hospital. What is the difference between the proposal and the current situation? As my right hon. Friend knows, people are sent to the Crichton Royal hospital in my constituency under order from the courts with the requirement for close supervision. What difference are we introducing on such confinement?

The proposals are important, but relatively modest when one considers the overall picture of crime. I really wonder why the judges are going into orbit. Young advocates, such as the dashing young hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell), are keen to secure maximum sentences when prosecuting, but when they are promoted to become judges they become lenient, liberal and inconsistent. It a strange metamorphosis from advocate to judge. I would expect them to become tougher than the prosecutors.

My right hon. and learned Friend is right to say that the people of Scotland want criminals to get tough sentences and they want those sentences to be carried out. That is the basis of the Bill.

I am not carried away by statistics, because almost any conclusion can be drawn from the criminal statistics, so many of which are available on Scotland, but I think that the Government's record is good.

Mr. Wallace: Oh!

Sir Hector Monro: I beg your pardon.

The Government's record is good and the statistics are beginning to reflect that. It takes a while to make a sea change in criminal activity. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) is a great man for sedentary interventions. We have heard all the nonsense that he said about Customs and Excise. He got that totally wrong, and now he is getting criminal statistics totally wrong. Perhaps he could wait and just vote against the Bill this evening to show what the Liberal Democrats really think of it.

I should like to put in a good word for the police, who have to put the legislation into practice. [HON. MEMBERS: "They support the Bill."] The police certainly support what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is doing. My local police force—the smallest in Scotland—has carried out jobs as varied as work relating to the M74 and work in Stranraer on the Irish problem. A small force can maintain good discipline and statistics. I am glad that its crime figures are falling.

I think that the police will be pleased that teenage drinking is to be curtailed. One message which we can send is that future generations must take discipline in the family, from school onwards, more seriously. Although national service was inefficient and unnecessary from the point of view of the Army, it certainly instilled discipline and good manners in many people. Of course, I would never suggest bringing back national service.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has an opportunity, through the Scottish Office block grant, to support voluntary organisations, and they should be given help when it is possible to do so. Many of them do a tremendous amount to help youngsters. I refer to the Army, the Navy and the Air Cadets, in whom my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) takes such an interest. I also refer to the scouts, the Boys Brigade, the YMCA and the YWCA. All those organisations are helpful in bringing discipline to youngsters who might otherwise indulge in crime and hang around street corners. We should help those organisations whenever possible.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point. It may be of interest to the House to know that the General Officer Commanding the Army in Scotland is keen to take forward proposals along the line that my right hon. Friend suggests. We have been working closely with him and we will provide resources from the Scottish Office to allow the Army to extend its activities that enable youngsters, often from deprived backgrounds, to be involved in all kinds of outdoor activities and to work alongside the Territorial Army and others. I agree with my right hon. Friend that such activities are beneficial and something that we should build on in the months ahead.

Sir Hector Monro: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend; I know that he is interested in this matter. It was

good to have him reiterate what is happening and to know that the GOC Scotland supports him. I am sure that the Air Officer in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the Navy will also support my right hon. Friend's work. We should help not just service-based organisations, but civilian ones. We must ensure that they have the best facilities possible to help them to keep youngsters off the streets. That point also applies to the world of sport and recreation, although I may be going wide of the Bill in saying so.

The new facilities that are available to help the fight against crime, such as closed circuit television and the latest technology, are very beneficial. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will look after the interests of the police and the other protection services when he undertakes the annual review.

We have had valuable briefings about the Bill from the Law Society of Scotland and the Scottish Consumer Council, which dealt especially with legal aid. However, it is important that the message we send out from the House to Scotland is not Labour's message but the Conservative message, which is that we are determined to fight crime in every possible way, even if it means introducing legislation year after year after year as things change. We must be prepared to move with the times and to give the authorities all the powers they need to fight criminals. Tonight, the Scottish people will be astonished to see that Labour intends to vote against the Bill.

5.42 pm

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): It strikes me as remarkable that Conservatives have said not a word in this debate about social factors. One of the best defences against crime is surely to bring children up in loving homes—they are far less likely to commit a crime than those who are unfortunate enough to have missed that experience. It is not a question of stern disciplinarians ensuring that children get the belt if they misbehave. A child who is brought up by loving, caring people is much less likely to end up in a life of crime, because that child internalises a sense of discipline which makes him or her less likely to commit a crime in the first place.

When we contemplate today's society, in which there is widespread homelessness, unemployment and poverty, we should regard it as remarkable that the vast majority who suffer such appalling experiences do not commit crime; only a tiny minority do. We must deal with crime when it occurs, not only by punishment, but by crime prevention measures.

One of the better ways in which to ensure that children grow up in a law-abiding way and with respect for other people's needs and rights is to give them pre-school training. Pre-school education has been proved, by research in the United States in particular, to be enormously effective in ensuring that children grow up in a law-abiding way and with respect for other people, yet in Scotland today we have a system that does not guarantee a nursery place for all three and four-year-olds. The Government must address that point if they are serious about preventing crime.

Another aspect is the protection of people's homes.

Mr. Gallie: The hon. Lady may have heard the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) say earlier that crime has been getting worse over the years. My impression is that the provision of nursery places by the state has increased over the years. In the good old days to which the hon. Gentleman looked back, there were no nursery places. Can the hon. Lady expand on that point?

Mrs. Fyfe: The hon. Gentleman should realise that it is not true that, in former days, there were no nursery places. During the second world war in particular, when the men were away fighting and the women had to go to work, the state provided nursery places for every child whose mother required it. We have fallen from that happy state.

Mr. Bill Walker: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Fyfe: I will give way when I have finished this point.

The evidence shows clearly that children who have had the advantage of pre-school education are less likely to commit crime. If we want to prevent today's three and four-year-olds and those who are not yet born from inclining towards criminality, we have to think about that point.

I know from my own surgeries—other hon. Members have found the same—that the behaviour of anti-social neighbours causes greater immediate misery in most people's lives than does the exceptional crime. We have come across persistent noise-making at all hours of the night, vandalism, threatening behaviour and verbal abuse, all of which make people's lives a misery. Local authorities in Scotland, and in particular the council in Glasgow, have expressed a willingness to work with the police to tackle the problem effectively, but they need the resources to do so.

Mr. Walker: I was not being nasty when I tried to intervene earlier, but I wanted to check on something the hon. Lady said, because I thought that I might have misheard her. I am sure that she does not wish to mislead the House. If she checks, she will find that it was not the case during the second world war that every child whose parents required it could have nursery education. I can assure the hon. Lady of that, and I can give her chapter and verse on where nursery education was not available in Dundee.

Mrs. Fyfe: That is a trivial intervention, because we are talking about society today, not society half a century ago.

Mr. Walker: I was there.

Mrs. Fyfe: Not only did the hon. Member fly the bombers: he ran the nursery schools as well. For the sake of accuracy, the provision of nursery places was extremely widespread at that time compared with now. I will not quarrel with the hon. Gentleman about whether the coverage was 90 per cent., 80 per cent. or 100 per cent.

I shall now return to the subject of anti-social neighbours. They cause daily misery to thousands of people and concrete provisions to deal with them should be included in the Bill. Anti-social neighbours affect more people more of the time than many crimes do.

Clause 1 deals with automatic life sentences generally, and, other than in exceptional circumstances, proposes automatic life sentences for rapists. I and many women in women's organisations throughout Scotland have

[Mrs. Fyfe]

complained repeatedly about cases in which the judge has been far too lenient and given someone a tap on the wrist or a few months for a serious crime. Of course we object to that.

I must point out to the Secretary of State that, to be given a sentence at all, the accused has to be found guilty. The majority of men who appear in our courts on rape charges are acquitted. I do not believe that all the women involved are lying, although some may be. We need to look once again at how rape cases are dealt with in court so that a man who commits rape does not expect to get away with it—because that is the most likely outcome in the vast majority of cases.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Fyfe: I want to continue on this point first.

The Secretary of State has shaken his head when listening to those who have objected to automatic life sentences on the ground that it might tempt a rapist to commit murder while he is about it. I should like the Secretary of State to consider that point more seriously. If a rapist knows that, if he commits murder, he will not be sentenced any more harshly and that he is less likely to be caught if the victim is dead, the possible advantage of murder is bound to occur to him.

I do not know how often that factor has occurred in recent rape cases in Scotland, but it is certain that in many instances the rapist might come close to murdering his victim in any case. A rapist will be desperate to stop a woman who is screaming and trying to run away, and the distance between nearly killing her and actually killing her could be small. That is why I beg the Secretary of State to consider the matter more seriously.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but she is mistaken. She said that the sentence would be the same, in so far as it was a life sentence, but we are talking about automatic, not mandatory, life sentences, and the court would take account of the nature of the offence. A rape is a serious offence, so the judge would set the minimum period to be served, which might be eight or 10 years; for a murder, although the courts can specify a minimum, they rarely do so, and the sentence would be longer.

It is not correct to say that the effect on the criminal would be the same. What would be the same for both types of criminal is that, after release, they would be on licence for the rest of their lives, and they would be released only if the court was satisfied that they no longer represented a threat. The seriousness of the rape, the way in which it was perpetrated and the possibility of murder would all be taken account of in the penalty implemented by the court. The hon. Lady is therefore quite wrong, and that mistake has been made both by Opposition Members and by others who have confused mandatory and automatic life sentences.

Mrs. Fyfe: I have followed the Secretary of State's argument, but I must repeat the point that, if the victim is dead and therefore cannot give evidence, the perpetrator is less likely to be found guilty or to be brought to justice in the first place.

Mr. Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the circumstances under discussion, the idea of the criminal discriminating between mandatory and automatic life sentences is fanciful? Her point is exactly right, and the problem is created by the Secretary of State going, as usual, for headlines and talking about life sentences for rapists when what really matters is that nobody should get out of prison—and nobody for years past should have got out of prison—for such offences without being under supervision and without showing some capacity to reform. Having failed society on those counts, the Secretary of State will not resolve the problem by talking about life sentences. All he wants is a cheap headline.

Mrs. Fyfe: I agree with my hon. Friend, because the Secretary of State has not addressed the core points about people being let out of prison without supervision and without evidence of their having reformed and understood the seriousness of their crime. When such people are let out, it is hardly surprising that terrible events such as the one referred to earlier by my hon. Friend take place.

I wish that, instead of treating this debate as a party political knockabout, the Secretary of State would address our genuine worries. We are trying to protect women from horrible crimes, so we should all think about it seriously.

Mr. Forsyth: I do not regard the debate as party political knockabout, because I know that it is fundamental and that the hon. Lady takes the issues extremely seriously.

A sentence that does not allow for a person's release until he is considered to be safe in the community and provides for him to be returned to prison at any stage after release if he shows any conduct that causes concern is a life sentence. That is what we are providing for, so I am slightly surprised that the hon. Lady is not supporting us—it may be because of the confusion between mandatory and automatic life sentences to which the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) rightly referred.

A sentence that will not allow out on licence repeat offenders who are likely to reoffend unless they are considered safe, and return them to prison if they cause concern, is a life sentence, and that is what we are imposing. Only by giving the courts that direction from the House can we achieve what we seek.

Mrs. Fyfe: The courts have had extensive powers for years but, as in the case referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), they have not used them. We can discuss the matter in detail in Committee, but let us at least agree that we are serious about tackling the problem. I am sure that most people who commit the appalling crime of rape will not distinguish between the niceties and do not even know about them. We shall have to recognise that fact.

Mr. Wilson: It is important that our debate should not be bedevilled by headline talk of life sentences, and that we should reach a consensus now and agree that everybody wants to ensure that never again is a recidivist rapist who is likely to reoffend allowed out of prison without supervision or knowledge of where he is going. We do not want rhetoric from the Secretary of State; we want to prevent such travesties as the Maguire case and the Mullen case from ever happening again.

Mrs. Fyfe: Other aspects of the Bill are also important. I hope that we will discover in Committee, if not tonight,

why the Bill confines the confiscation of alcohol to under-18s. It has been pointed out by social work departments that under-18s do not socialise solely with other under-18s. Some people in a disorderly crowd drinking in the street could be over 18 years old, and others under 18. A police officer could get into unnecessary difficulty trying to distinguish between the two. We should examine that more closely.

Recent research has shown once again that women are sentenced disproportionately toughly compared with men convicted of similar offences. There are women in prison at the moment for crimes such as fine default. I know that the Secretary of State agrees that that is not reasonable, but I would be glad if he would agree tonight to conduct some research into whether women in Scotland are being sentenced disproportionately harshly, because the evidence we have comes from United Kingdom-wide research.

When discussing other ways in which to deal with matters such as fine default, the Secretary of State has mentioned banning from driving. I hope that his common sense will tell him that a woman who is in prison because she has not paid her television licence will hardly be deterred by being forbidden to drive—it would hardly be an issue in her life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson) pointed out earlier that people are upset and angry about those who apparently—but not really—get away with drug pushing, because people who are arrested sometimes wait for a couple of years before coming to trial, which gives the impression that they have got away with it. People in my constituency have said that there is no point reporting offenders, because they only reappear in the street the next week; they do not realise that such people can be awaiting trial for a long time. The Secretary of State said earlier that there was a provision in the Bill to deal with that, but—perhaps it is my fault—I cannot see it. If there is no such provision in the Bill, it is certainly in the Secretary of State's power to do something about it in Committee. I hope that that point will be taken up.

On children in court, clause 23 is useful and I see no objection to it at this stage, but people who have abused or harmed children will not serve a sentence if they are not convicted in the first place. In the all-party Scottish children's group, we have identified three concerns about children in the courts that could be resolved by simple legislative action, and I hope that the Secretary of State will be open to our proposals—as his colleagues in another place were extremely supportive of them.

One proposal concerns the competency of child witnesses. The courts are currently bound by case law which frequently prevents young children from giving evidence. As a result, many criminal trials and care proceedings have had to be dropped because good evidence cannot be presented.

The problem is that a child who is too young to take the oath has to persuade the judge that he or she understands the difference between truth and lies, and promises to tell the truth. Because young children cannot think in abstract terms such as truth, and because judges often experience difficulty communicating at a level appropriate to young children, many children who could have given reliable evidence hardly get beyond giving their names.

The solution that the group supports is that the evidence of a witness unable to take the oath or to affirm should be heard subject to reservation. The child's competence and credibility could then be assessed on how the evidence is given, instead of the current test.

Legislation already allows children to be heard in chambers. When that law was passed, it was clearly intended that children should be questioned and heard in less demanding circumstances than open court—in less overawing surroundings—yet I hear that children are being heard by judges in court rooms instead of more pleasant surroundings. That point needs to be tackled. Speaking in court can be extremely intimidating for a young child, irrespective of whether the judge has a wig on. I am glad to note the Secretary of State's acknowledgement of that.

As for the protection of vulnerable witnesses, complainers in criminal trials on sexual offence charges are protected from cross-examination on their sexual history unless they make an issue of it themselves, but that protection does not apply to one of the most vulnerable groups of witnesses—children in children's hearing cases who say that they have been victims of abuse. There have been cases in which children have been subjected to distressing cross-examination of exactly the sort that is rightly disallowed in criminal trials. The solution would be a simple amendment to confirm that the relevant sections of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 also apply to court hearings under part II of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

I seem to recall that the Secretary of State's colleague, who is on the Bench beside him, has undertaken to look into this problem at a later stage. Perhaps we shall return to it in Committee.

The status of children's hearing proceedings is the next point at issue. They are intended to be private, with the aim of encouraging openness and honesty in identifying a family's problems and what can be done about them, but while there are controls on who may attend a hearing and what can be reported, there is no statutory guarantee of confidentiality. One result is that parents facing concurrent prosecution on child abuse or neglect grounds often feel unable to say much even if they want to talk about their difficulties. Some abusers evade important questions on the grounds of not wishing to incriminate themselves.

A further problem is that children's panel members sometimes find themselves cited to give evidence in matrimonial cases. The usual aim seems to be that they will boost one parent's case by explaining why they placed a child with that parent. The Crown has never sought to use statements from a children's hearing as evidence in criminal proceedings. A statutory confirmation that statements or admissions made during children's hearing proceedings are not admissible in other proceedings, except on a charge of perjury, would not adversely affect prosecutions but would support a better use of the hearings system.

Because we all support the hearings system as a way of dealing with children who are in trouble, whether they are miscreants themselves or the victims of abuse, neglect or criminal behaviour, I hope that the Secretary of State will give careful consideration to these points.

[Mrs. Fyfe]

Last, clause 12 deals with sexual offences against girls, but boys are not mentioned. I am not sure whether that is because the Secretary of State considers the law satisfactory in respect of assaults against boys, or whether the point has simply not been considered.

I have today raised a large number of points which I hope the Secretary of State will tackle. We shall certainly be tabling amendments, which I hope will find support, to deal with them.

6.3 pm

Mr. Phil Gallie (Ayr): People reading tonight's debate will be somewhat mystified to discover that we are voting on an amendment that declines to give the Bill a Second Reading. They will be mystified because the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) says that he wants the Bill to proceed but is using his motion as a device to bring about a debate. I realise that the hon. Gentleman is an expert in Opposition matters, but he is certainly not an expert in the affairs of Government, which he has never experienced. Very few of his party have; and after the hon. Gentleman's speech tonight, we can all understand why.

Back in June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State issued a White Paper on crime and punishment. It was an excellent document, but Opposition Members continued to question the Government's reasons for pursuing legislation with a crime and punishment message. They do so because Governments have to take account of changing circumstances.

There has been a lot of discussion of drugs in the debate, and I want to comment further on the drugs scene. Fifteen or 16 years ago, the menace of drugs in this country was not nearly as apparent as it is today. The same goes for Europe, although perhaps not for the United States, where the problem appeared earlier and on a larger scale. I believe that drugs have been a major factor in the increase in crime.

I welcomed the June White Paper, which was clearly in tune with the hopes and aspirations that I had been expressing in this Chamber since my election in 1992. Recognising the merits of the document, I tried to publicise it in my constituency, where it attracted a great deal of interest and, by all accounts, support. I should be interested to hear how many comments of support for the White Paper my right hon. Friend has received—I suspect many, but we have not heard much about them.

I set about carrying out a survey in my constituency. One of the questions in it was devoted to law and order issues of the kind faced up to in the White Paper. The survey was sent out to 17,000 voters, and I am pleased to say that we had 5,200 responses—remarkable in marketing terms. The responses showed that it is perhaps better to heed the ideas of the public than the words of Lords Hope, Ross or McCluskey, all of whom are steeped in the ways of the legal establishment in Scotland. [*Laughter.*]

Perhaps the legal fraternity, including the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell), should listen a little more carefully to what the public are saying. The public are the people who depend on the law for a reasonable existence in which they can feel safe and protected. The hon. and learned Gentleman, by mocking my comments, mocks the general public, too. It is a pity that eminent figures in the law despise the feelings of lesser beings who have not achieved such learned positions.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I do not laugh at the notion that the purpose of the law is to engender confidence in the public that the law will be properly implemented and enforced. My complaint is that these provisions do nothing in that regard. Moreover, if the hon. Gentleman thinks that Lord McCluskey is a member of the establishment, he must have a rather curious idea about what the establishment consists of.

Mr. Gallie: I dare say that Lord McCluskey will be interested in the hon. and learned Gentleman's comments.

I should like to run through the results of the survey that we carried out. Individuals were asked to identify areas of concern across a range of national policies. More than 40 per cent. identified law and order as their No. 1 priority, with issues such as health and employment also mentioned. I should point out to Opposition Members that there was little support for any change to the national constitution, despite the remarks that we often hear from Opposition Members.

Mr. Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gallie: I always give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is so sweet. Will he elucidate—what survey is he referring to? Who are "we"? Was it one of the Tory surveys that the party sends out?

Mr. Gallie: Yes, it was organised by my constituency. I am quite prepared to hand round the survey sheet for hon. Members to see; it was designed not to pick up Tory votes but to ask questions about key issues. I make no apology for the fact that I put my faith in the public to give me guidance on certain issues. That is why I am referring to the survey, which showed that over 40 per cent. of people had specific concerns about law and order.

Of those responding to the survey, 87 per cent. felt that there were real grounds for doubt arising from inconsistencies in court sentencing practices. Their concern gives me some comfort, because I have complained about the problem for a long time. Every hon. Member will have heard about judgments in sheriff courts and higher courts that have led people to scratch their heads and ask, "How on earth could that be? What is the comparison? How can someone get 18 months for kicking a person to death in one court, but someone convicted on a murder charge in another court gets a life sentence?" We should examine those issues, and recognise that judges and sheriffs are not wise above all other beings.

The performance of judges and sheriffs should be subject to review. Of those responding to our survey, 84 per cent. could not understand why judges and sheriffs were allowed to go on into their dotage without any controls whatsoever imposed on them. No one can query their judgment, other than the Appeal Court—their fellow judges. No matter how they perform, little or no judgment is passed on their performance, and that worries many people.

When asked whether fixed-term sentences should be served in full, 83 per cent. of those responding said yes—83 per cent. thought that the Government were on to something in wanting to make four years imprisonment mean exactly that.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): Did you ask about hanging?

Mr. Gallie: The hon. Gentleman is slightly impetuous.

We asked whether there should be a referendum on capital punishment. I was going to raise that subject, because I was slightly surprised that only 60 per cent. of people were in favour—I had expected a higher figure. We did not specifically ask them whether they were in favour of the restoration of capital punishment; had we done so, the number in favour might have been greater, but that is another matter. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman will have a chance to speak later. He need not keep shouting from the back—if he wants to intervene, I shall give way.

Mr. McAllion: The survey the hon. Gentleman conducted in his constituency fascinates me. He asked about hanging, but did he also ask about thumbscrews and racks, or is there is a limit to the hard line that the hon. Gentleman is prepared to take on crime?

Mr. Gallie: The hon. Gentleman's point is unworthy of an answer, and I shall not give him one. I have said that we asked people whether they wanted a referendum on capital punishment, and 60 per cent. said yes. However, that was not the purpose of the survey. We were trying to find out whether there was general public support for the main issues included in the White Paper.

We asked what a life sentence should mean, and many people felt that life should mean life, but not a significant majority. Most people felt that, unless there were exceptional circumstances, a life sentence should mean a minimum of 15 years. That is not the current position. I am happy with the definition of a life sentence, and the fact that my right hon. Friend the Scottish Secretary will have some control over such sentences.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: When my hon. Friend asked about life sentences meaning life, I assume that he was asking about mandatory life sentences, not discretionary or automatic life sentences. When he carries out his next survey, it will be interesting to find out whether people know the difference. Will he comment on Opposition Members' confusion about the differences between those types of life sentence?

Mr. Gallie: I have to admit that we tried to keep the survey fairly simple. We recognise that the great mass of the British public do not understand the niceties of our legal system—they leave the definitions to others. The people who responded to the survey expect the legal system to have a sense of justice and fairness.

The hon. Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) and for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson) suggested that we should be able to deal more quickly with those who have been charged with drugs offences. The hon. Lady's comment was that such individuals were frequently arrested by the police and back on the streets within a day or two at most.

Some time ago, I received assurances from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about guidelines on bail, where it would be a case of "two strikes and you're out". I strongly support that proposal, and I hope that the hon. Member for Maryhill, who has supported such a proposal in the past, will come into line on that aspect of the Bill. It would certainly help in the circumstances that the hon. Lady described.

Great support was expressed in the response to the survey for restricting the consumption of alcohol on our streets by those under 18. The hon. Member for Maryhill asked, why 18? In fact, it is illegal for those who are under 18 to obtain alcohol, to be given it or to buy it, and it is illegal for people to sell it to them. It seems nonsense to most people that, if they manage to obtain alcohol, there is really nothing in the law to enable the police to stop them drinking it. It is a constant source of aggravation to my constituents.

Mrs. Fyfe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gallie: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a minute.

My constituents see gangs of youngsters with super-lagers or Buckfast wine and other fortified wines—it is a shame that the hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) is not present—and they are mystified by the police's inability to do anything about it unless there is a perceived breach of the peace. The proposal to enable the police to confiscate alcohol from youngsters will remove that quandary and give the police a useful device to control a situation that, at times, goes well beyond the limit. I note that the Scottish Police Federation welcomes the proposal, as does the federation for the police south of the border.

Mrs. Fyfe: There are people on our streets who are causing a nuisance by drinking in the open air, of whom it can be said that it is many a year since they were 18. Are the police supposed to distinguish between those who are under 18 and those who are over 18 in a crowd of young people? They cannot do so, and it is nonsense to expect them to be able to do so.

Mr. Gallie: I disagree with the hon. Lady. I have driven through her constituency—not stopping to make speeches, I hasten to add—and seen youngsters of 13 or 14 on the streets. If neither the police nor the hon. Lady cannot identify 13 and 14-year-olds, something is wrong.

I understand that Glasgow city council has used local authority powers to impose an overall drinking ban. That is fine—the measure is of value in some areas—but blanket bans are not logical. I represent a holiday town, and I recognise that families want to have picnics in the park. I have no objection to their having a bottle of wine or a couple of cans of beer with their picnic; but I do object if the youngsters are drinking in public, because, to my mind, that is against the law. The measure gives police the power to control the problem—it is a wise move.

I am mystified as to why the Labour party wants to vote against this well-thought-out and necessary Bill. We should consider the Labour party's performance last night over the Crime (Sentences) Bill, which affects England and Wales. I wonder whether its performance involves

[Mr. Gallie]

something deeper, and whether it recognises that it desperately has to win seats in some areas of England and Wales that have been way beyond it in the past. On that basis, it has bitten the bullet and is trying to kid us into thinking that it is tough on law and order and will back my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary.

The scenario in Scotland is perhaps different. We all acknowledge that a huge majority of Members of Parliament in Scotland come from the Labour party, which currently picks up the majority of votes. I wonder whether the Labour party in Scotland is taking the Scottish vote for granted and turning its back on the people. It seems to be saying that what happens in England and Wales is one thing, but what happens to us in Scotland is another, and we will do what we want because we do not have to count the voters. Those honest Labour Members of Parliament who see the value of the Bill should join us in the Lobby tonight—that would be logical.

Clause 1 involves life sentences for rapists. I was surprised to hear the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) arguing against the wise steps advocated by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. We must attempt to rectify what has happened in the past and ensure that the problems never recur. When Maguire was released, the courts had a responsibility to maintain some supervision over him, but they let us down. They will not do so again if they use the life sentence provisions suggested by my right hon. Friend.

I am slightly perturbed about the list of qualifying offences for life sentences. I commend the list of qualifying offences contained in the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill, which includes sodomy or attempted sodomy. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would point out to my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary the omission from the English Bill—the Crime (Sentences) Bill—of those qualifying offences. My right hon. and learned Friend may have missed a trick and the English Bill should perhaps follow the example of the Scottish Bill—or perhaps there is a good reason for the omission.

I query the seven-year sentence for someone who has committed the offence of drug trafficking for a third time, as it seems a remarkably lax sentence. That figure should be raised to 10 or perhaps 15 years. Drug traffickers are purveyors of death.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: It is a minimum.

Mr. Gallie: I recognise that seven years is a minimum sentence for drug traffickers, but it is too low and should be higher. There is no justification for anyone who attempts to sell drugs and is convicted for the third time.

I welcome the abandonment of automatic release. I argued strongly in 1992-93 that the automatic halving of sentences was wrong. Prisoners should be able to earn remission, but I underline the word "earn". I was horrified by the comments of the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East, who seemed to suggest that there would be problems in implementing the measure because it might put pressure on prison warders who could be subjected to threats from prisoners.

The hon. and learned Gentleman seems to be suggesting that we should give up if threats are involved. That would be wrong: we should not give in to people because they use threats or threatening behaviour. The prison service will be well equipped to make judgments. Prison officers are aware of those prisoners who merit early release, and I welcome the fact that they will play a part in the process.

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) will be aware that some prisoners in Perth prison have, for a long time, regularly threatened officers. There is nothing new in that.

Mr. Gallie: Absolutely not. Prison officers are well equipped to deal with such problems, and I am sure that they will be able to cope, and that they will welcome the Bill's proposals.

I was surprised to find that the Bill contains no mention of the right of appeal for the prosecution against summary court judgments. I am advised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the subject is covered by a statutory instrument; if so, I welcome that. I shall be pleased if we do not have to introduce further legislation on that much-needed aspect.

I much approve of DNA sampling—another measure included in the Bill. I welcome the fact that prisoners can be checked for alcohol.

I fully approve of electronic tagging, and I would welcome further investigation into its use for juveniles. A small minority of juveniles commit many criminal offences. Electronic tagging might be a useful way of controlling that problem. I wonder about the costs involved, and I shall listen to the debate with interest to see whether my right hon. Friend gives us guidance on the costs of tagging.

There are to be changes in the operation of the Legal Aid Board involving the appointment of solicitors who could, to an extent, be defined as public defenders. I wonder whether that is a step too far. The introduction of state-appointed lawyers smacks of nationalisation, but I am prepared to read the clauses carefully when the Bill reaches its Committee stage. I shall listen with great interest to what is said, but I am putting down a marker to show that I have some reservations.

The Legal Aid Board has a job to do, as does the Law Society—some self-regulation is necessary. I realise that concerns have arisen about the abuse of the legal aid system by some legal firms, but I should like to think that controls could be introduced without having to adopt the public defender approach.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: This is the first time that I have been accused of supporting nationalisation. It is proposed to pilot the use of the public defender system to ensure value for money for the taxpayer and to ensure that justice is carried out speedily. I know that my hon. Friend has supported both those principles enthusiastically in the past, and I shall be happy to discuss those matters with him before the Bill reaches Committee.

Mr. Gallie: I thank my right hon. Friend for that assurance. I would never doubt his commitment to ensuring that we do not adopt the nationalisation policies previously advocated by the Opposition—I am happy to say that even they now seem to have abandoned them.

Mr. Bill Walker: If, like me, my hon. Friend finds that the professional body that produces the most complaints

from constituents is the legal profession, perhaps we should find a method of making sure that lawyers behave properly. The Law Society's procedures for ensuring that may be flawed.

Mr. Gallie: I have some sympathy with my hon. Friend's point, but we are the party that believes in self-regulation. The Law Society has a part to play, and I would expect it to discuss with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State the means of achieving that.

Finally, I believe that the legal aid system is sometimes abused in the criminal sector. A person should have the right to choose his lawyer, but I recognise that some people try repeatedly to change their lawyer. The Legal Aid Board can exercise some control, and I would welcome the imposition of further controls.

I look forward to going into the Lobby tonight to give my 100 per cent. support to this excellent Bill, which I thank my right hon. Friend for introducing.

6.30 pm

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): I shall deal later with the points raised by the hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) about state-provided defence lawyers. He may wish to reflect that, although that may be characterised as nationalisation, part V of the Bill gives sweeping powers to the Scottish Legal Aid Board to undertake investigations of legal practices. The Law Society has stated that, were the Government to give it sufficient powers, as they have in other respects to regulate its members, it would undertake investigations itself, thereby saving the taxpayer a considerable amount of money. The hon. Gentleman may wish to consider that part of the Bill in terms of value for money for the taxpayer, as the Government seem to have lost sight of those objectives when they prepared it.

It would be rare if one objected 100 per cent. to any Bill presented to the House. There have been a few such occasions—the poll tax legislation, for example, was 100 per cent. objectionable. There are measures in this Bill that my colleagues and I would support, such as those on DNA sampling, the consumption of alcohol by under-18s in public places, and part of the Government's proposals for implementing the Sutherland committee report.

That is a good example of why we cannot bring ourselves to support the Bill as a whole. The Government accepted part of the Sutherland committee report but ignored the crux of it, which would provide for an independent body to consider whether cases of alleged miscarriage of justice should be referred for appeal.

The Bill is good in small parts, but is flawed in many important respects. Above all, it will fail to attack crime, which is its stated purpose. That is why we tabled the reasoned amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), myself and others. Having tabled an amendment stating that we decline to give it a Second Reading, we are prepared to follow through and vote against the Bill.

Before going any further, I should state that I am a non-practising member of the Faculty of Advocates and the unpaid parliamentary adviser to the Procurators Fiscal Society for Scotland. However, any remarks that I may make this evening are entirely my own, on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

The Bill is all too typical of the Secretary of State's tenure of the Scottish Office. Every new idea is conceived in a great frenzy of activity. It may be superficially attractive at first, like candyfloss, but when one tries to put it to use, it melts away, leaving a sticky mess. The right hon. Gentleman vamped up the Bill with a great number of speeches and a White Paper that paid lip service to consultation. It is hailed as an effective attack on crime, but closer examination reveals it to be as flawed as it is ill conceived. If ever implemented, it would not only leave expectations dashed, but worse still, it would take away vital resources which, if otherwise applied, would be more effective in the war against crime.

No party has a monopoly on concern about the rise in crime. The right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) said that he was not happy about dealing in statistics and did not think that they mattered much in respect of crime figures. I understand his reluctance. He has supported, and at times been a member of, a Government under whom, over the past 17 years, crimes in Scotland have increased by 156,000 and recorded offences by 125,000. From 1979 to 1995, the number of non-sexual crimes of violence has increased from 10,025 to 21,119. The Government have presided over an increase in violent crime of more than 100 per cent.

I am not surprised that the right hon. Member for Dumfries wanted to run away from that figure. It shows how ineffective the Government have been in combating crime. With all the measures that they have introduced, the same claims have been made. Very little has been achieved, other than an increase in crime.

We are told in the explanatory and financial memorandum that, if the Bill is implemented, in five years the prison population could increase by 2,200. Perhaps that is testimony to the deterrent effect of the measures proposed in the Bill.

Not surprisingly, mandatory sentences have been the subject of considerable debate. There has been an interesting discussion about mandatory life sentences and automatic life sentences. Will the Secretary of State ponder on the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe)? It was a valid point that has been made several times during the debate. The same argument was advanced in the Chamber last night by the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker). In certain circumstances—for example, a woman being raped—the criminal might kill the only potential witness because a life sentence awaited him.

The Secretary of State says that we have got it wrong: it is not a life sentence. That is simply the headline that he wants to get over to the press and the people of Scotland. The sentence could be less than a life sentence, but would automatically be called a life sentence. There would not be much consolation to the victim if the perpetrator made the same mistake.

In the Crime (Sentences) Bill to which the House gave a Second Reading last night, the reference is to mandatory life sentences. In this Bill, the reference is to automatic life sentences. Can the Secretary of State tell us now, or can the Minister of State tell us in his winding-up speech, what difference there is in the legislative provisions between the Crime (Sentences) Bill and this Bill—the Dostoevsky (Scotland) Bill—that creates the distinction between mandatory life sentences and automatic life

[Mr. James Wallace]

sentences? On looking at the first clause of each Bill, I could not see what makes the difference, but it may lie elsewhere. It would be interesting to know.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: I should have thought that the hon. and learned Gentleman—

Mr. Wallace: I am not learned.

Mr. Forsyth: Perhaps that can be remedied. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would be aware of the considerable differences between the Scots and English systems—for example, for mandatory life sentences in the English system, the tariffs are set by Ministers.

The Scottish Bill provides that the period of a sentence that would be served by an offender would be set by the judge and that eligibility for release would be determined by the parole board making a recommendation to the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman is telling the House that he would oppose a sentence that would allow repeat sex offenders to be out on licence for the rest of their lives, but if there was any concern about the threat that they represented to the community, they could be returned to prison. I am surprised that he takes that position, because without doubt the measure is in the interests of public protection.

Mr. Wallace: I was certainly aware that there was a difference between a mandatory life sentence that gave the power into the hands of Ministers to determine when a person may be released, and the discretionary life sentences that are already available. That is the answer to the right hon. Gentleman: those sentences are already available to the High Court, if a judge thinks that they are warranted by the circumstances of the case or the danger to society posed by the perpetrator of the crime. The Bill takes away that discretion, although there has never been any substantial complaint that it has been abused or not properly applied over the years. The Secretary of State's eyes boggle, but he failed to answer the question raised by the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) about how many times the Lord Advocate exercised his power to appeal where he felt that the High Court had been too lenient in passing a sentence.

Mr. Forsyth: I did not make the point to the hon. Member for Hamilton, because he is not a lawyer; the hon. Gentleman is, and he knows very well that the Crown's right of appeal is to the court, and the court has to decide whether the sentence passed by the judge was reasonable. If a judge imposed a determinate sentence of a long period, it is very unlikely that one would be able to persuade the court to take a different view. We propose to change the law to require courts to impose an automatic life sentence for the protection of the public, and Parliament is entitled to take that view. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman takes the view that we should rely on the discretion of the judiciary on a matter that is clearly for the public interest and for Parliament to decide.

Mr. Wallace: The Secretary of State has summed it up in a nutshell: that judges, after many years of training and after all the other things that we ask them to do, simply cannot be trusted, and that in individual cases Parliament knows better than those who have had extensive training. I do not deny that judges must work within the parameters set by Parliament, but I challenge whether tonight—of the thousands of cases that will come before the Scottish courts in the next five, 10 or 20 years, with their different circumstances—the House knows better than the judges what the sentence should be.

Let us take this further, because the Bill invites Parliament to pass an automatic life sentence on someone who has already committed a qualifying offence and thereafter commits a robbery involving a firearm or an imitation firearm. I am not saying that that is not a serious offence; it is a very serious offence. But what is the difference between that and, for example, a robbery committed by someone who holds the victim at knife point? That, apparently, would not command an automatic life sentence. What is it that makes us able tonight to make these distinctions and apply them irrespective of the particular circumstances of a case?

Mr. Forsyth: Wriggling.

Mr. Wallace: The Secretary of State says that I am wriggling. I am not; I am pointing out the inconsistencies of his proposed legislation, which will lead, as Lord Ross, the Lord Justice Clerk, said, to considerable injustice and perceived unfairness.

That could also have a further consequence. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell) said, it is quite possible for counsel—indeed, it may well be the duty of counsel for an accused who is up on a second offence—to put before the jury the fact that, if the person is found guilty of the offence, the judge will be required to pass a life sentence. The jury may not think the circumstances of the case proportionate to the passing of a life sentence and they may acquit, by a verdict of not guilty or not proven. They may also believe that there is a scintilla of reasonable doubt, which, given the fact that a life sentence will be imposed automatically, will lead to an acquittal. We might see, as a result of what the Government propose, an increase in the number of wrongful acquittals, and that would do nothing to protect the public.

The other possibility is that trials will be longer, as the incentive to plead guilty will disappear. There has been much outcry in the past few weeks about victims, particularly of sexual offences and rape, being subject to extensive cross-examination by the perpetrator. The consequence of passing the proposed legislation will be that the number of cases in which the victim of crime has to be subjected to detailed cross-examination, possibly by the perpetrator himself, will almost certainly increase.

The Bill has not been properly thought through. The mirror measure in England and Wales is the Crime (Sentences) Bill. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that an offender's first offence is the equivalent in England of lewd and libidinous practices towards children and his second offence is a rape in Scotland. In such circumstances, the automatic life sentence will not apply because there is no equivalent provision on lewd and libidinous practices in the English legislation, but if the rape is committed in England and the lewd and libidinous practice is committed in Scotland, the automatic sentence will apply—another illogicality resulting from the rushed preparation of the Bill, more with an eye to the publicity it would attract than to achieving the proper aims of justice.

Clause 11 increases the sentencing power of the sheriff. I do not think that there is much objection to that in principle, although I echo the point made by my hon. and learned Friend, who said that, if more cases are tried in a sheriff court as a result of the Bill, it is important that there are enough full-time sheriffs to ensure that the cases are adequately and properly handled. At some stage—perhaps in the not too distant future—a balance might have to be struck because of court work loads and an advocate-depute might think for some reason that one case should be heard in the sheriff court and the other, which is similar, in the High Court. But because the case is heard in the sheriff court, it will not be a qualifying offence. Something as arbitrary as that might determine whether a person was subjected to an automatic life sentence.

We believe that the Bill contains many flaws that could lead to acquittals, which would not necessarily be in the interests of justice. There is the drug trafficking mandatory minimum sentence. I made a point earlier, which is still valid, about the closing of Customs and Excise posts at points around our coastline where it is easiest for drug traffickers to smuggle in their drugs. The Secretary of State says that he has to take advice. The reason why that advice has to be proffered in the first place is that the Government are cutting resources for the Customs and Excise service so that they can give tax cuts to their supporters and to people they want to attract at the next election. They make tax cuts on the one hand and cut the resources of the Customs and Excise service on the other.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Cromarty and Skye): Does my hon. Friend agree that the point that he raises is particularly perverse—the Minister of State might want to refer to it when he winds up—because all of us from the highlands and islands lobbied the Minister of State a number of years ago, before the previous general election, on law and order expenditure in the highlands and islands of Scotland, and the Minister of State acknowledged then that one reason why he came forward with an increase, following the disquiet expressed by the chief constable at that time, was specifically because of the drugs threat on the western coast and in the northern and western isles?

Mr. Wallace: Indeed. That concern was raised recently by the newly appointed chief constable.

I turn now to the provisions relating to early release. It is not the length of the sentence that determines whether a particular sentencing policy has worked but how the prisoner will behave when released. In spite of the Secretary of State's efforts at the beginning of his speech to pretend that somehow this was a development of the 1993 legislation, it is far removed from the proposals of the Kincraig report.

I think that 98 per cent. of prisoners are eventually released. What we had under the Kincraig report, implemented in the 1993 legislation, was imprisonment plus a period in the community plus resettlement under supervision—the very points that the former Secretary of State for Scotland made on Second Reading of that Bill. The Secretary of State challenged me and my hon. Friends earlier and said, "If they are in prison, they won't be committing crimes." But he omitted to mention that, when they leave prison, it is possible that they could commit crimes.

Yesterday, the parole board issued a statement in which it said:

"since the parole scheme began in 1968, less than 10 per cent. of parolees have been reconvicted during the first six months after release, compared to 30 per cent. of non-parolees . . . since 1968 35 per cent. of those on parole have been reconvicted two years after release, compared to 55 to 60 per cent. of those nonparolees."

Those figures relate to England and Wales, but they are recent.

Far from curbing crime by eliminating early release and the kind of arrangement that was expected under the 1993 Act, more prisoners are likely to be released without adequate supervision, with the greater likelihood of a higher reoffending and reconviction rate. That does nothing to reassure people that the Government's current sentencing policy is appropriate.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fife, North–East said that prison officers will determine who will receive additional days. That will become an administrative act, and will open prison officers up to possible intimidation. The fact that that already happens in our prisons is no justification for extending it. At present, added days are determined by the governor after a disciplinary hearing. It is a big change for a person's liberty to be determined by an administrative act rather than a proper disciplinary procedure where the rules of natural justice prevail.

The Scottish Association for Mental Health needs to be persuaded that hospital orders are necessary, as sufficient sentencing powers are currently available to the courts to achieve the same results. It bodes ill for any relationship between doctor and patient if the patient knows that, if he gets better, he will be sent to gaol. That will not encourage better health.

The Secretary of State was wholly disingenuous when, towards the conclusion of his remarks, he quoted selectively from the submission of the Law Society of Scotland in response to his White Paper, clearly suggesting that the Law Society of Scotland supported the White Paper. Those of us who met its president today know that the opposite is the case, and that it has a series of objections to the Bill.

Where is the choice or independence if one is told who one's solicitor will be? Not only will choice be denied, but any choice that has already been exercised may be taken away. No one would think that a particularly satisfactory arrangement. Likewise, as I have said, on only five occasions during the past 10 years has the Scottish Legal Aid Board brought any cases to the Law Society's notice for further investigation. It is odd that it should now have such extensive powers of search and disclosure when no fault which needs to be addressed has been proved in the present system.

There is another potential difficulty. The powers relating to the disclosure of documents are such that they could erode the bond of confidentiality between client and solicitor, and not necessarily in respect of the criminal legal aid case which prompted the inquiry. If all documents relating to what happened in court on a particular morning when an alleged irregularity took place had to be disclosed, solicitors and other clients with nothing whatever to do with the Legal Aid Board could be involved. Such documents would be open to civil servants and quango appointees in circumstances which many will find unacceptable.

[Mr. Wallace]

The Bill talks about the suspension of payments to solicitors where allegations have been made by the Scottish Legal Aid Board. That means not suspension of payments but suspension from the criminal legal aid system, which is a severe penalty when there is only an unproved allegation. By all means withhold fees if there is a complaint about a particular case, but to deprive people of a significant part of their livelihood on the basis of an allegation as yet unproved goes too far.

The Bill requires substantial public expenditure. If we are to tackle crime efficiently, we must prevent it and ensure that it is detected and there must be efficient sentencing. The Bill offers no hope of an improvement in the detection of crime, which, at the end of the day, is the best deterrent. The Scottish police tell us that in England and Wales 24 per cent. more is spent per officer in capital expenditure and 16.5 per cent. per officer in revenue expenditure. Resources would be better directed towards ensuring that our police can improve crime prevention and detection.

That means not just more officers on operational duty, but more civilian support staff to release other officers for operational duties. It means computerisation to deal with routine functions and to apply new technology in the detection of crime. It means better facilities and a more reliable replacement programme for vehicles. One councillor on a Scottish police board told me that there was a limit to the number of years that they could postpone buying a new police car simply to stay within the budget.

Our police forces are being starved of the necessary resources to allow them to do the job adequately. The Government's response to that crisis is to come forward with a Bill which will not achieve any of the objectives that it sets for itself. Far from achieving them, it will set matters back by ensuring that resources do not go where they would be most effectively used in the battle against crime which we all wish to win.

6.55 pm

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) attacked the Government's record on crime. If the increase in crime was confined to Scotland and the United Kingdom alone, his comments would be justified. But crime has risen and continues to rise throughout the industrial democracies. In particular, the rate of crime in Europe has risen dramatically. That is not surprising, given the easy and rapid movement of large numbers of people. It would be astonishing if patterns were not repeated.

The challenge is to deal with that situation and to deter mobile criminals. It is no good simply saying that crime in Scotland is rising. We must consider the world in which we live and how to address the problem. The Bill, which I welcome, will go a long way towards restoring the Scottish people's confidence in the rule of law.

Whatever our learned judges and others may say, people look to Parliament to respond to their concerns and to introduce laws to address those concerns. They expect Parliament to listen to those with an axe to grind because they are directly involved. That is what lobbying is all about. They expect Parliament to make the judgments and decisions.

Given the Bill's long title, it is astonishing that hon. Members should suggest that it will not be possible in Committee to table reasoned amendments. Most of the points that I have heard could have been addressed by means of reasoned amendments.

What we have seen today is the reality of new Labour. It has one policy for England and Wales, where it supports minimum sentencing, and another policy for Scotland, where it is against minimum sentencing. The question that we should be asking is which is the real Labour. The Islington-Hamilton divide is endemic. It wrecked Labour's policy on devolution, causing the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) to take a principled stand and resign. I understand his position, because I too have taken a principled stand and resigned on a constitutional matter about which I felt deeply. It wrecked Labour's devolution policy, and it will wreck its law and order policy as well.

Disraeli once described political parties as organised hypocrisy. New Labour must be the textbook example for students of modern politics. For us politicians, it may just be hypocrisy, but for the British people, especially Scottish people, new Labour means chaos or catastrophe, or it would if ever a Labour Government were forced on us.

The only consistent theme in new Labour policy is the white flag. Labour will wave the white flag at the unions. Labour Members will surrender the constitution, they will surrender to Brussels, and would surrender to the criminals in our society if they had their way on this Bill. They talk about law and order. I have a long memory and I have served on every law and order reform Bill Committee in the past 17 years.

Mr. Connarty: As the hon. Member has been on the Government side for 17 years, can he tell us why they have made such a mess of it?

Mr. Walker: The hon. Gentleman obviously did not listen to my opening remarks. If he had, he would have heard me explain that the Bill deals with the problems created by a modern, mobile society, especially in Europe and the rest of the western world.

We must put in place a combination of measures. The Bill is only one part of that combination. It is not the solution; it is the road towards a better way of dealing with crime. No Bill, in isolation, will address all the problems. We must amend the law in the light of experience. Criminals are much more mobile now. We must produce Bills that will deter, and this Bill is part of that approach. Its purpose is to create deterrence. I have always believed in deterrence, which is why I have always supported the nuclear deterrent and capital and corporal punishment. I am not saying that they are answers in themselves, because they are not. But they are part of a package.

What is wrong with modern society is that we seek simple, single-issue solutions when the problems are always much more complex. The Church has responded recently. I agree with the cardinal: he was right to address the issue. He and the Leader of the Opposition may have words, but one cannot deny that the cardinal is right to speak out on behalf of his Church. That is his job, and I support him. In fact, I think that he is a splendid cardinal, and I am not a Roman Catholic. He tries to address some of the fundamental problems.

We live in a world that has substantially abandoned old standards and values. That worries Tom Winning, because he sees standards being eroded and not being replaced with other standards and values. In schools, in the workplace and on the football fields people no longer have a code of conduct that is acceptable to the majority. The Bill, in part, tries to address that problem, and I welcome it.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (Lord James Douglas–Hamilton) and the Government for funding the DNA laboratory in Dundee. I am sure that the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) also supports that. The Tayside force led the way in this field, and now that it has extra funding, its laboratory is being extensively used by other Scottish forces. I welcome that. Modern policing and modern detection is about having the right equipment and the right people.

I shall deal briefly with another comment of the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. The use of aircraft for coastline surveillance is much more important than having people on the ground. With the size and length of our coastline, we could never have enough people on the ground to ensure that every part of the coast was covered. That cannot be done: it is not realistic. Using modern equipment makes it a more viable proposition, so the use of aircraft is much more important.

We must introduce measures that will give people confidence. The courts must be reminded that Parliament's job is to tell them what to do: it is not their job to tell Parliament. They can advise Parliament and they can lobby—everyone has that right in a democracy—but Parliament must ultimately decide. I shall not go into detail on the Bill tonight, because I will have ample opportunity to do so in Committee. As my right hon. Friend knows, I never sit silent in Committee. I look forward to considering amendments, introducing amendments and listening to the reasoned amendments of hon. Members who have been so critical tonight.

7.4 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I do not often agree with the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker), except at a social level, but he used a short phrase that I agree with when he said that this Bill "is not the solution". Unfortunately, because of soundbite politics, the Secretary of State tried to sell it as a solution. That is the frightening thing about the context of the Bill. It was embarrassing to hear the fumbled and mumbled expressions used by the Secretary of State to try to tie this Bill in with the Bill that we debated in 1992, when we helped the Government to pass the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993. I hope that he was embarrassed by that: I certainly was.

The Minister of State always reads a good brief, and he will no doubt read his brief well at the end of the debate. I hope that he will admit that he was embarrassed. He also served on the Committee on that legislation, and he argued the case for the 1993 Act very well. To have to contradict it will be a further embarrassment, although he will cover it well as he is trained to do so. I will return to the Chamber to listen to his response.

Law and order is a key demand of the citizens of Scotland in my constituency and in every constituency. When we consider Bills, we must take account of the key demand of our citizens for security and peace of mind, free from threat to themselves, their families and their communities. That is what people want in every constituency of Scotland, and no doubt throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. The Bill will not necessarily give them that. The terrible thing is that it may hold up a banner that will hide from them the reality of what may happen as a consequence, and that will make them think that it is a solution. If we go too far, we shall fail to make the progress that we want to make.

I am wearing the "Scotland Against Drugs" badge, as most Ministers are: if it is not on their lapels, I am sure that it is in their pockets or on another suit.

Mr. Wallace: It is difficult with a poppy as well.

Mr. Connarty: I made a point of not covering it with my poppy for the debate.

There is a discussion in Scotland about the type of advertisements that the "Scotland Against Drugs" campaign intends to use. They have all the flaws of those used in the campaign against AIDS and HIV in the early 1990s. Their portrayal of every drug user as a victim who will end up a vegetable or even dead was extreme and ridiculous. Everyone trafficking in drugs or selling a tab of E looked like the devil without his tail. That is so ridiculous that the vast majority of young people will reject the advertisements, and that will not help our fight against drugs. I hope that that organisation gets that message.

When I learned about the constitutional history of the United Kingdom, I was taught about Hanging Judge Jeffries, who hanged people for stealing sheep. Even though people were caught with the sheep in their hands, they were acquitted of sheep stealing. The ridiculousness of the sentence compared with the crime was apparent, so it led to less rather than more justice. That is what is worrying about the Bill.

The Secretary of State, for whom I have a great respect intellectually, has not had time to take on board the fact that the population in Scotland needs a toughening up on crime and on the way in which we act against criminals. Because we are rushing towards an election, we have what the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) called the Dostoevsky Bill. It may be nearer "The Possessed" than "Crime and Punishment".

Mr. Fabricant: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not want to mislead the House—I know that he is not speaking of his own volition but merely quoting the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace)—but it was not Dostoevsky but Tolstoy who wrote "War and Punishment".

Mr. Connarty: I know that *Hansard* sometimes has problems with my accent, but I was referring to "Crime and Punishment", not "War and Peace". I believe that "Crime and Punishment" was the book referred to by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland—who, like most people in Scotland, received a broad education which included literature. Pupils did not have to choose to study English literature in order to read the classics. The Secretary of State for Scotland should have stuck to rewriting "The Brothers Karamazov" rather than trying to rewrite "Crime and Punishment", as he has made a complete mess of it.

[Mr. Connarty]

There are fundamental questions that we all ask again and again—in opposition, in government and in society. Does prison sentencing reform criminals? Does prison sentencing, in the long run, protect society from further criminal action? The question has now become, "Will automatic sentencing deter people from criminal behaviour?" If it will not, it will not work with the grain of society's wishes or, I believe, with the grain of the wishes of the House.

When is a life sentence not a life sentence? Is it automatic, or is it mandatory? I note that clause 13 attempts to connect automatic sentencing with the rights given to people, and to deal with sentencing policy in relation to what we know as a designated life sentence for a person aged under 18 in Scotland. There are heart-rending cases of young people sent to prison who, well over 20 years later, are still serving their designated life sentences. I am glad that those arrangements will be tightened up, although I am not sure that automatic sentencing will make the necessary difference.

That is the question that we must ask about the Bill. Will it make a difference? We want it to, which is why we have tabled a reasoned amendment objecting to the way in which the Government have cobbled together a series of ideas without sorting them out or researching them properly, and without working with the commissions, judges or other learned persons who are already trying to give us advice. The Government have merely put together some of what appear to be the Secretary of State's own prejudices and made them into a Bill.

In a reply to me, the Secretary of State said that the Government were not rejecting the principle contained in the 1993 Act—that it was best for 50 per cent. of a sentence to be served in prison, and then, if no trouble occurred in prison, for the remaining 50 per cent. to be served on licence in the community. The offender could then become rehabilitated, under supervision. That was a good principle. The Minister of State argued it well, and we supported it: the deputy shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), and others helped to put the 1993 legislation on to the statute book. The present Secretary of State did not reject the principle then, but everything in this Bill clearly does so.

We are now faced with a strange situation. A criminal's fitness to be released will be tested solely on the basis of his behaviour in prison—behaviour that will mean only that he is a good prisoner and adapts well to the prison regime. It will not mean that his behaviour is good in the sense of his having become a better citizen; it will mean that he is good at working with the warders and with the other members of the criminal underworld with whom he is imprisoned. For between three months and two years, or one sixth of his sentence, that criminal will then be released into society.

It seems that we are going to screw down the spring more and more, and then release it as though it were a cork emerging from a bottle of something very fizzy. Having been released into society, the criminal will pose a real problem for us in the longer term. Prisons do not currently rehabilitate prisoners, which worries me greatly. The focus of society should enable those who commit crimes to be led away from the path of criminality and towards another life—because there is a better life for them, because they can live in peace with society or because there are pressures on them not to reoffend when they are out of prison.

I believe that the 1993 Act was implemented only five weeks ago. No sentences have been cut in half; we have not tested the legislation. That is what worries me most. The Secretary of State wants a high platform from which to wave a flag—he wants some bylines and soundbites—but we should at least have considered the implementation of the Act and whether the theory proved correct, and if necessary introduced even stronger amendments. At present, we have nothing on which to test it. We have thrown it out before it has even been tested in the market in the way that the Government would normally recommend.

Mr. Bill Walker: The hon. Member is making, from his standpoint, a very reasoned case. But are not his constituents, like mine, deeply concerned about the fact that criminals appear to be getting off too lightly and that the whole legal structure seems to be designed to assist the criminal? That is what bothers people, and that is what the Bill attempts to address.

Mr. Connarty: I fully concur with the impression gained by my constituents and, I am sure, those of many other hon. Members, that criminals do seem to get off far too lightly. But many members of society seem to get off too lightly in the courts. I found it just as frightening to read in the press yesterday about the case—it was not in my constituency—of someone who, travelling at 70 mph in a 30 mph zone, knocked down and killed a 70-year-old woman. When he arrived in the High Court, the sentence was 200 hours of community service because of the "stress" in his life—200 hours of community service for killing a 70-year-old woman, and, indeed, driving away from the scene of the accident. It was not possible to prove that he had been drinking, but the sentence was ridiculous none the less.

A constituent of mine was killed by a lorry driver who was clearly out of control and should not have been driving so fast. That young man killed someone. He was sentenced to imprisonment, and appealed. In the meantime, his partner became pregnant. He went back to court, where the sentence was reduced to 200 hours community service. The father of the young woman who was killed—apparently, the lorry ran right over her—has lost his business and the family has fallen apart. She was an only child. That strikes me as an appalling sentence, and there are many more such incidents.

I now write so many letters to local sheriffs and the local procurator fiscal that I may be hauled up for murmuring a judge unless I am protected by this austere place. I see so many people let off on the basis of what I consider to be plea bargaining, which is not supposed to exist in the Scottish courts: people who plead guilty to a lesser crime are let off a more serious crime. In cases of what I would describe as attempted murder, when people end up with plates in their heads after being given serious kickings on a Friday or Saturday night, the perpetrators get away with a simple plea of assault or breach of the peace five or six months later. That frightens me, and it frightens everyone in society.

The Opposition feel that this Bill is not the way to tackle the problem, which is why we have tabled our reasoned amendment.

Mr. Bill Walker: The Bill is the way to tackle the problem. The hon. Gentleman can table amendments in Committee.

Mr. Connarty: If a genuine attempt had been made to construct a useful Bill, we could look forward to that. When I debated with the present Government the provisions which later became the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, we were promised—after evidence had been taken—amendments and fundamental changes. But then the Government dragooned their troops, who included five English Committee members so that they could secure a majority, to vote slavishly for the Government line. They accepted no sensible, reasonable amendments from the Opposition. It was ridiculous. They accepted only amendments that they decided to insert after taking evidence in a Special Standing Committee.

That is what worries me. We shall end up with what we have on paper now, with no serious, fundamental amendments. I do not think that we would even have tabled a reasoned amendment if we had thought that a constructive dialogue would take place; but the Minister and his subordinates will read their briefs, and then Conservative Members will vote slavishly for the Government line.

This is not really about trying to get something done about crime and criminality; it is about giving the Secretary of State some soundbites and platforms. He will play to an aspect of the Scottish people's fear. That is what the Conservatives' election platform will be about—trying to make people so afraid that they are afraid of change. I do not mind that in a Scottish context, because the latest opinion poll, published today, shows that the Conservatives have 11 per cent. support while Labour has 55 per cent. If voting patterns are not changed, I shall not be at all displeased.

We have heard a good deal about recorded crime. Along with my hon. Friend the deputy shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, I work as a co-ordinator of the anti-crime and drugs campaign in Scotland, and I commend the way in which the police forces and community groups have tried to do something about crime, launching initiative after initiative. I am struck by the fact that, when I visit constabularies, I am told, "Do not put credibility in the figures for the other constabularies because they fiddle the figures."

Recorded crime is not the real level of crime. I will give some examples. If five cars are broken into in a street, it is recorded as one crime, one incident. The same applies if half a dozen houses are broken into at the same time. My office was broken into when I left a window open and there were about 10 crimes in the same stretch of street as my office. That was recorded as one incident. Whether we record crimes now as we did in 1979 might explain some of the fall in the figures. As we heard from the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and from my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson), the figures are not good. Many of the figures are being fiddled so that it looks as though crime is coming down when it is not. Only recorded crime is coming down.

I do not want to go into detail on too many clauses, but clause 5 and those that go with it frighten me. As the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, it is wrong to say that someone who is mentally disordered should be sent to hospital for treatment and that he should afterwards proceed to prison. We are saying, "Leave hospital: do not pass go, do not collect £200, but go to gaol." That is nonsense. Someone is either ill and requires treatment as part of his rehabilitation or he requires imprisonment because he is lucid and has criminal intent. If the two are mixed up, it will cause serious damage to the process, which is to rehabilitate and decriminalise people, to take them out of the criminal cycle and put them in a useful place in society.

Clause 4, which I would call the "Clockwork Orange" clause, is also frightening. That film was based on the premise that people could be reprocessed by electronics. It was a kind of "Logan's Run", a science fiction film in which everyone was tagged and society knew where he was going. Those who tried to break out of the cycle were followed by the secret police. That is worrying.

I have an eighteen-year-old daughter, but she is not an adult in the sense of not being my responsibility. I do not know what kind of device would be used, but how can we think of anyone in a family wearing some sort of bangle or brooch? Will it be placed around the neck? Miners in Scotland used to wear a leather collar to show which pit they worked in. Will electronic tagging be carried out along similar lines? There are serious problems I want to try to change people's behaviour, but that will not be done by putting some electronic device on their bodies. That is a science fiction nightmare and I wonder what anyone thinks can be gained by a society in which people have to wear electronic tags.

The Bill deals with drinking in public places and taking drink off young people. Why does it not suggest a total ban on drinking in the street? Why do the Government chicken out and say that local authorities and the licensing boards can decide to have a ban? There is a ban in Glasgow in all public places except those that are licensed, and that makes sense. The issue is not about age, about knowing whether a person is 14 or 18: it is about the fact that young people congregate in the streets. Sometimes they are aged 20 to 22 and they are passing round bottles. That is deemed to be all right, but it is not; it is more frightening to have a groups of 20 to 24-year-olds hanging about in the streets. We should look seriously at the places where we do not want people to carry and drink alcohol, and then we can take it from there.

The issue is not age. Why is there this thing about the young? Why do we think that those under the age of 18 are somehow more threatening? Is it because of our own age, or is the Secretary of State older than he looks? I feel more frightened of adults with drink in them or on them than of young people.

We must be concerned about the signals that we are sending. We are here to nurture and look after the young and promote them, not stamp on them, imprison them and treat them as though they are the problem in society. In our society, the problems have been brought about by adults, by the Government of 17 years, not by people who were not even born then. There is a frightening message going out on the whole question of picking on young people and saying that they must give up their drinks.

The Bill is deficient in many ways. That is why we have tabled a reasoned amendment. It contains nothing about anti-social neighbours. In last year's debate on the

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Queen's Speech I told the tale of what I called my village from hell. At that time, eight houses were being demolished and five boarded up. Now 18 houses in that village are boarded up. People do not want to live in that village because three families who were put there 16 years ago destroyed it.

At present, there are no powers available to the police in Scotland to do anything about that. There have to be witnesses willing to go to court, but case after case against the families has collapsed between the time of reporting and the time when the case was due in court. If the Government want to do something about people's lives and peace and security, they should do something about that instead of presenting a measure like this one.

There is nothing in the Bill about bail and reoffending while on bail. That has been stressed again and again. It contains nothing on the social agenda, but there is such an agenda in crime. It is about education in prison and about reskilling prisoners and giving them a chance. Some people say, "Why spend resources on such people? They are out of society, they are criminals. Don't spend money on them; spend it on the other groups in society who need it." Society needs to get rid of the conflict caused by people from a criminal environment who coming out of prison and going straight back to that environment.

I do not mind if I am called a woolly liberal, because I do not think I am. I am not doing this for people in prison: I am doing it for the peace of mind that I want for my kids, my family and my community, which is not just the people I represent but the people I know who do not want to live in that society. There is a young offenders institution in my constituency and I want to see those young people come out as better citizens even if that means spending on the social agenda and providing more education, not cutting it as the Government have been doing.

Neither the Bill nor the White Paper contains much about crime prevention and the Government have to come up to scratch on that agenda. The Minister was at the launch of Operation Shopkeep. I went to a conference on retail crime. There are 5 million incidents of retail crime a year, 1.5 million people are arrested and 50,000 come to court, although I do not know how many of them are given a worthwhile sentence. There are suggestions about how we could allow automatic fines of a multiple of the value of the goods that people steal so that there would be some way to claim them back. There is nothing in the Bill about responding to that agenda.

The Bill is cumbersome. It is only within the past five weeks that we have brought in the 1993 legislation, and it will take three years for this measure to come into effect. There are massive bureaucratic costs. The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) gave figures for some of the measures in the Bill. It will be very wasteful if it is not effective, and such measures have not been effective.

Finally, how are we to deal with the 2,200 new prisoners? I already have a prison in my constituency. It is interesting to note that the Bill states that prisons should not be put in certain areas because they might affect inward investment or economic enterprise zones. Yet it is all right to stick a prison beside a housing scheme with working-class families or, in my case, in a middle-class area and expand them and mess around with the infrastructure. Women prisoners are put in with young offenders, and the communities in which the prisons are situated are disrupted.

Some people may bid for a prison, but it is not an attractive proposition. Where will the four new prisons that will be needed in Scotland for these extra prisoners come from? The prisons will be privatised and not state-run. That is the final betrayal of Scotland's prison officers. When the Government brought in market testing, they said that they would not have private prisons in Scotland. Market testing was the bulwark for the prison officers. It was said, "Accept market testing and the contract of agency status and there will not be private prisons". Then along comes this Secretary of State who intends to bring in private prisons. People with convictions sometimes run such prisons. Group 4 does not know whether it is going to the local museum or the local court, but it is cheaper and it is all right because it is private. Are we willing to go that far to implement the Bill because the Secretary of State wants a soundbite before the election?

The Bill is not just about criminals running the prisons: it is about the lunatics running the asylum. It is about time that the lunatics in the Conservative party got out and let us take over and bring some sanity to the debate.

7.29 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): As the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) has said, the Bill is about not just criminals, but the victims of crime, and it is the victims of crime that the Bill endeavours to protect. Tonight, I have witnessed more acrobatics than in Barnum and Bailey's or Billy Smart's circuses. The hon. Gentleman wishes to kill the Bill. Presumably, unlike last night, he will vote for the reasoned amendment.

I remind the House that the first line of the amendment states:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill".

We have already heard a Conservative Member ask what would happen if the motion were passed. It would kill the Bill. The hon. Member for Falkirk, East is consistent tonight at least, because he has said that he is anti-minimum sentencing. He mentioned the comparison with Hanging Judge Jeffries, although I will point out later that that is not a correct analogy. The question follows: if the hon. Gentleman is against minimum sentences per se, why did he not vote against yesterday's Bill for England and Wales?

As another Conservative Member has said, there is inconsistency between Islington and north of the border. There is a north-south divide. It is to do not with divisions of wealth between parts of the United Kingdom, but with divisions between the Labour party north and south of the Scottish border.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, East thinks that tagging of individuals is degrading, but is it not even more degrading when young people or, come to that, not so young people are out on the streets attacking people? If a tagging system were to ensure that a curfew would work effectively and so protect crime victims, would that not be effective and useful to protect people in his constituency, as well as for those in the rest of Scotland?

I have always believed in minimum sentencing. On 31 July 1991, in my acceptance speech outside this place after my selection to stand for Mid-Staffordshire, I spoke about the need for minimum sentencing. Sentencing has four functions. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) has said, it should be a deterrent. It should also punish. It must involve rehabilitation. Most important, it should protect society. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has talked about the Maguire case, where an individual was sent to prison for rape, was released, committed a second crime, went to prison, was released and committed a third crime. That could not happen under the Bill.

Labour Members have said that, from time to time, minimum sentences could mean that injustice will occur, but surely society as a whole must be protected. After all, the Labour party is the great advocate of society.

Mr. Connarty: I am not quite sure whether the hon. Gentleman listened in detail to the debate about automatic and mandatory sentencing. Does he understand that the Bill does not mean that even Maguire would have been put behind bars for all his natural life? He would have been let out after the period that is going to be agreed by the Secretary of State. The only difference is that Maguire would be under supervision while he was out. He would still be out there. It is dangerous for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that any Bill will prevent insane people from doing insane things.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on that point. The burden of proof would be on Maguire, or anyone else in that position, to prove that he was safe enough to be released into society, where he would be free under licence. To say that Maguire would have been in the public domain and outside prison is therefore not necessarily true. He would have had to prove that he was safe enough to be released. Even if he had managed to deceive the so-called experts and be released into society, as the hon. Gentleman says, he would have been under supervision. One would hope—although one could not guarantee this—that this would have prevented him from committing the third crime.

Minimum sentences are needed. The Bill needs to go further, because too many criminals believe that, if they commit a crime, they will not be caught. They then think to themselves, "Even if I get caught, I will not be found guilty if I have a good brief", or lawyer.

Incidentally, the police have often said that one of the reasons why so many not guilty verdicts are given when, in their view, the accused are patently guilty is that people have been able to maintain their silence and have not answered questions. It was this Government who said that, of course, people should be allowed to remain silent if they wished to do so. They are not obliged to say anything, but—this is the big "but"—the legislation passed in the House argued that the fact that the person had chosen to be silent would be brought out in court. The police welcomed that, yet the Labour party voted against that small amendment, which helps the police to obtain convictions. We all know that the professional criminal is trained to stay silent in these cases.

Criminals think, first, that they will not be caught and, secondly, that, if they are caught, they will be found not guilty. Another reason why they are not deterred is that they think that, even if they are found guilty, but have a good lawyer, he can present a good case for mitigation and they will be let off with a slapped wrist. Again, the hon. Member for Falkirk, East gave a good example of that happening in his constituency. The whole point about minimum sentences is that they deter and convince many people who would otherwise commit crimes that "it just ain't worth it" because, if they are found guilty, no matter what mitigation they offer in court, there is a minimum sentence.

There is nothing new about minimum sentences. It is interesting to be speaking in a Scottish debate, because Scotland does not have a system precisely similar to English law. The Scottish system is related more to Napoleonic and Roman law. In Spain, there is a minimum sentences system—the "escalones" or steps system—where minimum as well as maximum sentences are prescribed for each step in the judicial punishment scale.

France, the very heart of Napoleonic law, has a similar system of steps, with minimum and maximum sentences specified. It has the "crime", the grave offence; the "délit", the major offence; and "les contraventions", the minor offences—each with not only maximum but minimum sentences prescribed. Spain and France have found that the minimum sentence deters. It prevents crime. It protects the victim, which is the point of the Bill.

Mr. McAllion: The hon. Gentleman has given us a tour of the world to demonstrate the sort of legal system that we should have in this country. I am sure that he will admit that in Afghanistan the minimum sentences imposed by the Taliban also deter. Is he suggesting that we should introduce them in this country?

Mr. Fabricant: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is making a serious point, but there are minimum sentences and minimum sentences. If he is sinking to that level of debate, I can understand the inconsistency of why he did not vote against minimum sentences last night but will choose to vote against them tonight. Rather than sitting there smirking, perhaps the hon. Gentleman would care to explain why, if he is so against minimum sentences, he did not vote against them last night.

Mr. McAllion: I was not here last night, so that was the main reason for not voting. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue the point, I will address it in my speech. However, I always thought that Conservative Members argued that one of the great strengths of the Union was that Opposition parties could take a different approach in Scotland from that in England and Wales.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being so honest. I am sure that, in the months to come, analysts will read his comments in *Hansard* with great interest.

I have not taken the hon. Gentleman on a tour of the world, as I have talked only about Spain and France so far. However, as he invites me to do so, I shall speak briefly about the United States of America, which does operate under a system of English law. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that President Bill Clinton, a Democratic president—we will know tomorrow whether he is still the president—introduced the "three strikes and

[Mr. Fabricant]

you're out" form of minimum sentencing. That is now operating in 24 states. There have been difficulties in some states. The Californian republic has found that minimum sentencing has led to some injustice, but 22 other states have found it an effective deterrent against crime.

Do Opposition Members accept that we are in this place to protect people and prevent them from being the victims of crime? If Opposition Members are against minimum sentencing, apart from the fact that they could not be bothered to come here, why did they fail to vote against the Bill last night but will vote against the Bill tonight? The hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) is in his seat—he now seems to be leaving. I was about to ask him what he will say to his constituents who want protection from criminals now that he has heard the Deputy Speaker say that, if his reasoned amendment is passed, the Bill will fail. What protection will they get? He is saying nothing. His silence says it all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. I must point out that the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) would be out of order if he attempted to answer, because he is outside the Bar of the House and is not allowed to speak.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but when I started to ask my question the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber. As I reached the last two words of my question, he chose to be outside the Bar of the House. The fact that he chose to leave will be recorded. My question was unanswerable by him, but at least the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) was honest enough to say that he did not vote against the Bill because he was not here and because there are differences in thinking between the Labour party in Scotland and the Labour party in England and Wales. It is a divided party far more than any divided Britain.

Mr. Connarty: I think that the hon. Gentleman should come up for air, because he is talking rubbish. Does he accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) has a proud record of work on Scottish Bills, and is very dedicated? My hon. Friend has chosen to highlight the fact that Scotland still has the right—although it is slowly being taken away by the Secretary of State—to introduce different legislation for Scotland from that in England and to take a different approach to any legislation that comes before the House.

Mr. Fabricant: I have already said that the hon. Member for Dundee, East has shown integrity by answering as he did. My point is that both Bills concern minimum sentencing and that, apart from under-age drinking, electronic tagging and a few minor technical differences between English and Scottish law, there is virtually no difference between them. I am questioning the Labour party's consistency. The hon. Member for Dundee, East has explained truthfully and frankly why the Labour party will vote against this Bill, but he chose not to vote last night. The hon. Member for Falkirk, East is right to say that his hon. Friend has always shown himself to be honourable in these matters.

I truly do not understand why hon. Members are concerned about minimum sentences. The Bill says:

"the High Court may decline to impose such a sentence if it considers that there are exceptional circumstances which justify its not imposing such a sentence."

That is a let-out clause. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have said that, conceivably, minimum sentences could lead to injustice. However, the High Court can overrule the minimum sentence provision. So there cannot be any true or clear criticism of minimum sentences in this instance.

My point—it is worth repeating—is that minimum sentences act as a deterrent. The hon. Member for Falkirk, East said that, at times, judges impose sentences that do not truly reflect the nature of the crime. I have with me some statistics detailing crimes committed in Scotland between 1990 and 1994. There were 252 attempted murders; of those, 80 were found guilty and, of those, 81 per cent. were given custodial sentences and five were given life sentences. The average custodial sentence was only 5.9 years.

The figures get even worse. For incitement or conspiracy to murder—it is always difficult to win a prosecution on conspiracy—five people were convicted, and the average sentence was only five years. Equally worrying is the fact that for sexual offences—rape and attempted rape—183 individuals were convicted in Scotland. Thankfully, 92 per cent. were given a custodial sentence and one was given a life sentence. However, the protection offered to other potential victims of the crime was only 5.3 years. Hon. Members on both sides of the House should think about that. This Bill is not so much about crime and punishment as about protection for potential victims.

I want to talk about non-custodial sentences and the electronic tagging provisions, to which the hon. Member for Falkirk, East also referred. The Bill provides an alternative to custodial sentences. However, it is illogical for the Opposition to argue against minimum sentences and custodial sentences while, at the same time, arguing that an alternative method of protection for victims—electronic tagging—should be rejected by the House tonight.

Under the Bill, persistent offenders—it would apply only to persistent offenders—such as football hooligans, would be confined to their homes and kept off the streets. We hope that that would keep them out of trouble and prevent them from going to prison. If it works in Scotland—I am sure that it will—it will prove to be a beacon for other parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Connarty *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I have been generous; but, since I have mentioned the hon. Gentleman frequently, I shall give way to him.

Mr. Connarty: Is the hon. Gentleman admitting and boasting about the fact that, once more, Scotland is being used as a guinea pig for yet another crazy Government idea? Is the provision something that is not in the English Bill?

Mr. Fabricant: I do not think it is a matter of Scotland being used as a guinea pig. If we were to introduce legislation for England and Wales but not for Scotland, the hon. Gentleman would, understandably, be the very

first to stand up and ask, "Why should England and Wales have a provision, but not Scotland?" Scotland is not serving as a guinea pig. At least I recognise—having been to Glasgow, Edinburgh and smaller cities, and having seen the vandalism that occurs not only in large cities but in smaller towns—the intimidation of older people on the streets at night.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, East defends younger people out on the street drinking their lager or their McEwan's bitter. I suggest that that is intimidating to older people. As an alternative to sending them to prison, if we can say, "No, there should be a curfew, which can be implemented by using the latest electronic devices," so be it. Such measures are not degrading. There is more degradation for the victims of crime, and it is about time that the hon. Member for Falkirk, East thinks a little more about the victims than about the regular offenders in such crimes.

The consequences of minimum sentences can possibly lead to some injustices, although, as I said, the High Court can overturn the minimum sentence provisions. We must, however, accept that society deserves to be protected. I believe that the provision of minimum sentences is a true deterrent.

Labour Members continually harp on about society. Today and yesterday, however, they have ignored society, which could benefit from these reforms. There is nothing new in the fact that Labour Members ignore society—only in their tactics. Yesterday, they felt so strongly about minimum sentences that they abstained and did not bother to turn up at the House. Today, they feel so strongly about the issue that they will vote for the Labour amendment. If their amendment is defeated and the Bill is passed, however, what will they do to prove their consistency in this matter? They will abstain, for a second time. That is madness, but it is consistent madness.

On 14 March 1996, what happened with the prevention of terrorism legislation? The Labour party decided to be semi-consistent and to abstain from voting. In March 1995, Labour Members voted against prevention of terrorism legislation and, in March 1994, they voted against it again. Under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, the fact that a criminal had refused to speak to a police officer could be cited as evidence in court. Labour voted against that legislation, and then tried to wreck it. I could go through a very long list of such behaviour. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Labour Members say that they would not like me to go through the list, because of their embarrassment. But I choose briefly to embarrass them.

In 1991, 1992 and 1993, Labour Members voted against prevention of terrorism legislation. In November 1990, they voted against the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Labour Members say that they are tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. Who are they kidding? In March 1990, they voted against prevention of terrorism legislation. In January 1989, they voted against it. In February 1988, they voted against it again. Labour is the party that is against crime and tough on the causes of crime? It is kidding no one.

Labour Members voted against the Criminal Justice Act 1988. If I really wanted to torture the Labour party, I could go back to 7 March 1983, but I think that that would be going too far.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I invite the hon. Gentleman not to do so. Perhaps he could bear in mind that the purpose of this debate is to debate the principles of the Bill before us. Other matters may be drawn in to assist him, but I do not want to get off the subject entirely, and the hon. Gentleman is in grave danger of doing so.

Mr. Fabricant: Madam Deputy Speaker, of course I take your advice, as I always do. I merely wanted to point out that the Labour party is at least consistent in its inconsistency by saying that it supports all the measures that need to be taken to protect victims. When it comes down to it, however—such as yesterday and today, and consistently since 1979—Labour has voted against measures that would protect people.

Labour says that it is tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but, yesterday, Labour Members could not stir to vote for the Crime (Sentences) Bill. That is a great indictment. Today, there will be a greater indictment when Labour Members vote for their amendment and against the Bill. That is inconsistent. It is new Labour: new abstentions, new tactics, but no new policies.

7.55 pm

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth and Kinross): I was somewhat entertained by the speech given by the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant). It was an interesting history of some aspects of the Labour party's voting record in the House. What it had to do with today's debate, however, is another matter entirely. I also noticed the repetitive nature of some of his comments, which suggested that he ran out of substance a considerable time ago but was nevertheless intent on treating us to an ear-bashing.

Like the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), I am a non-practising member of the Faculty of Advocates. I must put in that disclaimer for some of the remarks that I shall make.

Although the Conservative party would very much like to be seen as the party of law and order, its record over the past 18 years gives the lie to that desire. There is absolutely no doubt, however, about the fact that it is the party of law and order legislation, which is a vastly different matter. Before yesterday, the Government had introduced 33 pieces of legislation. That number will now presumably rise to 35.

People should not be fooled into thinking that all this parliamentary activity necessarily means that the Government are achieving anything, except perhaps the perception of activity. Unfortunately, the reality behind the perception is a sorry story of rising crime rates, with all crimes of violence increasing considerably since 1979. I do not think that the Government should be proud of that record.

I noticed the great rush to take credit for an apparent drop in crime over the past four years. It is understandable that the Government would wish to take credit for it. If they are going to take credit for the past four years, however, they must also accept responsibility for the previous 12, which I do not hear them—quite so audibly—doing. They must also acknowledge that, despite the crime decrease in the past four years, crime rates in 1995 were still higher than at any time up to 1989. The Government should not in any way be proud of their record.

For all the past 18 years, the Government's response has been to flit from one sure-fire answer to another—usually contradictory—sure-fire answer. Some proposals

[Ms Roseanna Cunningham]

were introduced after a measure of study, and some were not. U-turns have become a matter of course, although they are never presented as such—that might be carrying honesty a wee bit too far.

Each new proposal has been presented as a panacea, but here we are, once again, debating a Bill that is basically a rag-bag of proposals that is almost incoherent in its approach. It smacks of a last-ditch attempt—not to achieve any results, because I do not think for one minute that Conservative Members believe that these proposals will produce results, but—to kid on that the Government know what they are doing.

I should like to challenge directly the proposition that the Government know what they are doing, because there is every evidence—from the White Paper, from the Bill and from the pronouncements of the Secretary of State—that there is no real understanding of whether most of the measures can even begin to make a positive difference. Certainly there are indications that some of the measures will have absolutely no effect, and—of greater concern—that some of them will have a negative effect. Had the Secretary of State and his Ministers even bothered to consider the evidence, they would know that.

A major test of the effectiveness of any criminal justice system must be the rate of reoffending. We all know that reoffending rates in Scotland are far too high. I understand that about 90 per cent. of people entering prison have committed at least one previous offence, and we have the second highest prison population in western Europe, which costs taxpayers an annual £26,479 per prisoner. We have to seek ways to reduce the reoffending rates consonant with a twin desire to punish and to rehabilitate, but where do we find them in the Bill?

One of the most telling facts in the White Paper, "Crime and Punishment" is to be found in paragraph 10.7, which states that reoffending rates are some three times higher among people out of work than among those in employment. On the basis of that figure alone, if the Government cared about the reality of reoffending they would be seeking to ensure that there was work available for ex-offenders.

Unfortunately, there is little in Scotland in the way of analysis of reoffending rates, and only very little work available in England and Wales. Indeed, recent parliamentary questions that I tabled elicited answers along the lines of, "We do not collect this information centrally," or, "It would be too difficult to put this information together." That makes it very hard to assess the basis on which the Government approach the issue of reoffending. It is a great pity because, without an understanding of the facts, how can the Government be confident that the changes proposed in the Bill will have the slightest effect?

I direct the Minister's attention to today's edition of *The Scotsman*, in which he will find a report on a Barnardo's project dealing with persistent young offenders in central Scotland. It appears to have been remarkably successful in cutting the rate of reoffending. As it has been funded by the Scottish Office, I assume that the Minister is aware of it. In light of the project's apparent success, does the Minister intend to expand it and perhaps build it into the system across Scotland? It appears that an excessively punitive approach might not be the most effective course in the long run, which is precisely what I would have thought we were looking for—but there is no sign that the Bill provides it.

Electronic tagging has been mentioned by several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire. It is an element of the Bill about which I feel somewhat ambivalent, and I have taken care not to rush to say that we would automatically oppose it, because I can see that it may on occasion be an appropriate measure. I do not dismiss it out of hand, as I can see the usefulness of the disposal and its possible practicality if used as an alternative to imprisonment. However—it is a big however—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire would care to listen, as he seems to be unaware of what is happening in England in this regard.

The pilot studies in England and Wales, and the evidence gleaned from them and from the use of electronic tagging in the United States, suggest that, in practice, it is not all that effective. I am worried that its introduction would mean resources being diverted from other potentially successful community-based projects such as that to which I referred.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Lady mentioned the United States, but is she referring to the Oregon study or the Washington DC study?

Ms Cunningham: I shall cite one American academic who considered attempts right across the United States.

The Secretary of State referred to such a disposal—

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Lady unwittingly to mislead the House? There have been no pan-American studies, only studies in certain states.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): The hon. Gentleman asks whether it is in order for the hon. Lady to mislead the House. Hon. Members should not wittingly mislead the House, and I am sure that the hon. Lady was not doing so.

Ms Cunningham: I was saying that there has been academic consideration of projects in the United States, as there presumably has been of those in England and Wales. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of the projects in England and Wales, which are on his doorstep.

As I was saying, the Secretary of State referred to disposal such as electronic tagging in connection with reducing the number of prison inmates. We need to be clear that the Government do indeed have it in mind that tagging, or the restriction of liberty order, is intended to be a direct alternative to custody. In addition, I should like some idea of the sort of offences considered appropriate to be dealt with in that fashion.

I question the advisability of proceeding now with proposals for the studies in Scotland when the pilot schemes in Reading, Norfolk and Manchester are not due to report until March 1997. Perhaps I missed some details about the time scale for the Scottish studies, in which case I stand to be corrected, but surely it would have been more appropriate to await the completion of the trials in England and Wales, especially as the estimated cost of the

Scottish pilot studies is about £1.5 million. It would seem sensible to await a final assessment of the schemes in England and Wales before spending £1.5 million on studies that are to be set up without the knowledge and understanding of what is already happening.

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): In a spirit of helpfulness, I can tell the hon. Lady that while she was out of the Chamber my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that the Bill will provide the power to tag people over a certain age, and that there will be pilot schemes.

Ms Cunningham: I am aware that there are to be pilot schemes in Scotland; I am pointing out that the pilot schemes in England and Wales will not be completed until March 1997 and that, with the Scottish scheme estimated to cost £1.5 million, it seems ridiculous to commit ourselves to spending such a large sum without having seen the results of the English and Welsh pilot schemes. Saving money is supposed to be one of the Government's hallmarks.

One problem identified in the English study was the stigmatising effect of the tag, which led in one case to an offender being beaten up when the tag was seen—that is hardly something that we want to happen too often. Other problems include domestic friction resulting from lengthy curfew hours; the difficulty of obtaining employment while having a liberty restriction order—in part because of long curfew hours—and, perhaps more important, the marked reluctance of the courts to impose the orders.

As I understand it, so far the trials show that, after the first full year, in Reading, only five orders have been imposed out of a possible 460; in Manchester, only 49 have been imposed out of a possible 2,330; and in Norfolk, only 44 have been imposed out of a possible 2,280. It has been assessed that the trials cost £14,300 per accused, whereas probation orders cost about £2,500 per accused. I cite these figures because I am genuinely concerned and interested to know how the scheme will work in practice. As I said, I have not set my face against the idea, but I am concerned that it will not ultimately be productive and will cost a great deal of money.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire is no longer here because I wish to mention again the studies in the United States. They have been equally equivocal, leading one professor of law and public policy to say:

> "There has been no effect on recidivism, no reduction in the prison population and no cost savings . . . The main sentencing effect is to ratchet up the prison population through a high number of technical breaches."

I hardly think that we want that to happen here. I understand that the Association of Chief Officers of Probation concluded that the United States experience was a shambles.

I appreciate the Minister's desperate desire to be seen to be doing something—anything—but he must not mislead the public as to the likely efficacy of the proposals. The experience of the trials is that electronic tagging is emphatically not a means by which young thugs will be kept in check. I am therefore anxious to know what kind of offender Ministers have in mind. I have an open mind on tagging adults, but I emphatically oppose any suggestion that it should be used as a disposal for the under-16s. Although that proposal does not appear in the Bill, it is being trailed. As far as I am aware, there has been no consultation on it.

Clause 45 deals with the public defender system. Such a system seems to be being introduced by the back door. I particularly deplore the Secretary of State's decision to introduce it by stealth and without public debate. He has in mind a fundamental change of the operation of legal representation in Scotland, but he is trying to make the change without any sustained study or public debate. The idea seems to be driven by nothing more than a desire to cut the legal aid bill. His plan would remove freedom of choice of representation, which is extraordinary given the Government's otherwise slavish adherence to the free market.

To justify the charges of inefficiency levelled against the current system, comparisons are drawn with the systems in England and Wales and in the Netherlands, both of which are different from that in Scotland. Although a public defender system exists in some jurisdictions, there are flaws in the idea which should not be overlooked.

Whatever his or her title, a public defender will not be independent. How is it suggested that the conflict between duty to the client and duty to the employer be resolved? That problem is compounded by the unlikelihood of a client being able to choose even the individual public defender whom he or she wants.

There are real dangers to justice. I do not think that anyone in Scotland wants to follow the example of the United States, where far more public money is spent on prosecution than on defence. We have all had graphic illustrations of the difference that money makes in American courts. That has never been an issue in Scotland, and I certainly do not want it to become one. Public defender systems are notoriously under-funded. The Government do not inspire confidence on any sort of public funding.

On mandatory sentences—or automatic sentences, as we have learnt this evening we had best call them—there are serious concerns, which the Minister must be aware of, about interference with judicial discretion. Those concerns should not be brushed aside lightly. Lengthy references have been made to minimum sentences. Such sentences may be appropriate on some occasions, but one must be careful about their wholesale application because they introduce inflexibility. With inflexibility comes the danger of justice not being done.

I know that the Government think that judges are unpopular characters who can be brushed aside when it is thought appropriate. The problem for Ministers is that the judge, who must sit through the entire trial and consider an appropriate sentence on the basis of the verdict and in the light of all the evidence that he or she has heard, is the best person to make a decision about the disposal. That is important because, as the Minister well knows, a simple statement of what an offender has been convicted of rarely tells the whole story.

One immediate practical effect of the "two strikes and you're out" proposals will be to make it impossible to get guilty pleas. Automatic life sentences will mean automatically going to trial. There will be long trials and there will be more of them. It is almost impossible at the moment to persuade anyone charged with murder to plead guilty, because of the automatic life sentence. It makes no

[Ms Cunningham]

sense to plead guilty of murder if the defendant may as well take their chances and hope that the trial will result in a reduction or a not guilty or not proven verdict. There will be far more of that if the measure is passed.

I question the motives behind the introduction of the proposal. It smacks of a headline measure, because simultaneous provisions are being made for it to be departed from in "exceptional circumstances". I should like at least one example of an exceptional circumstance so that I can get some feeling for what is thought likely. Is it proposed to hang judges out to dry if they find exceptional circumstances more often than the Government consider appropriate? The suspicion is that any judge who applies the rule will be held up to the public gaze as not doing his job. That is a dangerous game.

I do not want to get into a half-hour debate on the precise nature of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 on the restriction of remission, as happened earlier today, but I note that the current provision for the early release of prisoners was introduced by the Government in 1993, based on recommendations put forward by a review committee which sat for two years. Those rules have been in operation for only a few years.

The clear implication is that the 1993 Act has been a failure. I have asked the Secretary of State before and I repeat the question to the Minister this evening: if the Act has been a failure, what evidence does he have of that, and will he share it with us? What studies have been done to establish its effect on reoffending rates or its impact on prisons? What basis is there for the changes now being put forward? I know of no such studies or investigations.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): If the Government believe their propaganda about falling crime statistics, which has been heard many times from the Dispatch Box, is not the conclusion to be drawn that the 1993 Act has been a great success?

Ms Cunningham: My hon. Friend is right to ask that. Many of the changes in the Bill are being proposed without any proper study or any real consideration of their effectiveness. That is a worrying aspect of the Government's approach to criminal justice.

As I have said in previous debates, there are three prisons in my constituency—more than in any other Scottish constituency. The hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) may think that prisons are always situated in places of extreme deprivation, but a visit to my constituency would show him that that is not necessarily the case.

I have constant contact with prison staff and with people who are concerned about prisons. I frequently have to deal with issues arising out of having prisons in the constituency. The White Paper says that there will be an increase of 1,000 in the prison population in the first year of implementation, rising to 2,000 over five years. Even if the figures are taken at face value, the likely result of implementation, as the Government have been advised by many within and without the profession, including the Scottish Prison Officers Association, will be an increase in tension in prisons and an increase in the stress on an already overloaded prison staff.

From my frequent contact with staff at the three prisons in my constituency—Perth, Friarton and Castle Huntly young offenders institution—I know that real concerns are being expressed in the prison system about the Government's proposals. Those concerns should not be brushed aside lightly.

Clauses 5 to 10 deal with mentally disordered offenders and have rightly given rise to some concerns. I understand that it is proposed that the period in hospital should be in addition to any prison sentence, which is a fairly unsatisfactory way of going about things, to say the least. There is no justification, if someone is ill at the time he commits an offence and the judge decides that he should be in hospital, for him to be sent to prison once he becomes well. If both the patient and the doctor know that, when the patient is better, he or she will be sent to prison, there is little incentive for him to get better. Doctors may keep patients in hospital longer than necessary if they fear that a prison term would lead to a subsequent deterioration in the patient's health. There are problems in the treatment of offenders who suffer from mental health problems, but the proposals will do nothing to alleviate the difficulties and may just exacerbate them.

Overall, my great concern is for the way in which the criminal justice system in Scotland is being treated by the Government. They seem to be bouncing around with no clear strategy—a bit of this and a bit of that, a headline here and a soundbite there. It seems to be the case that what the Home Secretary says in England one day, the Secretary of State for Scotland parrots the next day, without regard to the difference in criminal law and professional practice—a difference that has given Scotland one of the best criminal justice systems in the world. No one objects to reform; we are all concerned to tackle the problems we see around us. But there is no evidence that the Bill will achieve that end. The Government are simply perpetrating a con just so they can appear to be doing something.

The problems are much more deep rooted and difficult to address than the cut-and-paste approach suggests. The Bill does not deal with crime prevention, which is a cultural question that goes beyond clauses in a Bill. A culture of violence is developing: the question is how to tackle that culture. In a previous debate, I referred to the success in New York between 1991 and 1995 when the crime rate was reduced by a staggering 33 per cent. That was the result of a major attack on petty street crime, which is the crime that the vast majority of people fear.

I know that there is a similar Strathclyde police operation at the moment. Such operations will not succeed if they can last only for a few months. They must go on for a long time—years rather than months—to be effective, and that means real resources. I note that the Strathclyde police operation involves cancelling various kinds of educational leave, taking people out of other work and off computers so that they can go out on to the streets. We cannot go on like that much longer. If there has been an enormous success elsewhere in the world, we should try to emulate it. We cannot do so in the space of 12 weeks, which seems to be what the Government propose.

Earlier in the debate, the possibility of tagging football hooligans was mentioned. The events of the past couple of weeks show that we are talking about a whole culture. I surely cannot be the only person who finds it disgraceful that a man can openly admit a serious assault yet have to

deal with nothing other than a bit of bad publicity. I refer, of course, to Paul Gascoigne. He seems to be getting away with serious assault—and is seen to be getting away with it. Even worse, he is almost being rewarded into the bargain. He has said sorry and he has given a touching explanation of his bad temper. He knows that he is in the wrong.

But what is the lesson for the thousands of youngsters who lionise people such as him? Is it that, if people earn enough money, they will get away with it? Is it that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor? Is it that some assaults are not real assaults and that society will turn a blind eye? The extent of the establishment collusion in the whole sorry affair is almost the worst part. We heard the defence forwarded by the Rangers football club management, that it was a domestic affair and not their concern, and the self-serving justifications of Glen Hoddle.

I dwell on that case because it is important in terms of what it tells us about our culture. There is a culture of laddism which is a culture of violence, and it seems to be a culture of getting away with it. The perception is that people can get away with it if they are Paul Gascoigne. They will then think that maybe they can get away with it even though they are not Paul Gascoigne, but just youngsters on the street. Ultimately, we shall have no success in tackling crime where it starts, which is among young people on the streets. Methods to deal with that problem are shamefully missing from the Government's approach. The Bill offers no attempt to deal with the problem, despite evidence that tackling crime at street level is where successes can be achieved.

8.25 pm

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): We have had an interesting and lengthy debate; I do not know whether it will turn out to be the highlight of the debating week in the House. We have been discussing very important issues, and much of our discussion has run in parallel with yesterday's debate, which dealt with England and Wales.

Earlier this evening, we heard some enormously loud bangs outside. I thought at one stage that the siren for evacuation was about to go off, but then I suddenly remembered that it was just old Guy Fawkes.

Mr. Davidson: The noise was caused by Scottish Members who had been listening to the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) for far too long, and had gone outside to shoot themselves.

Mr. Banks: I can only tell the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson) that there must have been an awful lot of Scottish Members outside pointing their guns at him ahead of a ban.

Time is getting on. I did not see the hon. Gentleman trying to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I do not think that he is in the Chamber for his health. I see that the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) is also here, so I will confine my remarks to the points that I wanted to make when I first arrived, although I also want to address a number of the points that have cropped up during the debate.

I turn first to the remarks of the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross (Ms Cunningham). I have never met Mr. Paul Gascoigne or Mr. Glen Hoddle. I have some sympathy with some of her remarks, although I would draw one distinction. It is possible on such issues for hon. Members, including perhaps the hon. Lady, to appear to be tough on some things, but not to be prepared to back the Government on other aspects of this laudable Bill. I have one or two constructive criticisms, which will no doubt crop up in Committee. However, I wholeheartedly support the broad thrust of the Bill.

I support the ending of automatic release, supervision following release and tougher sentences, especially for drug traffickers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) and one or two other Members suggested that perhaps the sentences were not quite tough enough. That point will no doubt crop up in Committee.

The Bill proposes stronger non-custodial sentences, such as tagging, a point to which I will return. It contains provisions on mentally disordered offenders. I strongly welcome those provisions, and I will come back to a point that cropped up in the remarks of the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross and in the remarks of the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty). The Bill also contains provisions on DNA testing, on action on teenage drinking—a cause championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie)—and on legal aid.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear, as the result of an intervention by the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson), that tagging was not applicable to those under 16 years of age. The so-called reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition seems something of a handy coatpeg on which to hang an objection in an attempt to avoid yesterday's difficulties, when the Labour party wriggled around on the hook to avoid voting against the Crime (Sentences) Bill. However, Labour seems to intend to vote against this Bill tonight. We know that it is not a reasoned amendment, because if it were made it would kill the Bill stone dead.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that the Bill is not about doing away with past provisions; the emphasis is much more on building on the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 than on reversing it. He cited a quotation from the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair)—I shall read it with interest tomorrow in the *Official Report*—that seemed to support the provisions that the Government are trying to put in train for England and Wales, yet the Labour party is opposing the measures for Scotland.

If the Bill had had Royal Assent and its provisions had been in force at the time of the Maguire case in Ayrshire, at least one person would not have died, and, as my right hon. Friend said, there were 23 other such cases in 1994 alone, five involving someone with three previous convictions and, as far as I can make out, no special circumstances. I have no personal knowledge of the other case mentioned by the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), but it sounded similar, and there was something of a contradiction in what he said.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the new categories for increased sentences. I especially welcome the minimum sentence of seven years for drug trafficking. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), a former Minister with responsibility for prisons, who yesterday made a powerful speech that was at times constructively critical of the proposals, made the valuable point that seven years might be too much for someone

[Mr. Banks]

who had sold a small amount of drugs to a fellow drug-taker, but that it was grossly insufficient for someone who had been trafficking in drugs. I hope that that point will be addressed in Committee.

I welcome clauses 5 to 10, on mental disorder. I welcome specifically the consultation that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said would be conducted individually with judges in Scotland about the possibility of taking away the driving licence of someone who had committed a non-motoring offence. That could be a valuable sanction.

My right hon. Friend took a number of interventions on tagging; the only people who need fear tagging are those who commit crime. No one else need worry about it. He also mentioned the comments of the Law Society of Scotland on the White Paper. I was pleased that, although there was some constructive criticism, there was much support.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) and the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) referred to their concerns about the vulnerability of child witnesses. I mean them no discourtesy, but I know from experience of debates on Scottish affairs that they are masters of the Exocet intervention; they have been and gone, and it is a pity that neither of them intends to serve on the Committee, because they made valuable and constructive points that need to be addressed.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) expressed concern about the presence of Customs and Excise in the highlands and islands. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) rightly took him to task, suggesting that he had got the emphasis all wrong. The highlands and islands constitute a vast area where sea meets Scotland, and it is almost impossible to have someone at each point watching all the time. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about his discussions with Customs and Excise, but I believe that the present policy of relying far more on increased intelligence to improve the detection rate for drugs is the best way forward.

The hon. Gentleman also called for tougher sentences for drug traffickers, but that matter is addressed in the Bill, so I do not understand why he and his hon. Friends intend to vote against it. Unlike the Labour party, his party voted against the provisions for England and Wales last night. There is no doubt whatever that the Liberal Democrats—unlike some hon. Members, I differentiate, because there is a Liberal party—are soft on crime, just as the Labour party is. There is no point in saying that we need to be tough if one is not prepared to back the Bill and to consider the details in Committee.

The hon. Member for Govan rightly commented on the importance of tougher sentences and the ability of the courts to levy them as soon as possible. Support for the Bill would achieve his objective.

The hon. Member for Hamilton spoke for about 15 minutes before I wrote anything down. I mean him no discourtesy, because I recognise the difficulty—

Mr. George Robertson: The hon. Gentleman was asleep.

Mr. Banks: The hon. Gentleman knows that I was not asleep, because I occasionally tried to intervene during his speech. I recognise, as does the whole House, that he is effectively opposing tougher sentences, which the public want.

It is not a matter of importing English and Welsh methods into Scotland, which, in my view, has always had much better legal and education systems. The so-called reasoned amendment suggested that we should not press ahead with tagging in Scotland, simply because there had not been a pilot scheme for it there.

That is a ridiculous way to try to get off the hook and excuse oneself for voting against Second Reading tonight, because there are pilot schemes in Manchester, Berkshire and Norfolk and, bearing in mind that we have national sentences for drug trafficking, there is no reason why Scotland should not take advantage of technology that is being tested elsewhere in the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend made it clear that we wanted to introduce powers to tag offenders over 18 years of age, and not under.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) highlighted a number of initiatives that were taking place in Dumfries and Galloway. I was also pleased to hear that the Secretary of State intends to ensure that the Scottish Office provides further support for young people, enabling them to gain valuable experience in education and, to a small extent, in the military. Support will be forthcoming from both the Scottish Office and the Army.

Several hon. Members have mentioned young people from deprived backgrounds. On a personal note, I might add that I recall the enormous satisfaction I gained in the Army when I played a tiny role in looking after youngsters from deprived backgrounds in Edinburgh. I suspect from what my right hon. Friend said that the increased support on offer will result partly from his discussions with GOC Scotland.

Speaking of young offenders and children generally, I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe). I cannot remember whether she is an officer in the Scottish children's group, but she is certainly a leading light in it.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): An officer.

Mr. Banks: Yes. She mentioned the importance of pre-school education, and I think the whole House took her point. We understand that it is enormously beneficial in inner-city areas. I was not entirely convinced by her arguments about this Bill, but I welcomed her warm remarks about clause 23, in respect of children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr conducted an interesting exchange about young people drinking in the streets. A number of hon. Members seemed unsure about whether the Bill does anything to act on under-age drinking. Perhaps the Minister of State will deal with that later. For myself, I believe that the Bill may provide extra powers in relation to people over 18 supplying alcohol to those who are under 18—but I may be wrong.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr made an excellent speech. I was not surprised to learn the results of his constituency survey. He puts his finger on the nub of a number of issues. It is a great pity that his regular efforts to keep in touch with his constituents are so often denigrated by other hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, East expressed some concerns which I share, although he perhaps emphasised them differently. The hon. Gentleman frequently speaks in European Standing Committee A. This afternoon, he said that the existence of a minimum sentence was no deterrent to the person who killed one of his constituents some time ago; as a result of all sorts of shenanigans, the person concerned managed to get off—my words, not his. That sort of thing certainly brings the criminal justice system into disrepute. That is why it is important to move towards mandatory or automatic sentences, depending on which part of the United Kingdom we are talking about.

Special circumstances must, of course, be allowed for. If I have one constructive criticism of the Bill to offer, it concerns special circumstances, and I hope that that point will be dealt with in Committee.

I certainly do not agree with the hon. Member for Falkirk, East that prison has no part to play in reforming criminals. While that may be true of some, and while we must not lose sight of the fact that punitive measures are also needed, we should also do all in our power to rehabilitate people. I thought that the hon. Gentleman's comments on automatic sentencing were incorrect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) rightly drew attention to the discrepancies between what Labour says and does. He read out a long list showing how Labour has voted so often against useful measures—the prevention of terrorism legislation, for instance. The Liberal Democrats have done likewise. Clearly, new Labour says one thing but old Labour does another. Certainly, Opposition Members did not hang about in the Lobbies last night, when they could not afford to be seen to oppose yesterday's Bill for England and Wales. Tonight, however, they have chosen to oppose this measure—against the public interest and what the public want.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) and several others mentioned yesterday's speeches by my right hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Mr. Hurd), for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) and for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd). I believe that my right hon. Friends have been misquoted. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney said:

"The Labour party used to contain a tradition of liberal thinking on penal matters. In my time, I occasionally found that tradition extremely irritating. Earlier, when the Attorney-General answered questions, we were reminded of the Labour party's record in resisting the Conservative Government when we proposed the prosecution's right of appeal against lenient sentences. I believed that the Labour party was wrong about that and several other measures in my time, but we recognised that as part of a consistent tradition."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1996; Vol. 284, c. 933.]

That consistent tradition is one of backing away from taking tough measures which the public and the Government want brought in.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley said:

"I was glad to see the provision in the first three clauses that mandatory sentences need not be imposed if there are 'exceptional circumstances' . . . However, I am glad that the Home Secretary has made that provision, because it allows judges to exercise some discretion, which is important. The clauses would be unacceptable without that discretion."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1996; Vol. 284, c. 941.]

The Bill relating to Scotland would be just as unacceptable without the analogous clauses.

We want automatic or mandatory sentences, with the proviso that judges can take certain matters into account so as to avoid imposing unnecessarily harsh sentences.

This is a good Bill. It introduces provisions that the public want, and I hope that it will receive sound scrutiny in Committee.

8.47 pm

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): Earlier this evening, I said that I had not been here for last night's debate, and as I listened to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Banks) droning on, I began to wish I was not here for tonight's debate, either. It was a dreadful filibuster which added nothing to the debate. Indeed, we have heard a succession of speeches by Conservative Members working themselves up into a frenzy of synthetic outrage about the fact that the Opposition have chosen to treat this Scottish Bill differently from the one dealing exclusively with England and Wales.

Intervening on the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) earlier, I tried to make him understand our reasons—but I failed. But given that he is someone who thinks Scots drink McEwan's bitter and that Tolstoy wrote "War and Punishment", it is rather difficult to make him understand anything. Even Shakespeare would struggle to make him comprehend.

I was trying to make the hon. Gentleman understand that it is not Opposition Members who argue that Scottish Bills should be dealt with separately in this House, but the Government. The Secretary of State for Scotland has consistently argued that Scottish Bills should be approached in a distinctive and completely different manner from Bills dealing with England and Wales. He argued that Scotland has a different history, culture, legal system and system for handling criminals and young offenders, and that therefore a different approach to legislation on crime and punishment is required. That is the point I was trying to make.

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. McAllion: I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman. One of my hon. Friends has been sitting here since 3.30, trying unsuccessfully to get into the debate because of Conservative Members' filibustering.

If the Government want to be consistent, they should not send the Bill to a Standing Committee that is dominated by English Back Benchers who will ensure a Conservative majority, but pass it to the Scottish Grand Committee and let its members determine the Bill's progress through Committee. We shall not, of course, see such an example of Government consistency. There is a solution to the problem: it is called a Scottish Parliament—a directly elected parliament. If we had one, we would not have the absurd situation that faces us tonight.

When opening the debate, the Secretary of State called on hon. Members on both sides of the House to rise above electoral considerations and to concentrate on the real problem of crime that affects so many people in Scotland. I might have taken that appeal seriously, were it not for the fact that he then spent the first 28 minutes of his speech making cheap party political points against the Opposition parties. For him to call on the Opposition to rise above electoral considerations and then to spend most

[Mr. McAllion]

of his speech dealing with electoral considerations on behalf of the Conservative party was an example of the pot calling the kettle black.

The Secretary of State's favourite taunt is to say that hon. Members who dare to disagree with him have a brass neck, but there is no more brassy neck in the House than that of the Secretary of State for Scotland. He consistently says one thing and does another—his actions are completely inconsistent with his words.

The real lesson of tonight's debate is that it is the Conservative party that is playing party politics with crime and punishment in Scotland. Earlier tonight, I went out to make a phone call and I found the parliamentary private secretary to the Secretary of State for Scotland on the phone, contacting his office and trying to find out what would happen if the Bill was defeated on Second Reading. He asked whether it would be possible to reintroduce the Bill again in the same Session of Parliament. He was desperate for the answer to be yes, so that he could rush back into the Chamber and say that Labour Members were putting the Bill at risk—not because we were in any real sense, but because the Conservatives might be able to make a cheap party political point outside the House if the Bill were to fail. Let the message go out from tonight's debate: if the Bill is lost, only one party will be responsible—the Government party, which has a clear majority and can deliver the Bill if it wants to. The Conservatives have chosen to play party politics with a serious issue and that will not go unnoticed in Scotland.

The Secretary of State used part of his speech to address the problem of reoffending and how to deal with it. His view was clear and honest. He argued that, if offenders are behind bars, they cannot commit crimes—as he put it, if they are put away, they should stay away. That has a certain simplistic and reactionary appeal for many people in this country, but as we listened to Conservative Members speaking in the ensuing debate, we got a picture of the road down which they have started in making such arguments.

The reintroduction of hanging was raised—the hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) surveyed his constituency to see whether hanging would be a good way of dealing with crime. A hanged man cannot reoffend—that much is certain—and perhaps many Conservative Members think that the Secretary of State's approach is too timid and that the argument should be carried to its logical conclusion. Why not hang, shoot, gas and otherwise kill offenders? That is one guarantee that they will not reoffend, but it is also a guarantee that there will be no civil liberties or civil justice in our society and that innocent people will be killed.

The Secretary of State's policy flies in the face of academic research into the problem. For example, a paper presented to a probation officers' conference in Scotland in September this year reviewed strategies for reducing the rate of reoffending among convicted criminals. It highlighted a body of evidence from around the world showing that harsh punishment programmes are counter-productive—they do not reduce the level of crime in society, but increase it. Specifically, the research showed that it was important that reoffending programmes should be based in the community, or at least closely linked with the world outside prison—exactly the opposite of the policy advanced by the Secretary of State and Conservative Members.

No doubt the Government will dismiss that paper as the work of liberal do-gooders and academics who do not really live in the real world; but the academics who presented the paper were Scottish Office researchers—members of the Scottish Office central research unit, speaking at a conference supported by Scottish Office money and staffed by Scottish Office civil servants. I have to conclude that their views expressed in that paper had the backing of Scottish Office Ministers, or they should not have been at the conference. When we understand that reality, we begin to understand that this is a Government who even argue against research findings that they commissioned from their own civil servants in the Scottish Office. We begin to realise that the Government are playing politics with a serious issue affecting Scotland.

The example of America has been cited several times tonight, but the fact is that although, proportionately, America imprisons seven times more people than European countries, it suffers a much higher crime rate than any European country. America has already gone down the road that the Government are threatening to take Britain down. In American prisons, there are geriatric wards for the people caught by the "three strikes and you're out" rule, who are never to be allowed back into the community. They die in prison—old, disabled or blind men and women who will never be released back into society because of the idiotically reactionary approach taken to the problem of crime in America.

The lesson of America is that prisons do not work. More prisons and more people banged up in society is not a sign of success in tackling crime—it is a sign of failure. Until now, we in this country have—thank God—understood that lesson, but we are in danger of forgetting it because of the reactionary nostrums voiced by Conservative Members.

Many hon. Members today talked about the Maguire case and asked whether a rapist would reoffend if the sort of prison regime introduced in the Bill had been available before; but think about it—how does a rapist in an all-male prison prove to the warders that he is fit to re-enter society and that he will not be a threat to the young and vulnerable women there?

My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) and I visited Rossie secure unit for young offenders near Montrose. There we saw some of the hardest young offenders in north-east Scotland. We went round their classes and saw that they were model pupils while they were inside Rossie, where they were locked up in small numbers and looked after all day long. They present no problem whatsoever in Rossie, but return them to the communities they come from and it is a completely different story.

How do we know whether they are fit to return to their communities, unless we are prepared to say that part of their sentence should be served in prison, but another part should be spent outside in the community, under supervision? That way, offenders can be tested to discover whether they are fit to go back into society. That is the only realistic way forward for us, yet the Government are trying to close it off with the Bill.

I want to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson) to contribute, so I shall deal only briefly with clause 2 and the Government's claim that they want to crack down on class A drug traffickers. They believe that they can do that through minimum sentencing—seven years for people who fall within the provisions of clause 2. The Government believe that after the drugs have been brought into Scotland, after they have been sold to vulnerable people in Scotland, after the profits have been made, after the pusher has been caught and convicted, and after the damage has been done, they can deal with the problem by minimum sentences.

The Government brushed aside the protest of my hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) about the closure of Customs and Excise offices in the north of Scotland. They brushed aside the argument that preventing drugs from coming into Scotland is a much more effective way of dealing with the drug problem than cracking down on drug pushers with minimum sentences once they are caught.

Let us consider the facts. A press conference was held last July by Customs and Excise officers in Scotland which dealt with the closure of Customs and Excise offices across the north of Scotland. The officers suggested that at that time the Government were proposing to reduce customs staff by 27 per cent.—Customs and Excise staff on the north and west coast of Scotland were to be reduced from 40 to six. The proposal was to close Customs and Excise offices at Kirkwall, Stornoway, Portree, Invergordon, Fort William and Islay—the front-line staff to whom the Secretary of State claims he wants to listen. They held a press conference at which they provided statistics proving that over the past five years drugs had been brought into Scotland at all the locations where the Government intended to close the Customs and Excise offices.

Mr. Matthew Banks: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McAllion: I shall not give way, because I do not have time.

The reality is that the Government talk tough on crime, but act soft on crime. They make it easy for drug traffickers to get their poisonous material into our country because they do not want to spend public money to support the Customs and Excise officers around the country.

I understand that, on the night when three young men died at the rave in Hangar 13 in Ayr, there were about 1,250 youngsters at the dance venue. The police believe that about 50 per cent. of them purchased the drug Ecstasy in pill form, that there were about 25 pushers and that the drugs were selling at £15 or £20 per pill. That means that 625 youngsters buying just one pill each would net £9,375 for the pushers on that night. Each pusher would make an average of £375 for a single night and, in one year of such nights, would bring in £19,500. If the only way in which a drug user, hooked on drugs, can feed his drug habit is to get access to that sort of money by pushing those drugs, he will not be deterred by minimum sentences.

The phrase "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" was used earlier. Today's debate has not dealt with the causes of crime. In the long term, that is the only way in which we can effectively tackle the problem.

9.1 pm

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Govan): This Bill provides the Government with the opportunity to tackle some of the problems relating to crime in Scotland, but unfortunately they have simply chosen to sloganise and try to identify issues that they think are politically popular. Many of my colleagues have covered those points, but I should like to touch on one or two of the issues that the Government have not dealt with properly.

In an intervention, I raised the issue of delays in cases coming to court. The Government must do something about the number, particularly of drug pushers, but also of those convicted of violent assaults who spend 18 months, two years or sometimes longer waiting to go to court. During that period, they are seen by people in the community as having behaved with virtual impunity. In many cases, they reoffend, but nothing happens.

Does the Minister have any idea of the corrosive effect that that has, not only on the police, but on community spirit? What incentive is there for people to offer to be witnesses if they know that they will have to spend perhaps two years waiting for the case to come to trial, while they live in proximity to the accused, in danger of being assaulted or worse? The Minister must ensure that the Government take steps to deal adequately with that problem. I regret the fact that the Government seem prepared to leave the problem aside, because it does not involve a simple slogan.

The Minister of State, Scottish Office (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that intermediate diets, which we introduced in recent legislation, should go a long way to help to bring cases to trial more quickly? We are anxious to act along the lines that he suggests.

Mr. Davidson: I accept that that measure will bring forward some cases more quickly, but it is not sufficient to deal with the scale of the present difficulties. Many of those involved in drug dealing will seek to draw out the process for as long as possible and, owing to the scale of the money involved, they will have the money to buy the legal talent to do so.

I and others like me are handicapped by the way in which the Government operate the Data Protection Act 1988. We are being refused access to information on individual cases on the grounds that the information is held electronically. If we could gain access, it would help us to provide further information—perhaps to the Minister—about cases where people have been charged, but have not been brought to court for some considerable time.

The second issue concerns youngsters who are effectively out of control. There is no measure in the Bill that would deal adequately with the problem. Let me give as an example the case of youngster S, now aged 15, who has recently been charged with police assault, robbery on several occasions, indecent assault, house-breaking on several occasions, various thefts, driving offences and, not least, vandalism, whereby he has caused thousands of pounds' worth of damage to community facilities and schools in my constituency.

The existing mechanism has been useless in dealing with that youngster. He has been caught by the police on innumerable occasions and released. He has been reported

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to the children's panel but no action has been taken. On one occasion when he was sent off to custody, he was put in the front door of the accommodation and walked out of the back door. On another occasion the police caught him and handed him over to the social work department. Social workers were driving him to secure accommodation, they stopped the car for petrol, the youngster got out and walked away and the social workers did nothing because they were under orders not to exert any restraining influence on a person in their care.

Years—and dozens of offences—later, that youngster has been put in secure accommodation, but the community was terrorised by him over a long period. There are other youngsters like him in my community, but nothing in the Bill will address the problem. That leads the community to feel deserted by the Government and by the system, and the police too become disillusioned.

Has the Minister any idea how long it took the police to catch that youngster when he absconded from accommodation, or how many hours were spent looking for him when better use could have been made of that police time? Has he any idea of the effect on the community, when windows by the score were smashed in a community centre with a devolved budget, and money had to be spent repairing the damage instead of running the facilities for decent youngsters in the community?

The Government are not tackling the problem, which is extremely corrosive in local communities. There is no recognition of the fact that, although the children's panel system works for many youngsters, it is ineffective for many others, whose parents are not prepared to play a constructive part in dealing with bad behaviour. There are cases in my constituency where the parent is "known to the police", as the phrase goes, and encourages the youngster to misbehave. A superintendent's or inspector's warning is counterproductive because the parent is pleased to see that his youngster is behaving in an anti-social manner and regards it as a badge of honour. A subculture is developing which nothing in the Bill adequately addresses.

Similarly, the Government seem unwilling to recognise that many of the methods of disposal of youngsters through children's panels are counter-productive for other youngsters in the community. I know of cases where youngsters are sent off to IT—intermediate treatment—groups. Other youngsters in the community become jealous of them because they see the youngsters in IT groups being taken to swimming pools, leisure facilities and McDonald's. I understand the reasons for that, but ordinary, decent youngsters see bad behaviour being rewarded. They wonder what they have to do to get themselves sent on that project and taken on all those outings without having to put their hand in their pocket.

During the last summer holidays some local organisations were running summer play schemes. Youngsters in those play schemes complained to the volunteers who were running them and asked why the staff were not doing as much for them as the staff of the IT scheme did for the youngsters in their care. Youngsters in the IT scheme could go to McDonald's and the swimming pool on the same day, but the youngsters who were better behaved and who were being delivered by their parents in order that they could be looked after were getting less than the youngsters who were seen as "bad" and as having misbehaved.

When bad behaviour is rewarded, is it any wonder that youngsters abscond from school? That is a sensible and rational solution to the difficulties they identify. They see it as, "If you misbehave, you get rewarded. If you behave, you don't." Is it any wonder then that youngsters go out, dodge school, break windows and the like? But there is nothing in the Bill to resolve that problem. Similarly, there is nothing in it to address the difficulties of trying to separate bad youngsters—if I can use that term—or youngsters who misbehave, from decent youngsters by ensuring that community facilities and youth groups are available to keep youngsters out of mischief.

Many youngsters drift into crime simply because there is nothing else for them to do. I recognise that it costs money. The Government are willing to sloganise on issues of crime but unwilling to spend the money that is necessary to ensure that facilities are made available to stop youngsters drifting into crime. If the Government are serious about tackling crime, they must also be serious about maintaining community facilities, maintaining the youth service, and maintaining the uniformed and non-uniformed youth and voluntary organisations that cater for youngsters. They must be prepared to spend money on sports organisation for youngsters to stop them drifting into evil ways.

The Government do not adequately deal with the major difficulty of getting convictions—dealing with problems related to witnesses, witness protection and witness relocation. The costs of relocation are underestimated and not adequately provided for. One of the by-products of the sale of council houses is that local authorities no longer have the flexibility of alternative accommodation to allow potential witnesses to relocate, to provide them with the security that would be necessary if they were prepared to step forward as witnesses. None of that is addressed in the Bill.

Similarly, the Government do not address the anti-social behaviour of many people in our communities. I recognise that this is a very low priority for the existing system of law enforcement, as domestic violence used to be. It seems to me that the existing system is adequately geared to deal with big, one-off events like a murder, an assault, a rape or something similar, but not to deal with small, repetitive offences that have a cumulative and corrosive effect. We really must give these matters more attention, because they impact on more of my community than the major issues, the major assaults, murders and violence that I have mentioned. The Government have to be prepared to deal with these matters in a more up-front manner than they have to date.

I shall touch on the question of prisons, because a number of my constituents are sent to prison. I wish that the Government were sending more of them off and more quickly. I recognise that, although long sentences protect the public, they do so only for the length of the sentence. If simply by lengthening sentences the Government let people out older instead of improved, I am not sure that much has been gained. I visited Barlinnie last summer and was very disappointed to see how little the prisoners there were getting of what could be said to be "improving". There was little opportunity to do what I consider meaningful work, and little opportunity to do anything that could be considered meaningful education. Many of

the prisoners who were there are socially inadequate and badly educated. Many are nasty, brutal—and quite big, actually, which is why I did not bother telling them of my reservations about their behaviour. Their difficulties are inadequately addressed by the existing prison system, and simply incarcerating people for longer is inadequate.

The Government have to be prepared to tell us that they are willing to spend money on turning prisoners around, because many of the youngsters in my area drift into crime for the reasons that I have given. There is little else to do. They get up to mischief. It is a ladder towards prison. They end up in prison and nothing is done to enable them to remedy their ways. I have spoken to many of them when they have come out again, and they express the view that they wish that they had been given the opportunity to turn themselves around, but if they come out to no jobs, and no prospects, there is little likelihood that they will do anything other than trundle back into prison again. As long as the Government see prisons simply as warehouses for prisoners, the vicious circle of recidivism will not be broken. I regret that the Government are unwilling to tackle that, simply, I fear, because to do so will cost money.

I also regret that the Bill provides inadequate support for crime prevention in its widest sense. Crime prevention expenditure on things such as target hardening has been enormously effective in my area in cutting the number of burglaries of individual homes and commercial premises. Yet there seems to be no prospect of the Government spending the amount of money necessary throughout Scotland in order to reduce burglaries and the number of people who get drawn into them as an easy way of making money.

Similarly, the Government should be willing to spend more on street lighting in order to cut down on street crimes. There is a clear correlation between the quality of lighting and the amount of crime in streets. It acts as a deterrent, and it is much cheaper than longer sentences.

The Government should also be prepared to spend money on public transport in order to reduce the extent to which people are put at risk as a result of being unable to afford or to find public transport to take them where they want to go when they want to go at a reasonable cost. The Government seem unwilling to address that difficulty.

I regret that the Government have not given local authorities the option to give police the power to move along youngsters who are hanging about, as they were able to do under the old loitering byelaws. Such powers are not an answer to all the problems faced by people in the community, but they would be of considerable assistance. The vast majority of the public wish the police to have such powers, and the police, too, wish to have them. I fail to see why the Government are unwilling to bring forward such proposals.

We should be willing to accept tagging if we are convinced that it works. I have no objection in principle to a system of tagging as an alternative to custody if it would allow someone to keep his job and his family together and so be less likely to slip into a life of crime or idleness. It would allow offenders to maintain the fabric of their family life while making some contribution to society, perhaps by way of a recompense order which would take some money from them. Tagging should not be a soft option, but if it kept a family together it would be worth while.

I am willing to go much further than some of my colleagues, in that I am also prepared to consider tagging for those under 16, particularly if it were used in conjunction with curfew orders. In parts of my constituency, groups of youngsters under the age of 16 are running about, effectively out of parental control, and for them some measures are necessary. If tagging is the only thing that will curb their anti-social behaviour, I am willing to countenance it if I believe that it works.

However, in that context I would much rather that the Government considered more closely the risk of alcopops drawing youngsters into under-age drinking than simply putting forward their current proposals. If the Government want to tackle under-age drinking, they must be willing to tackle the big brewing interests and the way in which they are deliberately going out of their way to market alcohol to the under-16s. I regret that the Government have a vested financial interest. Because they take money form the big brewers, they are unwilling to tackle the problem. I only wish they would.

9.18 pm

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): This has been an excellent debate, with contributions from the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe), for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan), for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) and for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson), and the hon. Members for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) and for Southport (Mr. Banks).

Many fine points have been made, but the debate has been characterised by the fact that the Secretary of State has fallen on his face again today, accusing my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) of stating that the clear-up rate had deteriorated, when in fact my hon. Friend said no such thing. The Secretary of State should get his facts right.

A kerfuffle was made about the reasoned amendment. To make it simple for Conservative Members, I shall explain why we tabled that reasoned amendment. There are four or five main points. First, the Bill has been introduced without a proper review or study. The Secretary of State has not consulted anyone about the Bill. I remind him and others of the speeches yesterday evening by the right hon. Members for Witney (Mr. Hurd) and for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker), who are distinguished former Home Secretaries, and the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), who was a prisons Minister.

I remind the House of what the right hon. Member for Witney said yesterday:

"The operation of our criminal justice system is not in the hands of. . . the Home Secretary alone or of the Government. . . it is in the hands of a variety of people—chief constables, the Crown Prosecution Service, judges. . . prison governors. . . none of them are creatures of the Government. The House has given them all separate responsibilities and a degree of autonomy. Criminal justice measures will not work unless those people work them. That means that they must be listened to".—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1996; Vol. 284, c.933-34.]

The Government have not listened: indeed, they have not consulted.

Mr. Gallie: The hon. Gentleman said that my right hon. Friend has not consulted on this matter. The Secretary of State published a document in June which clearly laid out his intentions, and from that he produced

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this excellent Bill. He has listened to people. I would guess that there has been a considerable response. Why does the hon. Gentleman say that he never consulted?

Mr. McFall: The hon. Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) has led me on to my second point, which relates to the comments made by the recently retired Lord Justice-General and Lord President of the Court of Session, Lord Hope, when he addressed the Law Society of Scotland conference on Monday 30 September. The hon. Member for Ayr epitomised the crude political bigotry that still exists on the Back Benches of the Tory party when he said that Lord Hope and others were

"steeped in the ways of the legal establishment. . . despising the feelings of lesser beings".

I do not sit at the dinner table with the Lord President of the Court of Session, but when we are in government we will listen to such individuals, for the simple reason that they are the practitioners in the criminal justice system. They carry out the legal requirements that Parliament puts on them, so they must be part of the debate. That crude political bigotry should play no part in our system.

The Lord President of the Court of Session said:

"It is no surprise to me, therefore, that during each of the last seven years there has been a major initiative in the criminal justice field, about which we as lawyers have been consulted and to which we have responded to the best of our ability. What is new on this occasion"—

that is, since the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mr. Forsyth) came along—

"is that so much of what is in the White Paper, whose title has given its name to this conference, namely 'Crime and Punishment', appears to have been decided already without consultation. I cannot escape the feeling that it is taking place largely in a vacuum. And I do not think that the Minister who has just spoken"—

the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton), to whom he directed his attention—

"has been able to enlighten us. What account, if any, has been taken of the points already made in our written response to the White Paper? Nor do we have any indication that any public debate which may take place today will have any real influence on those who are responsible for laying measures before Parliament."

My hon. Friends and I think that it is dangerous not to listen to those who are in the criminal justice system.

Lord Hope continued:

"I should like now to add that unless that commitment is demonstrated by the Government, our endeavours will be no more valuable than the act of tossing coins into a wishing well."

The Secretary of State should be ashamed of himself for the way in which he has gone about his business. He has received trenchant criticism from the judiciary.

Mr. Michael Forsyth: If the hon. Gentleman thinks, as I do, that the judiciary should remain independent, does he not agree that it is disgraceful for him to take comments made by the judiciary out of context and to seek to make party political points out of them? Is that not politicising the judicial process?

Mr. McFall: I hope that the Secretary of State had a good meal tonight, because he looked as if he was cracking up late this afternoon. I have a copy of the speech by the Lord President of the Court of Session on 30 September, which I will willingly share with the Secretary of State. I have read out exactly what the Lord President said, and he represents the judiciary. To date, there has been no consultation by the Secretary of State with the judiciary. That is a fact, as the Secretary of State knows.

My second point concerns the reversing of key reforms. The hon. Member for Ayr said honestly that during consideration of the Bill that became the 1993 Act the procedures for automatic release were wrong, and he voted for them reluctantly. On the one hand, the hon. Gentleman tells us that those procedures were wrong; on the other hand, the Secretary of State says that they were merely an extension of the measures implemented by the right hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Lang). Both of them cannot be right, and we know who is wrong. The hon. Member for Ayr is honest, but the right hon. Member for Stirling is not telling us exactly the truth. He is not giving us—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that the Secretary of State is lying to the House, is he? If he is, I must ask him to withdraw his suggestion.

Mr. McFall: I will modify my statement and say that the Secretary of State is misrepresenting the position.

The Minister of State is a nice man. Indeed, one of my colleagues—

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I can manage without the hon. Gentleman.

I was not entirely sure whether the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) was in fact withdrawing his remarks, which could suggest that the Secretary of State was telling lies.

Mr. McFall: Of course I withdraw them. I am saying that the Secretary of State is misrepresenting the position. I repeat what I said before.

The Minister of State is a very nice man. Indeed, one of my colleagues memorably said that arguing with him is like throwing tomatoes at your granny: you feel guilty about it.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a genuine point of order.

Mr. Fabricant: It is, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope so.

Mr. Fabricant: I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and, were I in a position to do so, I would ask the Clerk—whether, if one Member accuses another of deliberately misleading—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have just dealt with the matter, and that is final.

Mr. McFall: As I have said, the Minister of State is a very nice man. How can he sit beside the Secretary of

State and introduce this Bill with him, when a few short years ago he approached my colleagues and me asking for support for the 1993 legislation? Let me remind him of what he said at that time. On 19 October 1992, he stated:

"Although the Bill promotes greater fairness and consistency, it will also strengthen the deterrent effect of long sentences. Offenders sentenced to four or more years will have to wait until they have served at least half of their sentence before being considered for parole, instead of one third as at present."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1992; Vol. 212, c.289.]

That Bill restored meaning to the full duration of a long sentence by ensuring that release, when it came, would be on licence. Yet the Secretary of State, addressing the Police Federation in May, said:

"We must put honesty back into sentencing."

The Secretary of State said, or implied, that the Secretary of State of the day, and the Minister of State, were not being fully honest in presenting their political measures, and that he was the one who would put honesty back into the equation. I say—and the House said at the time—that the Secretary of State was taken at his word, that he was being honest.

To date, there has been no consultation and no assessment of the implications of the legislation. It was sheer prejudice on the part of the Secretary of State to turn the 1993 Act upside down just to suit his own ends. The Minister of State should address that in his winding-up speech and explain why he could introduce that measure in 1993 with such comments and then join the Secretary of State in this debate and turn everything on its head.

Reversing key reforms will apply more pressure to the prison system. Similar changes in the 1980s resulted in some accommodation by judges on the length of sentences, but it was not enough to neutralise the impact. The Government seem set on a warehousing policy for prisons and no significant additional resources will be available to facilitate the necessary expansion or even the maintenance of prison programmes which attempt to deal with offending behaviour. Any reduction in the number and quality of such programmes will lessen the chance of lowering the current appalling rate of recidivism.

Catching a criminal and successfully prosecuting him is difficult, uncertain and expensive. Almost 60 per cent. of those who commit serious crimes, and 85 per cent. of young people who commit such crimes, reoffend within two years of leaving prison. It is irresponsible not to take every opportunity to try to change the offending behaviour when people are in custody.

No matter how long people are put away for, unless we throw away the key they will come out some day—and on current form the majority of them will commit further offences. The Secretary of State's proposals and his failure to tackle the appalling problem of recidivism will ensure a threat to public safety, because, when young men leave prison and find themselves back on the streets, they are a greater danger to the public than they were before they went to prison. The Secretary of State's negligence is contributing to that.

We do not advocate the establishment of prison programmes to deal with offending behaviour just because it is the liberal, caring thing to do. Our approach is pragmatic, and evidence suggests that the present system of sentences of imprisonment followed by supervision on release is more likely to reduce reoffending than imprisonment followed by release without such conditions. Discretionary parole is particularly effective in reducing reoffending, and the parole system produces remarkably lower reconviction rates than one would expect from parolees' proposal profiles.

If the Government's proposals are implemented, periods of supervisory release would be reduced for many long-term prisoners. A prisoner serving six years who does not receive parole is supervised for two years after release. Under the Government's proposal, that period would be one year unless the sentencing court had specifically ordered a longer period. Successful resettlement of difficult offenders often requires supervision over a substantial period, and a reduction in the supervision period might place the public at risk from reoffenders. Resources are required, but there is nothing in the Bill to which the Secretary of State intends to turn his intention.

The Opposition seek informed debate on electronic tagging. Similar initiatives elsewhere, particularly in the United States, New Zealand and Singapore, have resulted in a large number of failures and technical difficulties and excessive cost. In 1989, the Home Office initiated a six-months trial for people on bail. However, courts made little use of the facility, and, of the 50 persons made subject to the monitoring, 11 committed further offences and 18 broke the bail conditions. The equipment was subject to a high failure rate and it was estimated that the initiative cost about £10,000 per person.

Electronic tagging is again being tested in England and Wales, and the results are as yet unknown. It is understood that the pilot project will cost about £1.6 million. During the first nine months of the initiative, only 65 orders were made by the courts, and that works out at approximately £26,000 for each person made subject to electronic tagging. It is a pig in a poke and the Secretary of State has no rationale for offering it. We would welcome an opportunity to study the matter but as presented by the Secretary of State we have grave doubts about it.

The Government are being secretive about the unrealistic estimated cost and manpower implications of their proposals. The Secretary of State knows that his proposals for prisons are unrealistic financially. The financial burden could be crippling. If implemented, the proposals will mean that within 12 months the prison population will be an extra 1,000 and within five years it could be an extra 2,200. That will mean an extra four or five prisons, for the simple reason that our prisons are overcrowded.

Mr. Thomas Graham (Renfrew, West and Inverclyde): My hon. Friend will be aware that local authority budgets have been cut by more than £395 million in Scotland alone. Most of the voluntary organisations and groups that work with youth have faced incredible cost rises. Many clubs are out of the game. Many young people in my constituency have no clubs to go to. They do not have the finance. The Secretary of State may smile, but people are not smiling in my constituency. Because of the cuts, my young folk are vulnerable to crime. Juvenile crime will rise because of the slashing of local government money. I say to the Secretary of State: I will prove it.

Mr. McFall: The Secretary of State proposes another four or five prisons and he tells us nothing about how the money will be made available. Over 25 years, four or five

[Mr. McFall]

prisons will cost about £1.8 billion, on an annual Scottish Prison Service budget of £165 million. He must come clean on the issue. That is why we tabled our reasoned amendment—it was simply because of the obfuscation in which he is indulging in making his proposals, but in giving us no idea of what is happening.

As some hon. Members have said, we are going to the American system. During the recess, I visited six prisons in Maryland, which has a population of 4 million. Scotland has a population of 5 million. There are 36,000 individuals in Maryland prisons or on remand. Governors of those prisons told me, "There is one thing you can learn from here: prison in America does not work. You have seen the future and it does not work. You should take that message back home." Willy-nilly, however, the Secretary of State goes forward with his warehousing proposal, wit' not a whit or idea of the cost and waits for a future Government to pick up the tab.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McFall: No. I am sorry, but I intend to continue with my speech.

I want to mention the real problems of crime and the 17-year legacy. The proposal that the Secretary of State made to begin with of making the punishment fit the crime should be re-entitled, "making the punishment fit the prejudice". We should be looking to a prisons system in the 21st century which offers maximum protection to the public. Our primary concern must be the protection of our citizens.

What about the Government's record? After 17 years, they tell us that they are going to fight crime resolutely and have the gall and the neck to say that they are going to declare war on crime, but let us remind ourselves of their record. Between 1979 and 1994, crime in Scotland increased by 52 per cent., despite a 31 per cent. increase in the number of people in prison over that period.

Some of the steepest rises have occurred in crimes that cause the greatest fear to the public. Over the same period, non-sexual crimes of violence rose from just over 10,000 to 19,774, so the message is that the Conservatives have been promoting the violent society that we live in. Year after year after year, their policies are not working. The steepest and most alarming increase has been in drug-related crime, with a 1,140 per cent. increase since 1979. In that year, there were 1,500 drug offences; in 1994, there were 20,000.

The Secretary of State learned from that initiative. He realised that he was not able to cope with the drugs issue on his own, so he came to see the Opposition parties and others to ask us to join in the "Scotland Against Drugs" campaign. We did willingly so, because we realise the problems in society, but it cannot be done just by Government.

The Secretary of State had an iota of common sense on that occasion. Why does he not extend that to the rest of the law and order programme? Why does he insist on peddling his prejudices at the expense of good penal policy in Scotland? If he were to come forward with decent proposals such as the drugs campaign, the Opposition would listen to him. It is the same Opposition who have been pushing the Government to implement legislation for Scotland on the carrying of knives.

It is the same Opposition who have been pushing the Secretary of State on the subject of stalking. I mentioned stalking five or six months ago and the Secretary of State did not like it. The Lord Advocate wrote to me and said that I was impugning Scots law, because breach of the peace was an offence and would be used. On 18 October, the Secretary of State said:

"I have concluded that we could increase protection of the public by establishing, alongside the common law, improved measures of protection which the civil law can offer to victims of stalkers."

Why did the Secretary of State not take that view in April or May when we were asking for something to be done about stalking? Why did he have to wait five or six months? The answer is that he thought that he could get away with it, but then realised that public opinion was against him.

The Labour party will take no lessons from the Government on a legislative programme to ensure that those who should be in prison are in prison. We realise that we must have a sympathetic penal policy.

I will leave the Secretary of State with one comment on Cornton Vale, which is in his constituency. There have been five tragic deaths of young girls in Cornton Vale over the past year, but there has been a deafening silence from the Secretary of State. I mentioned earlier that I had visited prisons in America. When I was there, I asked about the policy on suicide. The six prisons in Maryland told me that they never had suicides. Why do we have suicides in Cornton Vale? What is the Secretary of State going to do about it? The new governor, Kate Donegan, said:

"I'm struck by how many of the young women here have multiple, desperate problems."

If the Secretary of State is to show compassion, he should start with Cornton Vale. If he does that and engages in a reasonable and sensible dialogue, the Opposition will listen. That is why we are not giving the Secretary of State a blank cheque tonight. We shall scrutinise the Bill line by line in Committee, so that at least when it comes out it will be decent and sensible.

9.42 pm

The Minister of State, Scottish Office (Lord James Douglas-Hamilton): The Opposition intend to vote in favour of their reasoned amendment, which, without doubt, would scupper the Bill. It is no use the Opposition pretending that they are in favour of law and order measures when they have repeatedly opposed almost every significant law and order measure that we have introduced over the years. They intend to do that again tonight, in spite of the fact that some of the provisions in the Bill would meet the circumstances of the appalling tragedy that occurred when Maguire murdered that small girl.

The hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) said that we had not consulted the judiciary. We certainly have. The judiciary are the high and mighty in the land and I am not at all worried about them. In January, they were consulted about making the punishment fit the crime and they were consulted on the White Paper, which was published in June this year. Some of the Bill's provisions directly reflect what was said by the judiciary. For example, the provisions to increase the sentencing powers for those convicted of lewd or libidinous conduct were directly a result of the judiciary's representations.

I must take issue with not just the hon. Member for Dumbarton but Lord McCluskey, who was widely quoted last week as saying that no Scot, whether in the House of Lords or the House of Commons, noticed what was being done. He was referring to the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.

I should like to establish the facts. In January this year, the Appeal Court, in the case of Gardner *v.* Lees, found that the 12-month time limit applying to the commencement of proceedings on indictment applied also to proceedings begun by petition, but subsequently reduced to summary proceedings. It had previously been thought, in accordance with earlier judgments of the High Court, that the 12-month period, which had been introduced under the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980, did not apply to proceedings reduced to summary proceedings.

The judgment of the Appeal Court was unexpected, and cast doubt on proceedings in train. It was also clear that the judgment would limit the flexibility previously thought to be available to the Crown in reducing cases from solemn to summary proceedings. We therefore tabled an amendment to the law to return it to the position it was thought to have been before the Appeal Court's decision in Gardner *v.* Lees. At that time, the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Bill was the only vehicle for doing that.

Before tabling the amendment, I wrote to Lord Hope, the Lord Justice General—the senior Scottish judge—to inform him of what we proposed to do. Of course I wrote to the hon. Member for Dumbarton, as the Opposition spokesman on home affairs in Scotland, to draw his attention to the amendment before it was debated.

If Lord Hope did not inform Lord McCluskey, that is a matter that Lord McCluskey should usefully take up with Lord Hope. Amendments were debated as the Bill was considered by Parliament, and the Scottish Office issued a circular to Scots courts in July, when the provisions came into effect, to draw attention to them. It is quite untrue, therefore, to suggest that we attempted to slip through the amendments.

It is also unjustifiable to suggest that our amendments diminish an important right that had been considered to exist since 1980. On the contrary, until the Appeal Court judgment in January 1996, the understanding supported by High Court judgments had been that no such right had been created by the 1980 Act. So the judiciary has most certainly been consulted. If some of the judges do not talk to each other, however, that is their responsibility and not mine.

The hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) asked why we were not presenting measures on anti-social neighbours. The Scottish Affairs Select Committee is examining the matter. We do not wish to anticipate its findings, but we look forward to them.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) raised the issue of children giving their evidence. Children can give evidence without taking the oath or affirming, but the judge must satisfy himself that the child concerned is capable of giving truthful evidence. Those matters are worthy of being considered, and we will no doubt return to them in Committee.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross (Ms Cunningham) mentioned the Barnardo's project, which was targeted on youngsters referred by children's hearings. The funding extension has been granted, and section 10 funding is being considered for the longer term. There have been promising results in preventing young people reoffending at early stages, and I shall encourage dissemination of the facts.

Our policy is driven throughout by protection of the public, and we are determined to follow through with that. It follows that we do not wish to see minor offenders going to prison; we would much rather that they served community service within the community, which is why we have doubled the maximum number of hours. More than 6,000 offenders are ordered to perform community service each year.

Just over a week ago, the hon. Member for Hamilton asked me what measures we were undertaking on fine default. I am very glad to say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today announced that he is extending supervised attendance orders to cover all of mainland Scotland by spring 1998, and we will be making available additional resources of up to £1 million to make that a reality. Of course, we envisage that that policy will relate to fine defaulters. We would much rather that they served supervised attendance orders or community service than went to prison. We believe that that will certainly happen.

Mr. Wallace: Why will that provision apply only to mainland Scotland? What will be the position on the islands?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The islands most certainly will be included, and I give the hon. Gentleman my undertaking on that point.

The hon. Member for Maryhill asked whether research could be conducted on whether women are dealt with more harshly in sentencing than men. I can say only that I very much hope that they are not. Some research has been conducted on this subject, but it has largely been anecdotal. We will consider the hon. Lady's suggestion on that matter.

As for restriction of liberty orders, I greatly enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Davidson) who, in an enlightened way, supported them as well thought out, which they certainly will be. We believe it is right to consult on whether restriction of liberty orders should be available for the under-16s. We intend to pilot the scheme in Scotland, and we need the relevant powers to do so.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross asked whether electronic tagging would be used as an alternative to custody, and the answer is that it most certainly will be. The moral justification for tagging is that, along with other disposals that can be of service in the community, it is an additional safeguard for the public. The hon. Lady asked in what circumstances tagging orders would be used. They might be suitable for football hooligans or for those whose offending was associated with their presence at a particular place. They could also be used for those who drink too much and get into trouble as a result, or for those who shoplift.

Mr. Graham *rose—*

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am tempted to give way, but I have many more points to cover. However, I look forward to the hon. Gentleman being a member of the Committee that debates the Bill.

[Lord James Douglas-Hamilton]

The cost of tagging will be around £1.5 million over two to three years. We believe that will serve the communities in Scotland very much better than the imprisonment of young persons.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Mr. Gallie) made some relevant points on the confiscation of alcohol from under-age drinkers. The key matter is that, in framing our proposals, we have paid great attention to the evidence from Ireland. Under the Bill, if a young person passes a bottle to someone over 18, the police will have the power to confiscate it if they have reasonable grounds so to do. That matter is properly covered in the Bill, as it should have been, and we shall have an effective law in place.

I mentioned—

Mr. Graham *rose—*

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am tempted to give way, but I must continue.

Some offenders, while fit to stand trial, are mentally disordered at the time of sentencing. We believe it is necessary to provide an additional safeguard for the public so that the court will be able not only to recognise the need for immediate hospital treatment but, in the case of someone who has committed a serious crime amounting almost to murder, to specify a custodial sentence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) mentioned that important point.

As for automatic life sentences, it was interesting that the hon. Member for Hamilton did not say that he would support or oppose our proposals. We are not sitting on the fence. I refer to the poll undertaken by the *Daily Record*, not a newspaper known for supporting the Conservatives. No less than 93 per cent. of the respondents supported honesty in sentencing. Those of us who were concerned, distressed and angered by the Maguire case believe that the provisions are necessary. The hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) is welcome to vote with us if he wants effective action to prevent that situation from occurring again.

I should also make it clear that we want automatic sentences of not less than seven years for repeat drug offences. Anyone convicted for the third time of a class A drug trafficking offence will receive a minimum sentence of seven years. That is absolutely necessary.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) asked how often the proceeds of drug deals have been confiscated. I am glad to be able to report that, in the three years from 1993 to 1995, a total of 15 orders were made, with assets amounting to £539,221 being confiscated. In 1996, there have been five orders, with assets of £494,000 being confiscated. We are determined to leave no stone unturned to ensure that that continues.

It is necessary to provide sufficient places in prisons, either through the private finance initiative or through public expenditure. A range of effective programmes must be put in place to train those in prisons, such as sex offenders, to tackle their offending behaviour. Those who go on such courses are more likely to be considered for remission.

We are increasing sentencing powers. The sentencing powers of sheriff courts will increase from three years to five years in solemn cases. The Lord Advocate is to be given the right of appeal against a decision not to impose an automatic life sentence, a minimum sentence for drug trafficking, a supervised release order or a hospital order. That provides additional protection for the public.

Electronic "livescan" fingerprinting is an exciting provision of great importance. It is much easier to take one photographic image than to go through the laborious process of pressing each finger on to a pad. The system also produces a higher-quality print. The exciting aspect of the system for the fight against crime is that it allows the police to check instantly whether a suspect detained in a police station is using a false name or is the subject of an outstanding warrant. I strongly commend clause 42 to the House; it will greatly assist the police in the battle against crime.

The Bill will be welcomed by all who believe in the rule of law. It is time to redress the imbalance that has grown between those who have to keep the law and those who break it. The recent tide of public opinion makes it clear that that imbalance will not be tolerated. We are alive to the wishes of the public and have listened to them. It is the duty of a democratic Government to respond effectively.

We are committed to firm action. The fact that even the Opposition admit that people are demanding firm action imposes a duty on us to meet those wishes. When the hon. Member for Hamilton accuses us of vote-catching and populism, he means that our proposals command general support in the country.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the Opposition's claim to be tough on crime is laughable. They have voted consistently over the years against countless law and order measures, from the prevention of terrorism Act to the police powers of search for offensive weapons. Whatever the partisan quibbling over the Bill, the reality is that the Opposition are seeking to defeat legislation that will bring fast and effective redress to many victims and potential victims of crime, as well as bringing proper retribution to their criminal tormentors. The people of Scotland will not readily forgive those who seek to obstruct reforms that they urgently desire.

We shall build a country that is safe, a country where people do not need to walk the streets in fear, a country where victims of crime will see that justice is done, a country where our people have confidence in the criminal justice system. That is our unshakeable resolve. I hope and believe that we can count on the support of all hon. Members who subscribe to that goal.

Above all, our policy is driven by an absolute resolve that the public of Scotland and of Britain should be properly protected. We shall put in place all necessary measures to ensure that. I challenge the hon. Member for Hamilton—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—to come off the fence and say as soon as possible whether he will support us on minimum sentences for those who commit murder and for repeat sex crime offenders.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to sum up the debate. I commend the Bill most strongly to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 267, Noes 288.

Division No. 7] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Paddy
Ashton, Joseph
Austin-Walker, John
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Mrs Margaret
Beith, A J
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Nicholas *(Newcastle E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, D N
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try SE)*
Cunningham, Ms R *(Perth Kinross)*
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C)*
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Davies, Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Mrs Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Ms Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Miss Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Ab'd'n N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampst'd)*
Jackson, Mrs Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian D *(SE Staffs)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Dr L *(B'ham Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Kennedy, Mrs Jane *(Broadgreen)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Miss Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stret'd)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian *(Makerf'd)*
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Alfred *(Wy'shawe)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Oakes, Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Stanley
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Mrs B *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Ms Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robertson, George *(Hamilton)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Robert
Shore, Peter
Short, Ms Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Speller, John
Squire, Ms R *(Dunfermline W)*
Steel, Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Thurnham, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Wallace, James
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike

Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jon Owen Jones and Ms Angela Eagle.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkins, Robert
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Dykes, Hugh
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel-Jones, Tristan
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, John
Hague, William
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Higgins, Sir Terence
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guildf'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensb'ne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Jopling, Michael
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lloyd, Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Mates, Michael
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Richard
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pattie, Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Redwood, John
Renton, Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Sims, Sir Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsf'ld)*
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Jim *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John D *(Strangf'd)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter

Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'ld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Timothy Wood and
Mr. Bowen Wells.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 60 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 22.

Division No. 8] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Aitken, Jonathan
Alison, Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(N Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Peter
Brown, Michael *(Brigg C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochf'd)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Dykes, Hugh
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble V)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garel-Jones, Tristan
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, John
Hague, William
Hamilton, Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Michael
Hicks, Sir Robert
Higgins, Sir Terence
Hill, Sir James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Douglas *(Grantham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Michael
Howell, David *(Guild'd)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensb'ne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard *(Colchester N)*
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Herts)*
Jopling, Michael
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Edgbaston)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Norman
Lang, Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
Lloyd, Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Mates, Michael
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Richard
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, John
Pattie, Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Redwood, John
Renton, Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond S *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Sir Timothy
Scott, Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Sims, Sir Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsf'ld)*
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir Jim *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Spring, Richard
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Sir John
Steen, Anthony

Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John D *(Strangf'd)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(Calder V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Miss Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesf'ld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Timothy Wood and
Mr. Bowen Wells.

NOES

Alton, David
Ashdown, Paddy
Beith, A J
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Canavan, Dennis
Chidgey, David
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Chris *(Littleborough)*
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross C & S)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
Maddock, Mrs Diana
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll Bute)*
Nicholson, Miss Emma *(W Devon)*
Rendel, David
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Wallace, James

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Archy Kirkwood and
Mr. Don Foster.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 50A(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill, there shall be paid out of money provided by Parliament—

(a) any expenses incurred by the Secretary of State—

(i) in respect of contracts for the remote monitoring of restriction of liberty orders;

(ii) in respect of common police services in Scotland;

(b) any expenses incurred by the Scottish Legal Aid Board in relation to—

(i) the employment by it of solicitors for the purpose of providing criminal legal assistance;

(ii) contracts entered into by it with firms of solicitors for the provision of criminal legal assistance;

(c) any expenses incurred by the Lord Advocate in respect of grants for the provision of forensic medical services; and

(d) any increase attributable to this Act in the sums so payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

Question agreed to.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL

Resolved,

That the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill may be proceeded with as if it had been certified by the Speaker as relating exclusively to Scotland.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

Toll Charges (VAT)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

10.28 pm

Mr. Roy Hughes (Newport, East): In seeking this debate about VAT on toll charges, I confess that I am particularly concerned about the two Severn bridges, although if VAT were imposed on those crossings, it would also apply to many others throughout the country.

Hon. Members, especially my Welsh colleagues, know that, over the years, I have taken a good deal of interest in the Severn crossing. It is, after all, the lifeline of Wales.

The background to this issue is that tolls at present on the Severn crossings are simply prohibitive. For example, for a motor car the charge is £3.80. For a small van, it is £7.70 and for a heavy lorry it is £11.50. They are, I believe, the highest tolls in the country.

Many people on either side criss-cross the channel each day to follow their employment. Many on the Newport, East side and in other areas on the Welsh side cross the channel to follow their employment in Bristol and Avonmouth. Likewise, quite a number do the journey in the opposite direction from Bristol, many of them teachers in south Wales.

On the Newport, East side some years ago, there were many thousands of redundancies in the steel industry, and the people affected at the time were advised by the then Mr. Norman Tebbit, now Lord Tebbit, to get on their bikes. Many of them took that advice, taking jobs in Avonmouth and Bristol, and now have to pay these punitive toll charges. Small companies on either side of the channel—perhaps small plumbing or electrical contractors—need to cross the estuary frequently, and they have to pay £7.70 for their small van. That adds considerably to their costs and subsequently to their charges to the consumer.

The third category is heavy lorries, which pay £11.50 for each journey into Wales. Incidentally, they carry the goods that provide our standard of living in this country, and it has often been said that, when the cost of transport is put up, it just about puts up the cost of everything.

The journey out of Wales across these bridges is free, so the toll is paid on the return journey. Consequently, some companies in south Wales instruct their drivers not to use the bridges when coming back into Wales; accordingly, many lorries are diverted into the villages of Gloucestershire. That in turn causes a good deal of consternation in those villages, because of the serious environmental and safety problems that the diversions cause.

All in all, the toll charges are simply an abomination, and much of the responsibility for this situation rests squarely with the Government. Some years ago, the Select Committee on Transport called for the phasing out of toll charges on estuarial crossings. It was a perfectly sensible recommendation, but, instead of taking that advice, the Government decided to hand over the then existing Severn bridge to a foreign-backed consortium. They also authorised it to build a second crossing, and to charge exorbitant tolls on both bridges so that the company could recoup its costs and more.

I come now to the nub of my argument. From time to time there are reports in the press that the European Commission is threatening to take Britain to court over its refusal to charge VAT on road tolls. On 26 July 1996, a report by Helen Cranford in Brussels in *The Daily Telegraph*—a highly reputable newspaper, although I do not often agree with it—said:

"Britain remained defiant yesterday after the European Commission threatened court action over its refusal to charge VAT on road tolls.

If the EC wins, the case could force up the cost for dozens of crossings such as the Skye Bridge and the Dartford Tunnel"—

and, I might add, the Severn crossings.

The report continues:

"France, along with Greece and Ireland, has also been accused of failing to comply with the EU directive on VAT. All four countries will be given 40 days to change their legislation."

That is clear enough. We recognise that the 40 days have elapsed, but I have been reliably informed that that court action will take a long time and is now expected in the second half of next year.

There is speculation, too, on how the issue will be handled. Will action be taken against all the offending countries at once or will particular countries be singled out? It has been suggested that France will be the first country to be taken to court, particularly because it has a large motorway network, with many toll positions.

The Government take the issue seriously. If such a court hearing went against France, it is pretty obvious that a precedent would be set, and action would quickly follow against Britain. I have a letter dated 24 October 1995 from the then Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), in which he specifically says:

"If tolls were to be subject to VAT it would have to applied at the standard rate of 17.5 per cent. Under EC law it is not possible to apply a reduced rate of VAT to tolls."

What would that mean in practice? It raises an interesting situation. Tolls for cars would rise from £3.80 to £4.47, for light vans from £7.70 to £9.05, and for lorries from £11.50 to £13.51. I repeat that, in Wales, the Severn crossings are our lifeline, and the toll charges are already prohibitive.

Only yesterday, the *Western Mail* contained the headline "Wales next to bottom in the UK prosperity league table". The article stated:

"Prosperity in Wales is lower than almost any other part of the United Kingdom, with a person's average income almost half that of a Londoner.

Of 11 parts of the United Kingdom included in a new prosperity survey, only Northern Ireland has a lower income per head."

Wages in Wales are abysmally low. It was reported in the press a week or two ago that 13,000 people in Wales are paid less than £1.50 an hour. Those people must be subsidised by the state through social service payments. In other words, the firms that employ those people at such a low rate of pay are being subsidised.

Male unemployment in Wales is still about 11 per cent. There is much hidden unemployment. Many people who have been made redundant draw state benefits but do not sign on, so they are not recorded in the unemployment statistics. There is no doubt in my mind that VAT on top of the existing tolls would do a good deal of harm to the economy of Wales.

The European Union Commissioner for Transport is Mr. Neil Kinnock, the former Member of Parliament for Islwyn and former leader of the Labour party. In response to a submission from me on the issue of VAT on toll charges, he said in a letter dated 14 November 1995:

[Mr. Roy Hughes]

"The Commission has been asked by the Member States to promote the harmonization of the different VAT regimes applied. . . if tolls are levied for the use of a motorway or a bridge, VAT should be levied as well."

That seems clear enough, but he goes on to point out:

"if no toll is charged, there will be no VAT payable. In this context, it would be possible, for example, to apply reduced toll rates (or even zero toll rates) for local people and residents who have to use the Severn Crossing often for their daily journeys to and from work."

I referred to that earlier.

I took this matter up—I call it a reasonable suggestion—with the French-American consortium that operates both bridges, which goes under the name of Severn River Crossing plc. The reply came from the well-known former Liberal Member for Montgomery, Lord Hooson, who is now the chairman of that company. In a letter dated 2 October 1995, he said:

"With regard to the suggestion that either no tolls should be levied or that there should be special concessions, these are entirely unrealistic. It was a political decision to build the bridge through the medium of private enterprise."

That is the attitude of his company. Lord Hooson goes on to talk as if the company is finding it a little difficult to make ends meet.

The reality is very different, to say the least. A local journalist, Mr. David Barnes of the *South Wales Argus*, conducted a survey last summer, when we had only the first Severn crossing. He said that the Severn bridge was reckoned to be taking no less than £16,000 per hour. I should point out that toll charges have risen since then.

I have no doubt that the company is simply profiteering on a massive scale. It is all the Government's fault for entering into such an arrangement with the company. The new bridge should have been paid for by the massive amounts they receive in motor taxation. The original bridge was paid for several times over. The so-called debt was merely a paper figure on the Consolidated Fund; it could well have been wiped out at a stroke.

We are now faced with the doctrinaire, meddling approach of the European Union. If court action goes ahead, as is being threatened, we could well face additional toll charges. The Government would shed crocodile tears; they would be in receipt of a nice little earner.

In Wales, it cannot be said too often that the Severn bridges are our lifeline. As a direct result of the Government's handing over control of those bridges to a foreign-backed consortium, we are being subjected to prohibitive toll charges, and, as I have said, the company is profiteering on a massive scale. Any further increases in toll charges would be very damaging to Wales and its economy.

In fairness, the Government proclaim that they do not want the VAT charges. They should therefore tell the European Union in no uncertain terms that they will not accept such interference in our affairs. In Wales, that is the least we are entitled to expect.

10.47 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Phillip Oppenheim): I am glad that the hon. Member for Newport, East (Mr. Hughes) has raised this important issue. He raised a number of other issues that are not directly related to VAT on tolls, and I think that it would be most appropriate if I referred those to the Department of Transport for reply. However, although I hoped that this would be the sort of consensual occasion for which I am best known and, indeed, loved in the House, the hon. Gentleman has provoked me into commenting on one or two matters that are not directly my concern, relating to the whole issue of the tolling of the Severn bridges.

I must say that I find it a little strange that the hon. Gentleman complains about tolls on the Severn bridges. Until he gets his own party to commit itself to taking away the tolls from the bridges, I shall not be able to take that seriously—but I will now give the shadow Secretary of State for Wales an opportunity to say that his party is committed to taking away the tolls from one or both of the Severn bridges.

Mr. Ron Davies (Caerphilly): The fact is that the present Government privatised the Severn bridge crossings. Is the Minister now suggesting that we should nationalise them?

Mr. Oppenheim: I will make two points in response to the hon. Gentleman. First, having been given a clear opportunity to give a commitment on behalf of the Labour party to abolish tolls on the bridge, he failed to do so. He then accused us of privatising a bridge when what we have actually done is build a bridge by means of something called the private finance initiative. I suggest that he refer to his good friend the shadow Chancellor, and ask what is official new Labour policy on the PFI. Is this one of the old redoubts of old, unreconstructed stakhanovite Labour? I do not know.

I shall move to an area in which I hope there is more cross-party agreement. Tolls are not taxed in the United Kingdom. They have never been taxed, and we do not intend to tax them. The hon. Gentleman said that we would shed crocodile tears and pocket a nice little earner if they are taxed. If they were taxed, the Government would have some of the proceeds, but they would not be pocketed; they would go into hospitals and schools. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members guffaw. I do not know where they think the money goes. Who builds the hospitals and accounts for the 70 per cent. increase in NHS spending in real terms since we have been in power?

I emphasise and doubly underline for the benefit of the hon. Gentleman and his constituents and everyone in Wales that we do not intend to tax tolls. We have consistently maintained that position throughout our disagreement with the European Commission on the issue.

I shall deal with a little of the background to the issue. Since VAT was introduced in 1973, we have viewed the large tolled crossings as activities undertaken by the state. European Union legislation accepts that the public activities of the state and of regional and local governments are not subject to VAT. Tolls charged on smaller private crossings are also exempted from VAT, but under a different provision. The European Commission disagrees, claiming that we should tax tolls in the same way that most services for payment are taxed.

To put it mildly, this is a very complicated EU legal issue of the type that would have been familiar to any of the priestly clerks who operated towards the end of the Byzantine empire. The United Kingdom is not alone in relieving tolls from VAT. France, the Netherlands, Greece and Eire do that. However, other member states with tolled roads add VAT to the toll charge.

The United Kingdom has strong and compelling arguments, to which the Commission has not given sufficient weight. The major tolled crossings are owned and controlled by the relevant Secretary of State, and they exist and operate under Acts of Parliament. They are in every sense an activity of the state, but the Secretary of State empowers local authorities and other bodies to run the crossings.

A comparison with the normal activities of local government might be helpful; refuse collection is an example. Councils are required by law to maintain environmental and public health standards. One requirement is to clean the streets and remove the refuse, and council tax is levied to pay for that. There is no dispute with the Commission that council tax is VAT-free. It is therefore eminently sensible that providing and maintaining tolled crossings should, by the same token, be VAT-free.

The Commission first raised this issue some 10 years ago, and in 1989 it announced its intention to pursue infraction cases against the United Kingdom, France and the other member states through the European Court of Justice. However, until July this year, nothing further happened. Then the Commission suddenly announced its renewed intention to deliver its complaint and legal arguments to the European Court of Justice and thus commence infraction proceedings. To put it mildly, that is a somewhat odd way to operate. When that happens, the UK and other member states will be able to respond formally to those arguments and later defend their position before the European court.

It is a lengthy process, and a formal hearing is unlikely to take place for about a year. We wish to use the time to take legal advice on the Commission's latest arguments and prepare the UK's defence. Furthermore, if there is any area in which the EC directive as it stands does not support the UK's position, we shall certainly do our best to influence the matter and change the relevant directive.

It is important that the VAT system creates a level playing field and does not discriminate between public services, whether they are publicly or privately provided. It is important that reliefs are not given indiscriminately, not just in relation to tolls but in all areas.

The Government support the concept of the Commission ensuring that there is a level playing field so that United Kingdom businesses can compete in the single market. It is also right for the European Court of Justice to examine the legal issues where there is a dispute. It is not acceptable, however, that, since 1989, the Commission has prevaricated, and that, instead of approaching the United Kingdom Government again to discuss the issues, it issued merely a press release announcing its intention to pursue cases through the European Court of Justice.

The Government find it particularly concerning that, last year, Neil Kinnock, as European Commissioner for Transport, referred to the tolls issue, which received much media attention. He said:

"if tolls are levied for the use of a motorway or a bridge, VAT should be levied as well."

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), the former Paymaster General, has publicly said, that is simply not so. It would have been nice if the former right hon. Member, now an EU commissioner, had got his facts right and consulted us, or at least discussed the issue with us, before making such a comment.

Despite my earlier harsh words, I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Newport, East had raised this important tax policy issue. I affirm the British Government's absolute opposition to placing VAT on toll charges. We will oppose it in the European Court of Justice. If we find that the directive in any way supports the EU position, we will do our best to influence the directive to change it. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman, his constituents, my hon. Friends and people in Wales and in other regions that benefit from toll bridges.

10.55 pm

Sir John Cope (Northavon) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. Has the right hon. Gentleman informed the hon. Member for Newport, East (Mr. Hughes) that he wishes to speak?

Sir John Cope: No, but as a few minutes remain, I wanted to support the hon. Member for Newport, East (Mr. Hughes)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Member for Newport, East has no objections, the right hon. Member for Northavon may continue.

Sir John Cope: I want to support the hon. Member for Newport, East and my hon. Friend the Minister in relation to the arguments about VAT. In my constituency, I have half of both the Severn bridges into Wales. As it happens, not so long ago, I had responsibility for VAT in the Treasury. Of course, the person who should be responding to the debate is not my hon. Friend the Minister, but Commissioner Neil Kinnock and his colleagues in the European Community, because it is they who have raised the possibility of VAT being charged.

Over many years, I have worked alongside the hon. Member for Newport, East in connection with the bridges. Neither of the bridges would have been built if it had not been for the tolls. The Labour Government supported the tolls on the old Severn bridge just as much as the Conservative Government, and benefited from them. A former Labour Treasury Minister is present who can verify that, if needs be.

It is not right that the European Commission and the European Union should dictate to Britain—or France and the other countries concerned—whether we should impose VAT on the bridges. From the start, we have not done so. We have the right to continue to zero-rate tolls and to exclude them from the VAT system if we wish. I am glad to have my hon. Friend the Minister's assurance that we will fight any court case as vigorously as we can.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 6 November 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Land Ownership (Scotland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Conway.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I take this first parliamentary opportunity to congratulate President Clinton warmly on his re-election in the early hours of this morning. That has a connection with the debate, because, while I do not know whether President Clinton has any Scottish ancestry, several of his predecessors as President were cleared from Scottish land. The whole House will want to congratulate the re-elected President, and we believe that the high hopes that he has for his second term can be realised.

Land tenure and ownership in Scotland is a big subject—too big for an hour-and-a-half debate in this place. I believe that the matter is best suited to consideration, improvement and action in a Scottish Parliament. Westminster does not have a good record on debating land reform in Scotland, nor does it have a record of action in dealing with the many injustices and iniquities of the Scottish land position. The most appropriate description is too little, too late.

I shall range across examples from several constituencies across Scotland. I have tried to notify the hon. Members whose constituencies will be mentioned, and, of course, I shall take interventions as I cross from constituency to constituency.

One thing becomes clear as the subject is researched and ventilated. The idea that abuse and misuse of land in Scotland is confined to any one area of Scotland is wrong. This is a problem, a question and a scandal that affects every area of Scotland. The latest legislative scrap from the Westminster table on the broad issue of land is the Transfer of Crofting Estates Bill, which falls into the category of too little, too late. The response of successive London Governments to the pressing problems of Scotland's rural communities can be illustrated in the same way.

It was some 40 years after the famine, more than a century after the start of the clearances, and only years after the so-called crofters' war, that this place finally passed the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886. That measure was welcomed because of the security of tenure that was finally offered to crofting communities in the north-western counties, but it was a lost opportunity in its failure to tackle other problems, none more pressing than the desire for more land. It was too little, too late.

In the 1890s, London's response to the long-standing and pressing cries for more land was the feeble Congested Districts (Scotland) Act 1897, which created a body with some vision, but its hands were firmly tied by having too few powers and insufficient funding. That was too little, too late. The Act is redolent of an approach to the problem that said that there were too many people as opposed to the people having access to too little land.

In the 1970s, there was some tinkering with the feudal system and crofting legislation. More than two centuries after the first serious calls for land reform in Scotland, this place finally managed to squeeze in a Bill that cut a bit here and reformed a bit there, in the shape of the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976. That created more problems for people who sought recreational access to Scotland's rivers. The 1970s was a lost decade for Scotland, no better highlighted than by the lost opportunity for meaningful land reform.

I shall highlight some recent cases of land abuse and feudal speculation that not only illustrate the failings of the current system of land law but show the real pain that the application of these mediaeval laws causes to families and communities the length and breadth of Scotland. It will be for the people of Scotland to judge—and they will judge very shortly—whether the Government's response in any way matches the scale of the problem.

In the numerous examples of land abuse, the most shocking truth is that none of the perpetrators are breaking the law. The law is their justification, their cloak and shield. That feudal law desperately needs reform.

A number of the cases with which I shall deal today are reasonably well known, at least to some Members of the House, some of them are less so, but they all point to exactly the same conclusion. To end the fear and doubt experienced by families and communities across Scotland, to remove the dead hand of the land ownership lottery, the only solution is radical and real land reform.

The House heard details in a previous Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber (Sir R. Johnston) in May this year of the crisis facing the islanders of Eigg. From Schellenberg to Maruma, the people of Eigg have been badly served by the failings of land law.

In the earlier debate on Eigg, the Minister noted that the island's owner

"has a responsibility not only for the environment, but for looking after his asset"—[*Official Report*, 1 May 1996; Vol. 276, c. 1113.]

Both Maruma and Schellenberg before him clearly neglected this responsibility.

The good ideas for progress on Eigg—there have been some substantial initiatives—have come from the people of the island, but barriers have been erected against them time after time by the laird and landowner. Concerned and frustrated by the lack of development and the insecure future that that presented for the island, the community came together to form the Isle of Eigg Trust five years ago, and began to work towards community ownership. The trust has now produced a business plan for the island, it has sought to develop sustainable woodlands and it is looking for avenues to create new employment, but, without community control, there may be more lost opportunities to come.

Like a petty laird in his castle, Keith Schellenberg, the previous owner of the Island, contemptuously announced that he would never sell the island to anyone who wanted to involve the islanders in the running of their own community. That is a mediaeval attitude, but one which perfectly fits in with our mediaeval feudal land law.

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

Today, the islanders face an even worse situation. While Maruma paints himself into obscurity at home in Germany, he has found himself notorious in Scotland. In a scandalous asset-stripping exercise, Maruma has left the hills of Eigg bare of stock, is overseeing a continuing and rapid deterioration of the island, its land and buildings, and, in a throwback to darker days, has a third of the families without secure tenure, fearful even for the roofs over their heads.

What next for the islanders of Eigg? The public appeal is in its final month. The National Heritage Memorial Fund meets within a few weeks to make a decision on the trust's bid for lottery money—an award which would be more justified in the eyes of many Scots who buy lottery tickets than, say, the £13 million spent by the board on purchasing the Churchill papers.

Like many other hon. Members, my office has been in regular communication with the Isle of Eigg Trust. I support its campaign for community purchase of this estate, and I urge hon. Members to sign the early-day motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross (Ms Cunningham), which supports the campaign. I share their plea for greater community involvement in the development of its own and other landed estates.

The Scottish National party is currently examining the proposals made by the Scottish Land Commission. I am delighted that one of its proposals for community land councils, including the whole community in creating a management plan for their local area, has been given a broad welcome by many groups, including the following comment from the secretary of the Isle of Eigg Trust:

"There should be some measure of protection for fragile rural communities so that their homes and livelihoods cannot be bought and sold at the whim of individuals with little or no understanding. Islands seem to be at particular risk due to romantic notions. The safeguards set out in the Scottish Land Commission report would seem appropriate."

As it is not the policy of the Government to interfere in the private ownership of land, are we to understand that they support the ownership of large areas of Scotland by landowners such as Maruma? In view of the experience of the Eigg residents, how can the Government claim to be sensitive or committed to sustainable development of rural areas?

In a feeble response this May, the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Kincardine and Deeside (Mr. Kynoch) said that the islanders should submit proposals to the rural challenge fund, but is it possible for the Eigg residents to take advantage of any part of the Scottish rural partnership scheme if they do not have secure access to land and buildings? The people of Eigg do not think so, and I think that we should hear today what the Minister has to say.

The Secretary of State for Scotland recently paid a visit to Eigg, and said that he had great sympathy with the predicament facing the islanders. In *The Daily Telegraph* on 26 September this year after his visit, he said:

"They explained the real difficulties facing the island. I was rather appalled by the description they presented to me of an island whose infrastructure is crumbling and suffering from serious neglect. The present situation is shocking and is not sustainable. However it is difficult to see that I can do anything directly, but I will make sure that my officials at the Scottish Office are fully aware".

There we have it. The Secretary of State believes his powers to be almost superhuman across the range of activities and legislation in Scotland, yet he comes to Eigg, expresses sympathy, says that it is a scandal, and adds, "What can I do? I am only the Secretary of State for Scotland."

What I hope to do in this debate is suggest to the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Mr. Robertson) some actions and initiatives that the Government could take, and say whether or not the current legislation programme offers the opportunities to take those initiatives.

I have focused thus far on the island of Eigg, and my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross hopes to have an opportunity to raise her concerns about the Blackford estate in her constituency, but Members will be aware that many other communities across Scotland depend on the whim of their landowner or feudal superior.

As the Scottish Land Commission confirmed—

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian) *rose—*

Mr. Salmond: I see that I have provoked a response from one of the feudal superiors in this very Chamber. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wants to give us some first-hand experience.

Mr. Home Robertson: I have been goaded, Madam Speaker. I hope that it will not come as too much of a shock to my hon. Friends to learn that I happen to be the feudal superior of the Barony of Eyemouth, which may sound rather a quaint title. It involves me in minor chores every now and then, such as signing legal documents for people. They are minor chores to me, but represent considerable legal expenses and all the rest of it for the people involved. It is a ludicrous anomaly. I do not like to sound too radical, but perhaps, before we get into the second millennium, it might be appropriate to abolish once and for all the feudal system in Scotland.

Mr. Salmond: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He will be delighted that his wish not to sound too radical will certainly be taken on board by his Front-Bench spokesman. The hon. Gentleman can now stand for new feudal superiority in Scotland.

He will also be pleased to know that the Scottish Land Commission has confirmed that most landowners are responsible, display an acceptable level of management and effect their duties as feudal superiors, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that one of the great difficulties is not just the inconvenience and expense that his own feudal estates and obligations can place on people, but the fact that an industry has now grown up on land speculation.

People buy up feudal superiorities not to cause some administrative inconvenience, not even to have the title, but to exact substantial sums and penalties on the people who are unfortunate enough to come within their maw. Many landowners are responsible, as the Scottish Land Commission confirmed, but that is to some extent a happy accident. The case I am making today is that there should be no lottery in Scottish land.

There are fears and doubts just now in Knoydart. The land market across Scotland is fluid. With perhaps the exception of the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, West

(Lord James Douglas–Hamilton) and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), who knows who their superior or landlord actually is? No sane person can dispute the words of the hon. Gentleman or deny the need for real reform, some control and greater community involvement.

Landowners make a difference to people's lives, and I shall be detailing to the House the ways in which people from Lanarkshire to Aberdeenshire have had their lives blighted by landowners and land law.

I want to deal first with the problem of pre-emption. This aspect of feudal law is designed to give first claim of purchase to the feudal superior when a property is sold on, or if there has been a breach of a feu condition. I shall focus on one serious example which highlights the inherent problems caused by this remnant of the feudal era. It is a case which will impact either on thousands of former council house tenants who took advantage of the right-to-buy legislation to purchase their council home, or, alternatively, on every council tax payer in Scotland.

The former Ross and Cromarty district council became embroiled in a dispute with Broadland Properties, which, in 1991, became feudal superior for a number of council estates in Ross-shire. As superior, Broadlands sought to take advantage of the powers it retained in the feu, and is now claiming thousands of pounds to grant a waiver for the properties sold to the council tenants. I understand that the Court of Session has found in favour of feudal law and the rights of the superior. That legal principle will shortly be tested further in the House of Lords.

If the current position stands, I am advised that its impact might be felt by other councils, from Glasgow to the Borders, to Moray and right through the highlands. There is potential for vast sums to be paid from council funds to feudal superiors for rights which exist in law but which surely have no place in a decent society.

Hon. Members may be aware that the Government are proposing to abolish pre-emption for their own properties transferred under the forthcoming Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill. I ask a simple question: if that is good enough for the Government in a narrow piece of legislation, why not sweep away pre-emption across Scotland?

Pre-emption allows a remote landowner, or a feudal speculator, to interfere in the day-to-day life of ordinary people, and there is no possible justification for the exercise and abuse of those private property rights.

The unjustifiable aspects of feudal law are numerous, as I am about to demonstrate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross for passing on a letter that she received from Mr. Brian Hamilton—a man currently dubbed in Scotland "the raider of the lost titles". Mr. Hamilton enclosed a letter he wrote in August to the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Kincardine and Deeside, in which he went into some detail concerning the current law on prescription.

As things stand, after the registration of a deed, and followed by 10 years of possession of the property, that deed becomes unchallengeable. Mr. Hamilton pointed out that that allows those who register a deed for property that is not theirs to gain an unchallengeable title to it after 10 years. He failed, however, to point out to the Minister how that law has protected many people from the predatory investigations of companies like his own.

I want to bring some examples of Mr. Hamilton's activities to the House's attention. The first concerns two of my own constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Gauld, from King Edward in Banffshire. They were tenants of Grampian region in the Old Schoolhouse in King Edward. In 1984, they purchased their house from the regional council. One day before the exact 10th anniversary of their purchase, when they would have become the unchallenged owners, they were contacted by Cairnglen—a company specialising in feudal investigations, and were told that, in fact, they were not the real owners of their house.

Before I explain the Gaulds' case, I want to let the House know how Cairnglen operates. It seems to be run by an individual called Gordon Kerr, although there are various dummy directors and others involved in the operation. Mr. Kerr used to work for Grampian region, and I am told that, in that position, he had access to records regarding Grampian region's schools and educational properties. Mr. Kerr knew that, in the 19th century, across Grampian and the country, landowners gifted land and buildings to communities for use as schools. Those properties were rarely transferred, so, when the building ceased to be used for educational purposes, the ownership was open to question.

As I have already said, I have been told that Mr. Kerr is acting upon the knowledge he gained while an employee of Grampian region. He further investigates the properties that he has identified, locates the feudal superior, and then approaches him to offer a mutually beneficial agreement in return for that valuable information. The profits from that grubby exercise can be considerable.

Ordinary individuals are, of course, terrorised by the impact of Cairnglen's investigations. In the Gaulds' case, Mr. Kerr or his representative contacted their feudal superior, Captain Alexander Ramsay of Mar, who duly signed over a disposition in Cairnglen's favour, which was registered in the Register of Sasines on 22 March last year.

Mr. and Mrs. Gauld were fortunate in one respect—when they purchased the property, their solicitor had been far-seeing, because he took out an indemnity for £50,000 from the regional council. It has been reported, however, that the claim, which may be tested in court soon, is not for £50,000 but for as much as double that. Mr. and Mrs. Gauld now face a battle to stay in their own house, or the prospect of paying thousands of pounds on top of that indemnity to "re-purchase" it.

I blame the law for the Gaulds' predicament, but I also question the motives of those who search through old titles and take advantage of obscure clauses and ancient laws to cause such misery for ordinary people. I hope that those who are responsible for the action about to be raised against the Gaulds in the Court of Session now examine their actions and, if possible, their conscience. If they proceed with that claim, they will deserve the contempt and condemnation of society, and, I hope, every Member of the House.

Whether one considers the law of prescription from Mr. Hamilton's angle, or from that of the Gaulds, there is no doubt that change is required. Mr. Gauld was head teacher at King Edward's school for 25 years, and I believe that his wife taught at Turriff academy for the same length of time. They are pillars of the local community.

[Mr. Salmond]

The defence offered by Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Kerr and others of their activities is that they are proceeding against incompetent lawyers or insurance companies, that the only individuals who suffer are regional councils, and that no one will notice the difference. I met the Gaulds earlier this year, and they have had two years of anxiety since the letter came through their door one day before they had the unquestioned title to their property. That retired couple have suffered such anxiety when they should be looking forward to a secure and safe retirement.

People like Mr. and Mrs. Gauld are the pawns in a game played by people like Mr. Kerr and Mr. Hamilton. Those who indulge in such activities and those who sign over their feudal entitlement to them bear a heavy burden of responsibility for the anxiety caused to hundreds of people—it is possible that it could become thousands of people—the length and breadth of Scotland.

Brian Hamilton has profited by many hundreds of thousands of pounds from his feudal speculation, and left lives and nerves shattered in his wake. The law is a mess, but the Government have done nothing to tackle the problem.

In Aberdeenshire, Mr. Hamilton purchased the remnants of the Huntly estate for a mere £2,500. In Kinnoir, he made £125,000 from Grampian region, which sold the property of redundant school buildings to a private bidder. Near Huntly, he proceeded with eviction action against teachers in two properties, and pocketed £150,000. By purchasing feudal superiorities from Aberdeen university, Mr. Hamilton has gained access to a claim for £750,000 of land in Portlethen.

Mr. Hamilton's purchases have not been limited to the Aberdeen area—he has properties in Dundee, Glencoe and Lanarkshire. He has blazed a trail which others are now following, and which poses a threat to many currently unaware and innocent home owners across the country.

Mr. Hamilton's most recent activities, in the village of Boghead in Lanarkshire, highlight yet another flaw in our land law. One case, involving a couple, the Reids, who face eviction and a bill for £30,000, has its roots in an issue already raised in a dispute over ownership, but Mr. Hamilton purchased the right to pursue that couple, and will legally profit from it.

The other cases involved casualty clauses in the ancient leasehold for a number of houses in the village. Again Mr. Hamilton has purchased a right to pursue individuals on the basis of obscure and mediaeval feudal clause. Efforts have already been made to clear those outdated mechanisms from our law, but, as the Boghead example shows, those previous attempts have failed. It is now surely time to clear up that section of feudal law, and I urge the Government to come forward with serious proposals to save others from experiencing the fear and doubts that Mr. Hamilton has created in Boghead.

The solicitor who represents the action group in Boghead, Mr. Cameron S. Fyfe, wrote recently to the Secretary of State for Scotland. He proposed two possible solutions that had been suggested by Professor Sinclair of Strathclyde university, who is an expert on land law. He received a letter from the Scottish Office on 23 October, and without going into detail, it basically stated that nothing immediate is proposed to be done. That must be dismal news for the people of Boghead and frightening news for other people in Scotland who will be caught up in the legal tangles arising from Mr. Hamilton's profiteering from bad laws.

I have condemned Mr. Hamilton, but I would take as genuine his desire for land reform. Now, however, I shall further criticise him for taking his newly purchased feudal superiorities too seriously, and stepping into the character of a remote and arrogant 19th-century laird.

In Boghead, he sought settlement of casualty payments from Mr. George Malone. Mr. Malone is 82 and, according to press reports, faced a substantial bill to settle his casualty debt to Mr. Hamilton. Mr. Hamilton commented on the case to the *Sunday Mail*, saying:

"I'm clearing up the casualty position, and offering the tenants the chance to buy me out. Mr. Malone is a special case. He's old and probably does not have much money. I'll do him a special deal. But if he is making any complaints, then the offer is withdrawn."

Those words sum up Mr. Brian Hamilton.

I have had the opportunity to examine in some detail the recommendations and evidence of the Scottish Land Commission. In the course of 10 public hearings, the commissioners spoke to almost 200 individuals representing groups as diverse as the Scottish Landowners Federation, tenants, crofters and farmers. The examples of land abuse that the commission uncovered are instructive. They included the case of an individual who could not get a grant for a development because the owner of the land in question could not be traced—an example of the incredible secrecy surrounding land ownership in Scotland.

From questions tabled last Session by me and my colleagues on this Bench, it is quite clear that the Government are among the most ignorant—at least, they say they are—when it comes to the question of who owns Scotland. Reform is needed to open up information relating to every aspect of land and the grants given to large estates to develop their land.

Such issues highlight another example from my constituency. The Gardenstown Harbour Trust had to fight for 40 years and trace and translate an obscure mediaeval document before it could prove to the Crown Estate Commissioners that it did not owe mooring fees in its own harbour to the Crown. The Crown Estate Commissioners' actions throughout much of Scotland are disgraceful—chasing vassals with the fervour of Mr. Hamilton, they are obsessively secretive and inadequately accountable, and change and reform are long overdue.

The Scottish Land Commission highlighted the abuse of feudal laws by councils and organisations such as Scottish Homes. It received evidence pointing to the activities of some local authorities and housing agencies that insert feudal conditions into deeds for those purchasing their council houses. The council then sits in judgment on what our constituents do in their own homes, just as it did when it was the real landlord. To add insult to injury, it then charges a fee for doing so.

The land and property law of our country should not be a mechanism that allows some people to make a fast buck. It should not allow one group of individuals to interfere in the property rights of the majority. For all those reasons, it is surely clear to even this Government that Scotland's law is in urgent need of reform.

What is the Government's legislative response in the coming Session? It is the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill—too little, too late. The Government's proposals fail not only to meet the challenge of land reform, but to give the wider crofting community what it desperately wants and needs—more land, bigger holdings and opportunities for new entrants into crofting.

The Government's proposals nevertheless open up the opportunity for genuine debate on land reform in this House. Perhaps, acting together, the Opposition parties could extend the clauses on pre-emption in that Bill to all people in Scotland. There may be a chance to talk about the real needs of crofters and other communities throughout Scotland. The Secretary of State has a cherished public relations touch, which matches his Thatcherite zeal to sell everything whether it moves or not, but his zeal in this cause might well result in land hitting the top of the political agenda. I look forward to the debate on the subject, because the Secretary of State will lose and the people of Scotland will win.

I am grateful to Mr. Andrew Wightman, who recently published "Who Owns Scotland?"—an update of the pioneering work done some 20 years ago by the late Mr. John McEwan. He relates a possibly apocryphal story about a Fife miner, who is walking home one night with a brace of pheasants in his pocket. He meets a landowner who informs him that that land is his, so he had better hand over the pheasants, double quick. "Your land?" says the miner. "Yes," replies the laird, "my land and my pheasants." "And who did you get your land from?" inquires the miner. "Well, I inherited it from my father." "Who did he get it from?" the miner continues; the laird splutters, "His father, of course. The land has been in my family for over 400 years." "Okay, so how did your family come to own the land 400 years ago?" "They fought for it." "Fine," says the miner, "Take your jacket off and we'll fight for the pheasants." The story is apocryphal and humorous.

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): It is not funny.

Mr. Salmond: The right hon. Gentleman says that it is not funny, but it illustrates the fact that we are debating an historic question and an historic injustice. My speech is meant to show that that historic injustice is still being visited the length and breadth of Scotland.

The challenge facing the Government is whether the legislative programme that they have announced—a limited and insubstantial crofting measure—can be extended to gather a cross-party consensus on radical change to at least some aspects of land law in Scotland. No sane or decent person can support the abuses that I have described this morning. Surely, within that piece of legislation, we can take action on casualty clauses and pre-emption rights, and so do something substantial to meet the real needs of the people of Scotland.

The hon. Member on Labour's Front Bench does not seem to think that this issue deserves a high priority—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order.

Mr. Salmond: The hon. Member on Labour's Front Bench does not seem to feel that the issue deserves a high priority.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I rise to express my dismay at the hon. Gentleman's purely negative remarks. I have made no comment whatsoever, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his remarks. I am here to listen to the debate, because Labour realises that land is an important issue in Scotland. I want that scurrilous remark to be withdrawn.

Mr. Salmond: I was referring not to the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), but to his colleague the hon. Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman refers to another hon. Member, he should be specific, especially when making allegations. I heard the hon. Gentleman refer to the hon. Member on the Labour party Front Bench, who is the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall). The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) should make it clear that he was not referring to the Labour Front-Bench spokesman. The hon. Gentleman was, in any case, treading on tricky ground, so I suggest that he hurriedly withdraws his remarks.

Mr. Salmond: I will gladly take your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was referring to the hon. Member for Rutherglen, who interjected from a sedentary position a few seconds ago.

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen): I did not.

Mr. Salmond: He did—I heard it and I am sure that other hon. Members and Mr. Deputy Speaker heard it. I made a fair comment.

My point is that land issues in Scotland have not been treated as a high priority in this House. It is time they were.

Mr. Sam Galbraith (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I cannot let the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen be besmirched in this manner. I made a sedentary intervention—I did not think that the remarks of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) were particularly funny.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Now that we have had it clarified, first, that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan was not referring to the hon. Member for Dumbarton and, secondly, that the sedentary statement was not made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen, perhaps the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan will do the House the courtesy of withdrawing his allegations against both those hon. Gentlemen.

Mr. Salmond: I will gladly do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and in the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he will now continue with his ordinary speech.

Mr. Salmond: In the tradition of collective responsibility, I am sure that the Labour Members will share the responsibility in that matter.

My substantial point is a simple one—that the issue of land in Scotland has not been awarded high priority in this House, and it is time it was. It is time for substantive

[Mr. Salmond]

change. Before us, we have a part of the legislative programme that addresses a single narrow issue in the Scottish land debate and was chosen by the Secretary of State for his own purposes.

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): The hon. Gentleman has raised an important—indeed, fundamental—matter, and I agree that the House should address it. I am sorry to say that the unfortunate way in which he has presented it sometimes gives offence, but the matter is serious and must be addressed, so I welcome the fact that he has brought it up.

Mr. Salmond: I exercised substantial restraint this morning when I dealt with the cases. The feelings that I expressed are as nothing to the feelings being expressed by many people the length and breadth of Scotland who are experiencing real difficulties caused by those ancient feudal overhangs.

The challenge, whether for Conservative Members or for Opposition Members, is whether we shall rise to that issue—whether the current legislative programme will give an opportunity to deal with at least some of those abuses. I ask a fundamental question: will the Minister and his colleagues at least consider whether the scope of the narrow measure on crofting that has been laid out in the legislative programme can be extended to tackle some of the substantive issues that I have discussed this morning?

I regret that the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Walker) does not always appreciate the tone in which I speak. I would not expect us always to agree, but I expect the issues to stand on their merits. Something requires to be done about the state of land in Scotland, and any hon. Member who does not rise to that challenge and support that cause will have to face his or her constituents with some humility in less than six months' time.

10.10 am

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): I am glad that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has raised the important issue of land tenure in Scotland. As he said, and as we all know, it is an extremely complicated issue, which cannot be rushed into willy-nilly at short notice. It is impossible to make progress between now and the general election, so I believe that the next Government should consider giving the matter careful thought in a major inquiry.

I am not deprecating the land commission instituted by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), but I wish to place on the record the fact that it is not a statutory body but an ad hoc committee set up by the Scottish National party for its investigation into land tenure in Scotland.

I was glad that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan said that there are many highly responsible landowners in Scotland, who do good work and look after tenants and add greatly to the community. Perhaps he tends to overlook the difference between land tenure and land management. It is very important to ensure that land is managed properly, irrespective of who owns it. He should bear that thought in mind in future discussions.

I understand that, this weekend, the Scottish Landowners Federation, of which I am a member—although I do not speak on its behalf—will give a response to the Scottish National party's land commission inquiry. Unfortunately, this debate was a few days premature, so the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan did not have the benefit of advice from the federation.

I cannot accept what the hon. Member said about the operations of Cairnglen and others. It is reprehensible to purchase feus with the objective of buying out the current owner of the property, and we all want that problem to be sorted out in the not too distant future.

Such behaviour is very different from that of those who happen to have owned feu titles for very many years; when a building changes use, by law it must fall back into the ownership of the person who gave the original feu. That is different from the position, which the hon. Gentleman rightly outlined, of a company or individual searching out feus and buying them up, and putting the current owner of a house in an impossible position. I agree that that is very unfortunate, and it should be cleared up by legislation in the foreseeable future.

Mr. Brian Wilson (Cunninghame, North): First, does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in my constituency, such as on the island of Arran, long-standing owners of the land exercise the powers of feudal ownership ruthlessly, so the distinction between people does not apply? He does not appreciate the fact that people suffer from that. Secondly, does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Scottish Law Commission has prepared a draft Bill, which is lying unused? It could be made law very quickly, in this Session of Parliament, if there were any political will to do so.

Sir Hector Monro: I note what the hon. Gentleman says. I am not aware of either point in detail.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan said that the debate was about land tenancy in Scotland. When I was responsible for agriculture in Scotland, I felt that we should seek a way of modernising—if that is the right word—land tenancy in Scotland. However, the subject is complicated, and I believed that it was necessary to take everyone with us, both the landowners, who were quite keen to go ahead with changes, and the National Farmers Union of Scotland, representing many tenant farmers who were very reluctant to alter the present arrangements.

I believe that we could have proceeded on the basis that the legislation was not retrospective, and that we should be allowed in future, as was agreed in England in legislation two years ago, to let land on an agreed term of five, 10 or 15 years, or whatever was wanted, with repossession at the end of the term. That seems to be working quite well south of the border.

One aspect of the feu system is worth considering in terms not of ownership but of planning. Often, especially some years ago, that additional hurdle to take in terms of planning has been beneficial in retaining a great deal of the beauty of the countryside. We do not want to throw that away without careful thought.

I shall make only one more point, because others want to speak, and the subject needs more detailed discussion than can be conducted in this short debate.

We must reach a result that is universal for the whole of Scotland—rural and urban. It would be wrong to change laws affecting one area rather than another. We

must aim to create a simplified system. I agree that the issue is highly complicated and technical, especially where the feudal system is concerned. Many people forget that, in many cases, it is possible to buy out feus at relatively modest cost.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan raised this matter, and I am glad that the my hon. Friend the Minister will respond. The subject deserves further discussion. We shall have to hold a full inquiry for legislation some time in the more distant future.

10.17 am

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): The House is indebted to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) for securing a debate on the very important topic of land tenure and land ownership in Scotland. I shall make two or three quick points in the short time that I have.

My first point—an important one—is that, as the hon. Member emphasised, land tenure and ownership has risen to the top of the political agenda in Scotland during recent years. He knows that many of the issues of land ownership and land use were mentioned in a debate that I secured last year on wilderness areas. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber (Sir R. Johnston) secured a similar debate earlier this year.

Those debates, the spate of articles that have appeared in the Scottish national press in recent months, and the two excellent books—one by Andy Whightman and the other by Auslan Cramb—show that the issue of land tenure and land ownership is climbing the political agenda in Scotland. It is doing so because people realise that the feudal pattern of land ownership in Scotland is not a harmless relic but has real implications for people's lives, especially in the highlands; and I shall speak about the highlands.

One good example has already been mentioned: the legislation proposed by the Government on crofting trusts. It is not merely an irony that the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill was launched in the House of Lords. It is a well-worn pattern under this Government that legislation affecting land management and land use issues originates in the other place. That was the case with the Deer (Scotland) Bill in the previous Session, and we saw how it was mauled in the other place. I am afraid that the pattern will be repeated with the crofting trusts Bill.

That is a clear illustration of the continuing power given to a small class or caste of people by their ownership of vast tracts of land in Scotland. That could have immediate financial consequences for the Government, because the crofting trusts Bill creates the possible right of pre-emption, which may be exercised by former landowners over estates now owned by the Secretary of State, and might result in their receiving a small—or even a large—financial windfall. That is a clear example of the continuing effect of land ownership on public policy in Scotland.

My second example is more local but still relevant to the debate. It shows that the impact of land ownership is manifested not only in what landowners can do, but in what they can prevent.

I refer to the activities of the Uig and Hamnaway estate in my constituency, which recently objected to proposals by local business people to set up a mussel farm near one of the lochs on the estate. Many people have grounds for objecting to economic developments, but the stark fact is that such an objection from a large estate carries more weight with the Crown Estate Commissioners who finally decide those matters than would an objection from an ordinary crofter. That is a further example of the continuing power and influence of landowners in the highlands.

I shall not reiterate the arguments that I advanced in the debate last year, except for one point that is particularly relevant. I proposed the introduction of new and strict controls over the sale of large estates in the highlands. There is currently a controversy over Eigg, but each year large tracts of land are sold off to the highest bidder, regardless of community interests or environmental need. That is a continuing abuse, which must be halted.

I suggested last year that we pursue the proposals by the Highlands and Islands development board almost 20 years ago, when, in a report in 1978, it called for mechanisms to control the sale of land. It is about time we legislated for such mechanisms. That will be an early task of the Scottish Parliament that will be set up by the next Labour Government.

My proposal is that there should be a specialised land commission or land use council covering the whole of the highlands and islands, which would have powers to veto the proposed purchase of any estate which did not conform to the environmental and economic criteria set down by the land commission. Every prospective purchaser of a large highland estate should be obliged to carry out an environmental and a developmental audit, and the purchase should be allowed to proceed only if those audits were passed. Any subsequent failure to conform to the terms of those audits should result in the purchaser having to relinquish the title and sell it on to another person or body able to fulfil the terms of the audit.

My proposal would involve no compulsory purchase, no nationalisation, no state ownership and no cost to the public purse, but it would soon have a dramatic effect, as it would weed out the most unsuitable speculators and purchasers of large estates in the highlands. It would deflate the speculative value of those estates and thereby put land ownership within the reach of ordinary communities, which, as we see, are aspiring to take over ownership and control of their own estates.

Scotland's feudal pattern of land ownership is not just a quaint relic from another era; it still represents a serious distortion of the social and economic life of the highlands and islands, and it is about time it was reformed.

10.25 am

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Cromarty and Skye): I shall contribute briefly to the debate, to enable other hon. Members to make their contributions.

The only part of the speech by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) with which I would take issue was his description of the crofting legislation that will shortly come before us as "too little, too late". It is certainly too late, but my anxiety is that it is too much, in terms of its blank permissiveness. It grants a blank cheque, financially and legislatively, to the Secretary of State. I agree with the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) that, in the coming weeks, we shall see the extent to which it is gutted in the other place.

[Mr. Charles Kennedy]

It is 20 years since the last Government-proposed crofting legislation went through the House. It is not satisfactory for a matter so complex and convoluted to be considered only once in a generation. In a Scottish Parliament, we could do better.

In a throwaway phrase, the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) highlighted the problem when he spoke about the many good estate owners and landowners who "look after" their tenants. Some of us find such paternalism offensive. It has no place in the last few years of the 20th century, as we head into the 21st. It should be a matter not of tenants being looked after, but of people having their own rights.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the Ross and Cromarty district issue. Let me probe the Minister on that. The matter is before the courts and has arisen with a right of pre-emption which has been exercised locally. It could have considerable knock-on effects. The basic problem, which arose from the Black Isle originally and has gone all the way to the House of Lords, is that the Government thought that they had attended to the issue of the rights of pre-emption in 1982, and that council house sales overrode those rights. Of course, that was not the case. Although we would very much wish their Lordships to overturn the situation, that is clearly taking some time.

The Government seem to be contradicting what they said in the mid-1980s. As long ago as 1985, the Scottish Office expressed the view that, if litigation highlighted the problem, which it now has, the Government would immediately contemplate amending legislation. They have been immediately contemplating it for more than 10 years now.

The Government could have addressed the issue with what would probably have been a one-clause Bill. They themselves acknowledged that there had been an oversight when they passed the right-to-buy legislation. They should have addressed the issue rather than causing cost to the public purse—the local authorities, the Government and the Law Lords—and distress, frustration and anxiety for the individuals concerned. I make a plea to the Minister: why have the Government waited so long, and why have they not acted in the way they said they would act 10 years ago?

Two recent examples from my constituency underscore the growing sense of anger about the issue. Two rural primary schools are being closed on the Lovat estate. One is at Knockbain near Beauly, and the other is at Kirkton five miles away. Despite the fact that both schools were built and maintained with public money, Highland council has no option but to give them back to the Lovat estate, which owns the ground on which they were built in the 19th century. There is no question of the legality of that; the Lovat estate is on all fours and is quite right.

Councillor Jimmy Munro, who represents the Beauly and Strathglass ward, sums up the problem well. He says:

"I don't agree with the system, but we're stuck with it. If we had been able to sell the two redundant schools, we could have put the money towards the new Kirkhill school, which would have meant that the council would not have had to borrow so much money to build it."

When one considers that a community asset, which has been in community use and community upkeep for more than a century, is reverting to an estate, one can understand why people feel so strongly, especially as the money could have been better applied elsewhere.

Another example concerns a constituent who came to me recently, who wanted to build a small workshop and back porch on his house. He is not a well-off constituent, but a small business person who is operating at the margins. The estate on which he lives demanded a fee of £500 to give approval for him to carry out the work. It advised him that that was standard practice. The fee is £500 a throw, and there are many such approvals every month of the year. That is pernicious activity by estate owners in this day and age.

The Scottish Law Commission has been mentioned. I was not filled with enthusiasm by the response from the Minister of State when I asked him when he intended to take up the gauntlet thrown down by the commission, and to embark on a degree of reform. He replied that the matter was one to which the Government would give due priority. The letter was signed by the Minister of State, who is the younger brother of the Duke of Hamilton. He contested the succession to the earldom of Selkirk in the heraldic court. That does not fill one with enthusiasm or a belief that the Minister of State will give as high a priority to dealing with feudal issues as many of our constituents would wish.

10.32 am

Mr. Sam Galbraith (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): All of us are grateful to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) for introducing this debate on a very important topic. He was more restrained than usual, and rightly so, because the feudal system and laws about which we are talking are a relic of the Scottish Parliament. In other words, they are laws enacted by Scots to the detriment of Scots.

Although he may contend that a Scottish Parliament might have removed those laws, fortunately for his case, the matter has never been put to the test. The hon. Gentleman was also correct to be restrained, because the last Labour Government started to do something about the feudal system, with the redemption of feu duties. They did not abolish feudal rights, but they might have done so if the hon. Gentleman's party had not brought down the Government and sided with Margaret Thatcher.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan had another reason to be constrained. From the cases he described, he seemed to be making the point that has dogged all land ownership questions in the country for some years. It is not a question of who owns the land and whether it is in foreign ownership or Scottish ownership. The people the hon. Gentleman described were Scots abusing the Scots. I hope that we shall hear no more of the argument that, if only all the land was owned by the Scots, everything would be fine, and that the only problem is the foreign owners.

As the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) rightly pointed out, there are two issues here. One is the ownership of land, which is important, but the other is how the land is managed, the point on which I shall concentrate. A good owner can manage the land well, and a bad owner can manage it extremely badly. That is true of management of the grouse moors, the lochs and the deer forests. That point also affects the area in which I am particularly interested, which is access to land. The approach to access is variable; the Minister and I have discussed this on other occasions.

As the Minister knows, a concordat has been established by Scottish Natural Heritage which is a major step forward in agreement and co-operation between

landowners and those who use the mountains about access to the land. This is probably the last chance the landowners have before legislation giving the right to roam is introduced, and they have a duty to make it work. The great problem with the concordat is not that it is voluntary, but that, although it was negotiated with the Scottish Landowners Federation, about one third of landowners are not members, and the federation cannot enforce the concordat anyway.

Despite the concordat, there is still a persistent hassle factor in the Scottish mountains. By that I mean trying to gain access to the mountains and finding notices that say, "Because of Government restrictions, no access". We know that there are no Government restrictions and that the notices are misleading, but the signs hassle individuals and restrict their access.

There are locks and gates throughout the highlands, but not because there are picture house queues waiting to gain access to the mountains. I am not talking about areas like Snowdonia or Sca Fell. I am talking about places like Arkle and Foinavon, where, at almost any time of year, one can walk for a week and never see anyone. I hope that the Minister will keep an eye on access, especially in the particular area that we discussed when we considered the Deer (Scotland) Bill.

Since that Bill was passed, I have done a quick check on notices saying, "Stalking in progress, no access to the hills". Again, those notices are not legally binding, but people adhere to them, partly because they do not want to be shot when they are moving around the mountains. As the Minister will know, stalking is not permitted on a Sunday, yet my recent check has shown that such notices are still up on Sundays. I have asked the Deer Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage to consider the matter, and I hope that the Minister will ask them what they are doing about the problem. If we are to get access, there has to be a two-way process.

I now return to my hobby horse—the national parks, an important form of land management. They have been around since just after the second world war. The Minister of State was responsible for setting up the Countryside Commission study into the matter in 1988, and it reported in 1990. We are still no further forward with national parks. The pressure on Loch Lomond is getting unbearable, and the pressure on the Cairngorms is ripping the area apart. There is bad land management there, and scars such as the Cairngorm funicular are being proposed.

It is proposed that the Cairngorms should become a world heritage site. That, however, will not happen under the current arrangements. The Cairngorms are important not just to this nation's heritage, but to the world. Will the Minister please once again consider national park status, if not for all the areas proposed, at least for the two I have mentioned?

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan was right to say that land is an important political issue, and it will become more important. As people get more time and as cities expand, we need the lungs of the mountains, the wilderness and the countryside. It is wrong that those areas are exclusively in the hands of individuals, be they Scots or foreigners. We all have an interest in those lands. They should be held in trusts. We must give this issue more importance; otherwise, we are in peril of reneging on our responsibilities.

10.39 am

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth and Kinross): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on securing this debate, and on his speech. Before I come to the specific issues he raised, I want to mention briefly a matter that has been a constant source concern and complaints in my constituency: the management of Blackford estate. It is not a highland estate, so it shows that these problems are not confined to the highlands and islands.

The problem of the Blackford estate is often raised by farmers, local residents and local ministers of religion, who are concerned by the issues that are brought to the fore when they consider the management of the estate. The estate contains many farmhouses—they are in double figures—some of which are visible from the A9, which is one of the main roads through Scotland. Those farmhouses have been allowed to fall into rack and ruin over a period of years. Many people living in the area were raised in those houses, and they must stand by and watch what was a perfectly adequate family home being allowed to fall into dereliction. The estate is in absentee ownership. The owner appears to have little concern for the local community, especially in Blackford.

Those houses could have been used as homes in a part of Scotland that has a housing shortage. As recently as last week, the estate owner was trying to obtain planning permission to demolish some of those houses.

Ian Thomson occupied one of the bothie cottages to highlight the fact that it is nonsense for houses to be allowed to fall into dereliction and for land not to be used, yet when someone tries to do something about one of the houses or one of the fields, attempts are made to remove him. Those attempts failed in court at the first hurdle. The sheriff felt that it was hard to see how it could be argued that Ian Thomson was doing damage to property, given that he was repairing property that the owner was allowing to fall into dereliction. It is an astonishing case, but unfortunately it highlights what is happening.

Land ownership seems to be an area in which vandalism is legal, which is exactly what is happening on the Blackford estate. Even the Scottish Landowners Federation, which is hardly a radical body, does not defend the management practices of Blackford estate. That estate is 30 to 45 minutes from Glasgow—a centre of population in Scotland. This issue is not confined to the far north-west or to the islands.

The Minister will try to convince us that matters are not as bad as they seem. I dare say that he will boldly state that the Government's support for private ownership rights is paramount, and he will condemn any outside interference in those rights or in the land market. Perhaps he will even call such attempts bolshevik, which was the Government's considered response to the 17,000-word Land Commission report.

If he does so, he will have failed to grasp the central arguments of our case. It is precisely the interference of a handful of occasionally unpredictable feudal superiors and landowners in the private rights of the majority that concerns us and the people of Scotland. We urge the Government to undertake land reform to protect the rights of the majority.

I am sure that the Government will ask us to wait for the report of the Scottish Law Commission before they take any action. That head-in-the-sand attitude is not good

[Ms Roseanna Cunningham]

enough. Why should the House accept that nothing can be done to remove the threat to the majority posed by pre-emption rights, when the Government blithely propose to remove such rights as they affect their own property in the forthcoming Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill?

My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan raised the issue of casualty clauses and their impact on the villagers of Boghead. Letters from the Boghead residents' solicitor, to which he referred, have been copied to me. They offer a way forward, with or without the Law Commission report.

They point out that the Feudal Casualties (Scotland) Act 1914 abolished feudal casualties, but not the leasehold casualties that have had an impact in the Boghead case. In the opinion of most experts, that was an oversight. The principle of removing those casualties is not in question. From what I have heard today, it is not called into question by Conservative Members. Those letters offer a solution: an Act of sederunt passed by the Lord President of the Court of Session amending the legislation to prevent the likes of Mr. Hamilton from enforcing his right to payment of casualties.

The Scottish Office reply says that the Lord President is concerned about the vires of such an action. I am sure that hon. Members would offer him full support if he took such a course of action. I hope that the Minister will deal with that point.

That is a short-term solution, but it would have an impact on Boghead residents. In the longer term, it has been suggested that the Long Leases (Scotland) Act 1954, which contained a provision for the transfer of such leases into feus—but only for a period of five years—be reinstated. That is a simple measure, following on from an accepted principle, but it has been rejected by the Government in favour of a wait-and-see approach.

Those are two possible solutions to the problems outlined during the debate. I hope that the Minister will take them as constructive suggestions. I think that there would be consensus in the House on reform, but I fear that it is a challenge that the Government do not want to take up.

With the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill, the Secretary of State has given us a purely cosmetic Bill that will make little difference to the lives of crofters affected, and absolutely no difference to more than 90 per cent. of crofters. That is not good enough, and the Government will be judged on their failure. I hope that they will accept that we can have consensus on the changes that can be made, which will make a difference to many people in Scotland and which will be welcomed by the people of Scotland as a whole.

10.46 am

Mr. Bill Walker (North Tayside): I shall be brief, because hon. Members on the Front Bench want to speak. Some years ago, I moved an amendment that I thought dealt with the problems in Blairgowrie relating to ownership, feus and so on. To my horror, I discovered that it had not, although the Law Society of Scotland and I thought that we had addressed the matter.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. I also welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has raised the matter. I hope that never again in Scotland will we fight one another for our land.

Mr. Brian Wilson (Cunninghame, North): I shall be extremely brief. Feudal power and law are nothing more nor less than an up-market protection racket. Until we recognise that, we will not confront the problem with the seriousness it deserves.

I want to draw a distinction between the activities of the newcomers to this field, such as Mr. Brian Hamilton, and the traditional exercisers of those powers. It is a racket waiting to be exploited. It is just as bad for the people who live under the Seafield, Lovat and Arran estates of this world, which have silently and perniciously exploited these powers for many years. The first part of the reform—the redemption of feudity—was put through by the previous Labour Government. It is essential that the job is finished, and that the whole business of feudal power is swept away, because it has no place in the last decade of the 20th century.

10.47 am

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on securing this debate, and on bringing some important, fundamental and serious issues to the attention of the House. We empathise with individuals, such as Mr. and Mrs. Gauld, on their heartache and concern. As the hon. Gentleman said, they are at a stage in their lives when they should have some contentment and peace of mind. Instead, they are far from content, and are living on a day-to-day basis. Something must be done about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) mentioned the Scottish Law Commission's draft Bill on feudal reform. I suggest to the Minister that we could implement that straight away. The Opposition would be happy to co-operate with him on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith) referred to land management.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): There is no draft Bill; nor is there a report.

Mr. McFall: I think that there is a draft Bill. I should also remind the Minister that, in 1993, I introduced the Carrying of Knives (Scotland) Bill and that, within 24 hours, the Government introduced a similar draft Bill. If the Government could show the same concern and attention to the land issue as they did to the knife issue after I introduced my Bill, the Opposition would be very happy to co-operate with them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith) said, the issue of land reform is extremely important. I am very concerned about Loch Lomond. There is much history on the issue—going back to 1945, when the Ramsay committee recommended establishing national parks. In 1965, Prof. Robert Grieve made the same recommendation. In fact, the Minister of State, Scottish Office commissioned the Countryside Commission to look at Loch Lomond—and, in July 1990, it recommended national parks, although nothing has yet

happened. The fact on which the House should focus—whether we are talking about the Cairngorms or Loch Lomond—is that voluntary solutions do not work.

In the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994, the village of Luss, in my constituency, was taken out of the former district of Dumbarton and put into Argyll and Bute. No concern was shown about the feelings of local people when making that change, and it was made in the most back-door manner. Today, I received a letter from one of my constituents about a planning application for a coffee house in Luss, which will despoil the village's amenity. The former Dumbarton district council worked on the issue with local residents, and, with section 50 planning, it ensured that the local environment would be treated properly.

The planning application was passed by three votes to two by the new Argyll and Bute council—despite the desire of the local representative, Councillor William Petrie, that it not be approved—and the approval will despoil the local amenity. In her letter, my constituent states that local residents are fighting the decision to approve the application, and that they have engaged a Queen's counsel to fight the injustice. The QC thinks that there is a good case, because

"Argyll and Bute Council should not have gone ahead with the second application before the Scottish Office had dealt with the appeal on the first. We have almost raised the Q.C.'s fee of £6,500 and as none of us are well off, you will know how strongly we feel about this issue!"

That letter goes to the heart of the issue of planning and land management in Loch Lomond. The Government paid no attention to the issue in the 1994 Act, and, as a result, we are faced with the current situation.

I should tell the Government that there can be change by reaching a consensus with the Opposition. Even in the Government's dying days, the Opposition would be quite happy to co-operate with their proposals—or with any Government's proposals—on the issue. Yes, we have used the Scottish Grand Committee in the past, and why cannot we use it again? The Opposition are ready, but we are waiting hear whether the Government are ready.

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on securing this debate, and I have listened with great interest to the wide-ranging points that have been raised in it. I fully agree with the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan that land tenure and land ownership are vital issues. A sound system of land tenure and reliable and accessible information on it is an essential cornerstone of any economic system.

I acknowledge many of the criticisms of the current system that have made during the debate. Indeed, the Government are publicly committed to reform and, in particular, to abolition of all remaining aspects of the feudal system. I can assure the House that our aim is to provide Scotland with a system of land tenure that will meet the needs of the 21st century and beyond.

Mr. Salmond: We all welcome that declaration, although I hope that the Minister is not about to say "but", and then tell us that it will be delayed for some time. There is pending legislation, and he has heard about pre-emption and casualty clauses. Will the Minister at least tell us that he will widen the scope of that legislation to deal with those two matters, which are causing such misery and were the subject of previous legislative attempts that failed? Will he answer that precise point—that we can take action now—instead of waiting, as he is about to tell us?

Mr. Robertson: Perhaps if the hon. Gentleman will allow me to speak—he spoke for half an hour, and I have seven minutes to respond to a debate that lasted one and a half hours—some of his questions might be answered.

To make progress with that aim, in 1990 we asked the independent Scottish Law Commission to begin a major and wide-ranging review of property law to provide advice on the way ahead. In 1991, the Commission issued a discussion paper on abolition of the feudal system, and it is now working towards producing a report. As hon. Members will appreciate, it is an extremely complex area of the law. The Commission is wrestling with considerable technical difficulties, and with the often conflicting views obtained during consultation on how those should be resolved.

In October 1995, the then Lord Advocate appointed Professor Kenneth Reid, a respected expert in property law, to be a member of the Commission, with the specific remit of completing the property law projects as soon as possible. We have made it clear to the Commission that that work is a priority, and I would like to see it completed before work on any new areas of law reform is begun.

I understand that the Commission is making progress towards finalising its proposals, and I await its report with considerable interest. In such a complex area, we would not wish to move forward without the benefit of the Commission's advice. We would, of course, also wish to obtain the views of all interested parties on what the Commission proposes. However, I can assure the House that, once the most appropriate approach is established, we are committed to completing the reform of the feudal system and will give priority to any required legislation.

We have heard in today's debate of the problems that owners of some leasehold properties—for example, those in Boghead in Lanarkshire—are facing over unexpected demands for casualty payments. I have the greatest sympathy for those who find themselves in that unfortunate position. The Government do not, however, have any powers to intervene in what are essentially private individual cases of dispute.

I should emphasise that the casualty payments that are being levied by landlords, and the conditions in leases which provide for them, are entirely legal. They are set out in the title deeds of the relevant properties. It is for solicitors acting on behalf of clients intending to purchase leasehold properties to check the conditions of the lease and to make clear those conditions and their implications for their clients. If that is not done, it is open to individual owners to make negligence claims against solicitors who advised them when they acquired their properties.

There are no quick legislative fixes for the problems. Existing leasehold casualties could not be abolished without provision to compensate the landlords for loss of future income. Leasehold casualties that are already due would not be affected, and would remain payable by the tenant. Therefore, in the short term, no legislative solution would benefit the affected residents in Boghead.

[Mr. Robertson]

The law on long leases is one of the subjects to be tackled by the Scottish Law Commission as part of its review of property law, and progress will be made once the work on the abolition of the feudal system is completed.

After listening to today's debate, it is clear that land ownership in Scotland is an issue that rouses very strong passions, and it is understandable that hon. Members should wish to debate the issue. It was in that context that, as much as he tried to be measured in his speech, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan could not quite stop the dark side of nationalism from appearing—the dark side that, under his leadership, has been the hallmark of the Scottish National Party.

The SNP's hallmark is characterised by xenophobia, and by the ugly face of nationalism. What he did not mention, however, are the sinister—indeed, odious—forces that drive him to xenophobia. Those forces are perhaps best displayed in his party by its youth wing, which has produced a leaflet. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I quoted from the leaflet, you would stop me after I read the 11th word, because it is nothing short of obscene filth, based on the obscene xenophobia that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan peddles as his political creed in Scotland.

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is this travesty in order? It has absolutely nothing to do with the debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is such a wide-ranging debate that, at the moment, the Minister's speech is in order.

Mr. Robertson: Therefore—if the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan is serious about the issues that he raised today, and serious in bringing them to the attention of the House and the Government—he will take this opportunity to disown the obscene and xenophobic filth produced by his party's youth wing. My right hon. Friend Secretary of State has challenged him on two occasions to dissociate himself from the remarks. I now give him a third opportunity, in the House, to dissociate himself from his party's youth wing and from that leaflet.

Mr. Salmond: I will give the Minister the opportunity to tell us what he will do about the 900-year history of feudal obligation in Scotland. What measure will be in the Government's legislative programme, and when will the Minister start addressing the issue instead of delivering his mindless abuse?

Mr. Robertson: It is now on the record, for the third time, that the hon. Gentleman will not dissociate himself from that leaflet, which, as I said, is nothing short of obscene, xenophobic and anti-English filth.

A great deal of nonsense has been talked about land ownership and management in Scotland. A landowner who does not live on his estate is not necessarily a bad manager of the land. There are those who enjoy harmonious relationships with their tenants and the local communities. Their estates are well-managed and are they able and willing to maintain and develop their estates and consequently continue to support or even expand local employment. Conversely, there are those who reside on their estates who may be less satisfactory landlords.

I repeat my belief that Scotland's system of land tenure and land ownership is flexible, resilient and capable of being adapted to meet the needs of the next century. The Government are committed to doing just that on the basis of advice from the Scottish Law Commission. We are also prepared to take direct action, where appropriate, to ensure that general policy on land ownership is adapted to meet the needs of particular areas of Scotland where the normal mechanism of the market is unlikely to work effectively. We have had a good debate, and I am confident that the Government have found the best way forward.

World Poverty

11 am

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate a sphere of policy and practice that is of the greatest concern to the Government, to many charitable organisations and to the overwhelming majority of people in Britain—our commitment to overseas aid and the initiatives that we are taking to relieve world poverty.

The timing of the debate could not have been more fortuitous, as we are at the time of year when my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor is doing his pre-Budget arithmetic and making difficult decisions about the best way to balance the many and inevitably competing priorities and demands on public expenditure. He will be seeking, quite rightly, to exercise the prudence for which he is renowned—from which our economy is now reaping the rewards—and to ensure that sound public finances are maintained, delivering sustainable growth and permanently low inflation.

Against that background, a hardy perennial feature of political life in Britain is that rumours about cuts to some key Government budgets and boosts to others abound. Civil servants—and others, I suspect—often set hares running to persuade campaigning groups to lobby on their behalf with at best speculative and at worst downright mischievous and misleading reports of reductions in spending on important elements of policy. Allegations that the axe is about to fall on overseas aid always seem to peak in October and early November. If those rumours had regularly proved accurate, our overseas aid budget would not be at its current substantial level.

This morning, we have the opportunity to raise the quality of the debate beyond rumour-mongering about the forthcoming Budget, to put on record the size and character of the overseas aid that the Government provide on behalf of the people of Britain, and to identify the principles against which the effectiveness of our aid programme should be assessed. We have the opportunity to make it clear that an effective overseas aid programme is about more than arguing about the amount of money that is spent on taxpayers' behalf: it is about making sure that our nation gives what it can to that important work, that those valuable, but inevitably scarce, resources are used by those who can derive the greatest benefit from them and that, where possible, the scope for abuse or waste is minimised.

I shall put on record the basic facts of our aid programme. The United Kingdom has, rightly, always been proud of the assistance that it makes available through official sources to people in other countries who are far less fortunate that us in economic terms. We maintain a substantial development assistance budget of £2,154 million in the current financial year. I do not deny that such spending was down in cash terms by about 5.4 per cent. on the previous year, but such a reduction was the inevitable result of the public clamour that we all witnessed for last year's Budget to concentrate resources on education, the national health service and the fight against crime. It is important to remember that expenditure on overseas aid can be committed only at a level that is sustainable by our economy and which takes into account public feeling on how different sectors of service provision should be prioritised.

The overseas development aid budget, however, is planned to increase by £47 million to £2,201 million in 1997-98 and by a further £69 million to £2,270 million in 1998-99. That commitment makes the United Kingdom the world's sixth largest donor by volume, behind Japan, France, Germany, the United States and the Netherlands. The programme is recognised internationally not only in terms of its size, but in terms of its effectiveness, its focus on poverty and its emphasis on encouraging private sector involvement.

The British Government, on behalf of the British people, have signalled their commitment to move towards the United Nations recommended level of 0.7 per cent. of gross national product to be spent on overseas aid as soon as economic circumstances allow. Although we certainly have considerable progress to make in that direction from the 0.28 per cent. of gross national product that has so far been achieved, the House will note that average expenditure for all donors remains at about 0.27 per cent., and that, among the wealthier G7 nations, we devote a larger share of our GNP to aid than Japan, the United States and Italy.

One fact that is often overlooked is that the British people do not expect the Government to arrogate to themselves all responsibility for overseas aid. We have a proud tradition of voluntary giving to some of the world's best and most effective charitable agencies: Oxfam, CAFOD—the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development—and Christian Aid, to name but three. There are many more. Such voluntary giving means that individual donors can decide for themselves which projects to support and which causes to prioritise. In addition, individual contributions can be enhanced as a result of a provision that was introduced some time ago whereby the charity can claim back tax at the basic rate. For example, if someone donates £1,000, the charitable organisation can claim back tax at the basic rate, and so receive £1,240. That is a considerable advantage to charitable organisations.

Individuals can exercise the rights of, and fulfil the responsibilities laid upon, that informed Christian social conscience that has characterised our society for so many years and which, at least recently, seems to be making something of a comeback in the political popularity stakes.

The net effect of the tremendous amount of voluntary giving is that the United Kingdom exceeds the much less publicised United Nations target on total aid. United Kingdom combined private and official aid flow to developing countries exceeds the United Nations recommended level of 1 per cent. of GNP. That is a good news story to which we should give greater attention.

I seek an assurance from the Minister that, building on the past developments of the Overseas Development Administration, it will remain a clear policy priority that public official budgets do not subsume that most important voluntary element of our nation's giving.

We are rightly seeking to ensure that our overseas aid budget works constructively to support the development of sound democratic institutions free from corruption, to serve the needs of developing countries and to support the development of sound economies to increase prosperity and create more opportunities for British businesses.

The success of the British economy—the direct result of the Government's prudent economic management policies—has led to British private investment in

[Mrs. Ann Winterton]

developing countries being at a record level. The United Kingdom is the third largest source of private finance capital to the developing world. That means that British businesses and the British people are investing in the future of the world's poorer nations, enabling them to step on to the first rungs of the ladder of economic growth with confidence.

Our aid is well targeted: 75 per cent. of United Kingdom bilateral assistance goes to the poorest developing nations—well above the average for all donors. A substantial proportion of our bilateral programme is devoted to meeting the basic needs of the poorest communities—basic education, primary health care, mother and child health, nutrition, water and sanitation. Considering our record, there can be little doubt that the British overseas aid programme is among the most generous in the world and, more important, among the most effective.

There have been changes in the level of overseas aid funding and the way in which control over that expenditure is exercised. Whereas in the past we concentrated on bilateral aid programmes, there will be a continuing shift towards multilateral projects, particularly through the European Union and the United Nations.

Knowing my views on those two august bodies, my hon. Friend the Minister will not be surprised to hear that I shall take this opportunity to seek some specific reassurances. First, those organisations, which are notoriously inefficient in administration and bureaucracy, must be forced to improve their efficiency and effectiveness to ensure that funds go to the needy, not to the administrative machine. Secondly, any corruption in official international agencies must be stamped out ruthlessly. Anyone found stealing from the mouths of the world's poorest people should be punished severely, no matter how senior their position. Thirdly, the international agency concerned should acknowledge the British contribution to its aid budgets in its dealings with recipient nations so that those benefiting from British generosity know that the British people have put their hands into their pockets, either through taxation or through voluntary donations.

In my experience, bilateral aid is often better targeted, more effective and more visibly British than multilateral projects. It gains more political and commercial credit for the United Kingdom, and is of more practical help to the recipients.

Despite my reservations, multilateral bodies will play an increasing role. For example, the work of the World bank in co-ordinating policy dialogue on economic reform is vital. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that, in charity work, small projects often deliver a better return on investment than grandiose schemes.

Many of the developing world's poor people live in countries with a policy and institutional framework that is not conducive to the rapid, broad-based growth and human development needed to make significant inroads into poverty. Many have suffered from civil conflict. To respond effectively to that challenge, we must take into account the relevant historical, cultural and social factors, as well as economic considerations, when designing and implementing poverty-reducing programmes.

Recent World bank poverty assessments, which take into account the perspectives of poor people, have shown that, in addition to material deprivation, poverty includes social and geographical isolation, vulnerability to natural or man-made shocks and powerlessness. The ODA's poverty-focused development assistance seeks to tackle all those important issues. That will be achieved by giving more effective support to strengthen the capacity of institutions that work directly to extend economically and socially sustainable benefits to those sections of society with the greatest need and the least access. We must also support institutions that stimulate self-help and encourage the poor to take control of their lives to improve their living standards and quality of life.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to assure me that resources and energy will be concentrated on three areas: first, projects designed to influence and shape broader policies on direct poverty reduction; secondly, projects designed to enhance the capacity of poor people to stimulate effective responses from services, while enhancing the capacity of service deliverers to respond appropriately to the demands of poor people; thirdly, direct assistance in emergencies designed to save and protect livelihoods, support effective coping mechanisms and achieve a smoother return to long-term development.

In furthering such aims, my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues at the Foreign Office, with the Secretary of State for the Environment, have played an increasingly active international role, setting the lead. My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development will shortly set out for the world food summit in Rome, the aim of which is to give new impetus to international discussions on food security to prevent starvation. The House will wish her well in seeking to take forward British aims to secure international policy on food security, to secure the full and efficient involvement of all the relevant United Nations and other organisations, and to build on the outcomes of previous summits.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will bear with me if I reiterate concerns that I have previously expressed in the House on such international summits and the way in which their agendas and conclusions are manipulated by others. I note with interest the understandable and growing opposition voiced by developing nations at the recent United Nations meeting in Istanbul, at which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment gave an inspiring address, rejecting the culture of negativity and death. I also note the reference made at the Rome meeting of the Committee on World Food Security to the unqualified promotion of the phrase "reproductive health", with its unfortunate connotations of abortion on demand according to the definitions provided by the World Health Organisation.

I am delighted that the texts agreed in Istanbul and Rome rejected the approach bulldozed through the United Nations World Conference on Women, which promoted abortion on demand—in the guise of reproductive health—as a human right. The G7 nations, the developing nations and the Muslim nations have rightly insisted on a formula linking the phrase "reproductive health" with the report and programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. The Cairo document insisted on national sovereignty on abortion and that abortion was not to be promoted as a method of family planning.

I seek the Minister's assurance this morning that this approach—rejecting definitions of reproductive health with connotations of abortion on demand—will be endorsed by the British Government at every opportunity. My hon. Friend must leave no stone unturned in the battle to prevent British taxpayers' money from being used to fund programmes in China that involve compulsory abortion and sterilisation, which must be repugnant to all right-thinking people.

I am concerned at the growing acceptance in the Foreign Office of the mantra that any link between aid and trade is contrary to Britain's interests. I know that many expensive reports on the matter from the Treasury, the ODA and Touche Ross have argued that tying aid is counter-productive, but I remain to be convinced by that argument. If we could rely on all other donor nations—both in theory and, more important, in practice—to untie entirely their aid budgets, the free market thus created might on balance create marginally more opportunities for British businesses than it destroys.

We know from experience that, when it comes to shifts in international practice, the United Kingdom will lead the way, while others will lag behind or fail to move at all. As a result, British businesses will lose out. In other words, we live in a practical world, and we must ensure that our competitors and partners live up to what they say. I see no reason in principle why aid and trade should not be linked where it is in Britain's interests so to do, provided that the effectiveness of the aid programme itself is not compromised. In short, if British taxpayers' money is to be used to buy vehicles, it should be used to buy vehicles from Land Rover rather than from Mercedes-Benz. I do not need to tell the House that the product would be better and its cost lower, or that the benefit to the recipient nations and the British economy would be greater. I do not think that anyone can argue with that.

I have sought this morning to highlight a number of important principles and to put on record a number of key facts. Above all, I hope that I have created an opportunity to raise the quality of debate on overseas aid in a manner that will help the House. It might assist my hon. Friend the Minister if, in closing, I summarised by saying that we have a record on overseas aid of which the United Kingdom can be rightly proud, but we must seek to improve on it as economic conditions allow. We must continue to ensure that aid is carefully targeted to those who need it most, and we must resist the move away from bilateral to multilateral projects. We must use aid programmes to enhance democracy and encourage sound economies, and we must stamp out waste and corruption in international organisations.

We must reject abuses in the aid budget to fund the spread of abortion, and we must move away from tying aid to trade only when we are satisfied that other countries will—in practice as well as in platitude—do the same. Words are cheap, but actions always speak far louder.

In my short speech, I have attempted to highlight how the action taken by the United Kingdom to aid the poorest countries in the world and those far less fortunate than ourselves speaks volumes. We must continue to build on our excellent record.

11.24 am

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on obtaining this debate and on her thoughtful speech. She raised themes with which it is well known she is associated, and for which there is more sympathy in the House than she may imagine. I had hoped that, when she referred to stamping out the improper allocation of aid, she would call for the resignation of the Minister responsible for the Pergau dam aid.

She also talked about the problems of childbirth and family planning questions. My view is simply that the best way to solve such problems is to empower people by letting their economies grow. It is a fact that the best form of birth control—if that is the problem facing the world—is a rich economy. For an economy to succeed, all citizens in it must be allowed to play their part, and I shall address that subject later.

I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), to the Government Front Bench. He was the Whip on the Standing Committee on the Finance Bill last year, and he marshalled his troops effectively to ensure that the rich were protected while the poor were given a worse deal from this miserable Government. Now that he is a gamekeeper turned poacher, I hope that he can secure a better deal for the ODA from his former colleagues in the Treasury.

Like charity, alleviating poverty worldwide should begin at home. Frankly, a Government who have deliberately, wittingly and with cold-blooded precision drafted laws to increase poverty in our country are ill-placed to provide a lead in alleviating poverty around the world. What does the Bible tell us? In Ecclesiastes, it states:

> "The poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard".

One should add women to that, because they bear the burden of poverty more than any other section of our community. The voice of the poor is excluded in the modern world, and is not represented in the boardroom, the newsroom or the Cabinet room, where decisions are made. The alleviation of poverty around the world will come as a result of enabling and empowering the poor.

Among the poorest of the poor are the children of the world, more than 100 million of whom are forced to work. The hon. Member for Congleton may be aware of a lovely poem by Elizabeth Barret Browning, "The Cry of the Children", which reads:

> "Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers
>
> Ere the sorrow comes with years?
>
> . . . They are weeping in the playtime of the others
>
> In the country of the free."

She wrote that more than 100 years ago about this country, but the ambient noise of today's political circuses drowns out the sound of weeping children around the world. According to even modest estimates, 100 million children are working. Some 15 million of those children, according to Human Rights Watch, are placed in servitude to an employer to pay off a debt.

Human Rights Watch cites the case of Kali in India, a nine-year-old girl who has been working in a silk factory since she was six. Perhaps she produces the silk used to make the cheap shirts that we buy from Marks and Spencer and C and A. Kali's mother needed £75 to pay for her husband's funeral and, to secure that loan, she sold Kali into slavery. Each morning, that child leaves home at 7 o'clock and returns at 9 o'clock at night, and she

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earns £5 a month for working a 14-hour day. That story is repeated in other countries. Carpets, footballs, toys of all description and clothes are made for sale in Britain using this odious form of labour.

In theory, the liberalisation of world trade and the growth of free trade and wealth in the world should put an end to such child labour, but everyone who examines this subject reports not a decline but an increase in child labour. Far from child labour dwindling to a few isolated spots in the third world as a result of trade liberalisation, we see it increase and encroach into new areas of high-profit economic activity, such as child prostitution.

What perhaps is worse, and should concern the House, is that the use of child labour is spreading back from the third world. Not many miles from the House, and in many other big cities in Britain, there are textile workshops with home workers who have not reached puberty. According to the university of Paisley, an estimated 1.7 million children work in the United Kingdom, not delivering newspapers as we all did as kids, but in economic, gainful activity. Indeed, in the Prime Minister's constituency of Huntingdon, the meat-packing company Hilton Meats was recently fined £12,500 after pleading guilty to employing 14-year-old children. Moral exhortation about what is happening in the third world rings hollow at conferences while we allow so much child labour in our own country.

What can we do? Moral exhortation, as I said, is not enough. Law and the enforcement of law are needed. Shaftesbury and those who fought in the 19th century against child labour understood the difference between a sermon or inspiring speech at some international conference and enforceable law. Wilberforce understood that passing a law in the House against slavery was of little use unless it was enforced on the high seas and other nations were drawn into a worldwide campaign to abolish slavery.

What was true then is no less true today. The need to take global action against child labour and other forms of poverty and inequality is hampered, alas, by reaction at home which, whether in the Government or the media, first, denies the need for effective international action; secondly, actively conspires against policy proposals when they are advanced; and, finally, wallows in the smug self-satisfaction of the pretence that the market alone can solve those problems.

I should like to put forward a three-point approach to the question of alleviating world poverty. First, at the Government level, we need to work at devising international solutions and programmes to defeat poverty. Secondly, at the business level, we need a new politics of ethical business behaviour, which we can already see taking shape in some parts of the business community and which should be supported and encouraged. Thirdly, each individual—all of us as consumers, employees and shareholders—can play a part by insisting that the goods and services we buy are provided on the basis of fair trade and decent working conditions.

Let us look first at the Government level. The internationalisation of trade, which is a growing trend and one that I welcome as a strong free trader—is bringing with it a new body of international law. Commerce throughout history has worked only if contracts are enforced and are enforceable at law. Standards, patents, so-called intellectual property rights, market access, dumping rules and all the paraphernalia of national commercial law and regulation are being reproduced internationally. We see that process in the European Union to enable the single market to work and we see it in the World Trade Organisation, in the North American Free Trade Agreement and in the thousands upon thousands of pages of directives and regulations about which the hon. Member for Congleton and her hon. Friends sometimes complain, but which are the stuff of making any market or any commercial set of relationships work.

Endless tribunals are needed to make free trade work. But just as national economies have social and environmental costs and consequences—which, for 100 or more years, we have regulated through health and safety, clean air and child labour legislation—so the international economy has social and environmental costs and consequences. Inch by painful inch, the call for international law and regulation on social and environmental questions—the cry from the poor of the world for their concerns to be heard at the table where the new rules of world trade are being written—can be heard.

The most concrete expression of that call is the demand that the new World Trade Organisation look at child labour, workplace health and safety rights and the right of employees to belong to free trade unions, which even the World bank in one of its reports held up as the cornerstone of free economic activity.

"We are keen to include social issues on the agenda of the World Trade Organisation."

Those are not my words or those of the new Labour party's policy programme, but a statement by Sir Leon Brittan, the former Thatcherite Minister, when he addressed the European Parliament two years ago. Sir Leon, Vice-President of the European Commission and the senior Commissioner responsible for trade, has consistently argued that the World Trade Organisation should at least agree to discuss social issues in some form through a working party—not to regulate wages, but at least to have a discussion.

The aim, in which Sir Leon is supported by the international trade union movement, is to find a non-protectionist, trade-enhancing way to enable the employees of multinationals that operate in third-world countries, and those of national companies, to have some say in the distribution of the wealth that their labour creates. That is a sensitive issue and powerful forces are ranged against it, including many multinational corporations and many third-world Governments, who represent an economic elite such as that disposed of in Pakistan earlier this week. They are ranged against the idea of a social clause because the men who profit from Government control of trade and the economies that deny social rights to too many third-world countries do not want child labour or union rights discussed at the World Trade Organisation.

Despite Sir Leon's commitment to that policy, I have to report to the House that, only last week, he was stabbed in the back by the Minister for Trade at one of the secretive Council of Ministers meetings, at which the existing European Commission policy for a WTO discussion on the issues was sabotaged. The language on setting up a WTO working party on social questions has

gone, although the Council of Ministers' statement—which provides guidance for the EU position at the WTO interministerial conference in Singapore—referred to the importance that the European Commission attaches

"to the efforts of the International Labour Organisation to promote the universal observance of core labour standards."

That is a small advance, but there was a retreat, under reactionary pressure from the British Government, from a clear policy position that Sir Leon had been outlining for at least two years.

At least the statement I have just cited is a positive statement that can only embarrass our Ministers, who only a year ago in the shape of the then Secretary of State for Employment, now the Secretary of State for Defence, were floating the idea of a United Kingdom withdrawal from the ILO. It required interventions in the House to the Prime Minister and an early-day motion, signed by a huge swathe of Members from all parties, to stay their hand. We welcome the Council of Ministers' affirmation of the importance of the ILO and regret that the British Government, only 12 months ago, were talking about a United Kingdom withdrawal.

In the battle to alleviate world poverty, we cannot dissociate the issue of trade from labour standards. The United States under President Clinton has made clear its commitment on that issue. We welcome his election victory last night and the defeat of the Conservative party candidate, Senator Dole. The raising of the minimum wage to a fair and decent level in the United States, under President Clinton's leadership, has undoubtedly contributed to his excellent election victory, and we look forward to that policy being implemented in this country.

If the European Union detaches itself from the United States over the question of the WTO examining social issues, we should not be surprised if the United States takes unilateral, extra-territorial action. We are refusing to work in partnership with our allies in the United States and make efforts to achieve a multilateral response through international agencies such as the WTO. I worked for some years in international organisations and I have no illusions about how useful working parties are.

If the message from the December WTO inter-ministerial conference in Singapore, from our Minister for Trade and from our Prime Minister to the world's poor, the world's child labourers and the other workers who face increasing poverty is, "We will not even discuss your problems," I warn the House that the poor of the planet will want no part in a world that excludes them. The road that they will go down instead will, alas, be the road of crime, of terrorism and rejection, and of supporting extremist solutions.

None the less, let me bring some good news to the House. Although our Ministers bury their heads in the sand, there is now a call for new ethical business behaviour at international level. Transparency International is an important organisation which, with the support of many big business companies, argues in a concrete fashion that we must put an end to corruption. I am talking about corruption such as that in the Gulf, and that exposed by the Pergau dam affair—corruption with which, alas, too many British companies' names have been linked.

Progressive British companies are now supporting European works councils, which allow their employees to have some say in those companies' international affairs. Swedish and German multinationals allow, indeed encourage, their union representatives to make contact with workers in overseas subsidiaries.

More needs to be done. A good example is the Rugmark scheme, which was set up to ensure that rugs sold in western shops are made in fair working conditions in the subcontinent. Unlike most carpet stores in the United States and Germany, retailers such as Ikea, Liberty, John Lewis and Bentalls refuse to sign up to the scheme. I appeal to those companies to support Rugmark.

Big British success stories such as the Body Shop now support the idea of ethical accountability and transparency. That means not insisting that one western standard be applied everywhere, but ensuring that transparent and accountable systems work, with inspections and accreditation to reinforce the ability of people in the south to raise standards in a culturally and economically appropriate manner.

The Co-op and Sainsbury are preparing to develop ethical approaches to sourcing, and are committed to work with the Fair Trade Foundation to support, through an admirable charter, the idea that what we buy in our shops should be produced in fair conditions.

That leads us to what consumers can do. There are now more and more examples of consumer and corporate pressure having an effect. We saw that in the outcry over the footballs produced for the Euro 96 competition. Those were made by child labourers in Pakistan, but FIFA has agreed that in future the footballs that it uses will be produced in fair conditions.

Textile retailers, too, are discussing those ideas, and there are fair trade campaigns. We can now buy Café Direct, an excellent coffee made by third-world producers in fair conditions—and I should like to see some bought and sold in the horribly refurbished House of Commons Tea Room.

In America, consumer boycotts have been effective. In Latin America, there has been a decline in child labour, as United States textile retailers have been forced to respond to such boycotts. Pepsi has now been banned in most United States campuses because of the company's refusal to draw a line and stop investment in Burma.

I have mentioned three ways in which we can alleviate poverty—Government action to support international initiatives, business action to support ethical fair trade and action by consumers to put their money where they know it will help to stamp out poverty throughout the world. Two of those processes are under way, but the third, Government action, will begin only when we have a Government committed to alleviating poverty—not only abroad, as the title of the debate implies, but more important, at home in our own country.

11.43 am

Mr. Peter Thurnham (Bolton, North-East): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on her success in the ballot and on the excellent points that she made in her speech, many of which I strongly support. I shall say more about that later, but first I shall comment on the speech by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), whose call for higher business standards I support.

Listening to the hon. Gentleman, my mind went back several years to the time when I was at Harvard business school, where the professors are regularly assessed by the

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students. Year after year, the professor who came top was Professor Roland Christenson, who lectured on business policy and delivered to his students the strong message that there was no problem in the world greater than the fact that hundreds of millions of people did not get enough to eat and that millions of children died every year. The hon. Member for Rotherham was right to draw attention to that.

The other problems that the hon. Gentleman addressed, such as child labour, are serious too, but the fact that children are dying is the greatest issue of all. Clearly we want children to be properly educated rather than used as cheap labour, but even being used as cheap labour is better than dying.

The hon. Member for Congleton spoke strongly about the role of voluntary agencies, and I support what she said. In Bolton, there are strong supporters of the World Development Movement, Save the Children and Oxfam. I believe that such agencies play an important part, and that, as the hon. Lady said, Britain leads the world in that respect. I spent much of my childhood in India. Other members of my family have spent time in Africa, and are now in India again—no doubt concerned with the work of voluntary agencies there.

The hon. Lady spoke about tying together aid and trade, and said that it was better for workers to be in Land Rovers rather than in Mercedes-Benz. There is sometimes a problem when aid workers are seen to be enjoying a standard of living far above that of the people whom they are supposed to be helping. Sometimes they live in luxury hotels and drive luxury cars, but it would be better if they were closer to the people they help, and drove vehicles not so different from those used by the indigenous population.

The hon. Lady drew attention to the summits in Rome, Istanbul and Cairo, and then talked about abortion, especially in China. I shall pick up some of her points. Some years ago, I saw the work done in Hong Kong by the Home of Loving Faithfulness in providing adoptive homes for severely handicapped Chinese babies. The Chinese have no tradition of adopting children, and there is a role for this country to play.

I ask the Minister to pay attention to the need to improve the process of inter-country adoption. I am sorry that in the Queen's Speech the Government failed to announce their Bill on adoption. I do not know whether there will be an opportunity for them to introduce it over the next few months, but as they produced a draft Bill on which there was a long consultation period, it is unfortunate that the legislation cannot now be introduced. Measures such as the ratification of the Hague proposals should be properly addressed by the House. Then we could be happy in the knowledge that this country could play its full role.

We are aware of all the problems in China. At the beginning of her speech, the hon. Member for Congleton said that she preferred a stronger emphasis on bilateral than on multilateral aid. In general, I would support that idea, but in China there are difficulties in knowing how, in such a coercive regime, to become involved with proper family planning. I am sure that the hon. Lady agrees that in that case it is as well to work on a multilateral as on a bilateral basis.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: I am sure that on that topic the hon. Gentleman will join me in deploring the fact that the British taxpayer's money is used, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, to support coercive abortion in China. That policy cannot be supported by any civilised person.

Mr. Thurnham: I do not believe that I can agree with the hon. Lady. Last month, I received a letter on that very subject from the Minister for Overseas Development. It said:

> "We do not give bilateral support of any kind to China's family planning programmes, but do provide annual grants to support the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and their work throughout the world, including China, to promote better reproductive health and improved quality of life for women and men."

I certainly support the Government in their work on that front, and I do not believe that what the hon. Lady suggested happens.

I want to draw attention to the difficulties that British couples face in trying to adopt children from abroad. There have been a number of recent newspaper articles—*The Sunday Telegraph* carried one earlier this year—on adopting children from China. There were also articles in *The Sunday Times* in June last year and *The Times* in October last year. They pointed out that approximately one Chinese baby is adopted each week by a British couple. Given that, the Government can help to bring about a better future for some of the unfortunate children in China. All the children are girls and we know that they can indeed be left in the infamous dying rooms because of policies in China.

Britain is almost unique among most of the developed countries in not having a central agency that can help to provide a smoother process of inter-country adoption. The couples who have written to me, and whose stories have been referred to in the papers, have described the great difficulties of the process of adopting a baby from China. China insists on dealing with a central agency here. There is no central agency here, although the Department of Health has an overall co-ordinating role.

Local authorities are required to approve the adoption, and some couples have had to move to get a local authority to approve their adoption of a child from China. A couple in Fulham had to move to East Sussex. Couples elsewhere, such as Staffordshire, were told that, because of the policy of the council where they lived, there was no chance of their being able to adopt a baby from China. I find that totally repugnant, and hope that the Government will give attention to the matter by bringing forward the Bill on adoption, so that the issue can be properly addressed and an inter-country adoption agency can be set up in this country to provide for such adoption.

I reiterate my support for a number of the points made by the hon. Member for Congleton. Difficult issues concern tied aid and trade. I agree with her that, in an ideal world, none of the countries would attempt to tie aid to trade. When some countries do, we in this country can clearly feel at risk by not doing so as well. On balance, the less we tie aid to trade, the better. We should certainly target our aid to those who are in the greatest need, which includes the unfortunate children in the orphanages in

China. We should do our best to cut out waste and corruption and insist on very high standards in our overseas aid.

11.51 am

Mr. Mike Watson (Glasgow, Central): I, too, congratulate the hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on securing this debate, which concerns a very important topic. She may be as surprised as I was when I heard her speech to hear that I agreed with very much of it. Indeed, I agreed with most of what she said about the current position of aid. I am not at all happy about the reduction in aid that has taken place and, of course, continues to take place.

The hon. Member for Congleton referred to the reduction in the context of the country's economy. It may well be that, until the economy begins to turn around, it will be difficult to envisage the aid figure increasing. Fortunately, there is a real prospect of the economy improving dramatically in the next two or three years following a change of Government, and for that reason, Labour is very clear about what it would do through overseas aid. We would use much of what is generated by an improved economy to enhance the aid budget.

The importance that the Labour party places on overseas development aid is shown in a document that was recently published, which clearly states that a Labour Government would resort to the position on aid held between 1976 and 1979, when there was a Department responsible for overseas development aid. A department of international development will enhance not only the quality of aid but the importance given to it as a central part of a Labour Government's programme.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), who will be a member of that Government and—I hope—hold the office that he shadows, will be in a strong position to put into practice many such policies, not least what has been termed the 20-20 Compact, which is very important and emerged from the Copenhagen social summit last year. Under it, 20 per cent. of aid provided by donors goes to basic services in return for a commitment that the recipient countries spend 20 per cent. of their gross national product on the same sort of basic services. That is very important to beginning to turn around the effectiveness of aid and ensuring, as the hon. Member for Congleton said, that the poorest people benefit. I certainly support her in that view.

I should like to mention one part of the speech of the hon. Member for Congleton with which I did not agree. I find it rather unfortunate, although not surprising, that she returned to the issue of reproductive rights and what she terms "abortion on demand" as part of aid policies. Such a term is an exaggeration and a distortion of the purpose of aid for women's sexual and reproductive health, which must be at the core of any serious policy that hopes to deal with poverty. The hon. Lady mentioned self-help. I thoroughly agree with that concept, but she mentioned it with regard to women's rights as if in some way such self-help was being discouraged through the policies that are being advanced. She used some rather emotive language, as she has in the past.

In preparing for this debate, I dug out the comments of the hon. Member for Congleton during a similar debate four months ago, in which she accused me by implication of having blood on my hands as a result of being an office bearer of the all-party population, reproductive health and development group. If she does not remember that, I am sure that the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton–Brown), who is the chairman of that group—I am its treasurer—and who was the butt of her remarks, does remember it. She made an extremely offensive allegation, and I hope that she will take this opportunity to withdraw it. The accusation was wide-ranging and referred to the hon. Gentleman's friends, of whom, in the context of the group, I am certainly one.

The hon. Member for Congleton has, unfortunately, peddled many untruths in respect of the aim of aid and aid programmes. In doing so, she has undermined the efforts of many organisations that do sterling work in the field, such as Marie Stopes International, Save the Children and Oxfam. They have communicated to me that they are stumped by some of the comments that have been made.

Some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Congleton about the United Nations fall into a similar context. She has often vilified the UN for what she terms coercion in reproductive rights and various aspects of it, yet she refuses to acknowledge that its population fund specifically outlaws any form of coercion in its programmes. Its projects require adherence to human rights and insist on approaches to service delivery that are grounded in informed consent, free choice and quality care. There is no evidence to the contrary. The same is true of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, whose constitution says:

"contraceptive information and services shall be provided strictly on the basis of voluntary acceptance and informed choice."

There is no evidence to the contrary.

In July, the hon. Member for Congleton also criticised Baroness Chalker and the Overseas Development Administration itself for its policies and the way in which they are delivered. Such criticism is most unfair. On 11 July 1994, Baroness Chalker said:

"The watchword is choice—there is no place at all for coercion".

Such comments are wrapped up in the debate on what is happening in China. I am well aware of the horror stories that have emerged from that country, and I am sure that many of them are true. I am not in any sense apologising for what happens in China, but we must understand that China has—I believe—21 per cent. of the world's population, but less than 10 per cent. of land that can be cultivated to feed its population. Something must be done to address China's population growth. Although I am not in any way suggesting that the policy of restricting families to one child or the way in which it is policed is justified, we need a little more objectivity in our approach to such issues.

The hon. Member for Congleton also talked about the manipulation of the agendas of some of the major world conferences that take place from time to time, and she specifically mentioned the one in Cairo. Again, her remarks were unfortunate. Much of what emerged from Cairo has, unfortunately, been distorted. It is unfortunate to talk of those outcomes in terms of birth control or abortion. Those of us involved in issues relating to reproductive rights do not use the term "birth control". The issue is not about controlling but about assisting people through self-help initiatives, to which I referred

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earlier, so that informed choices can be made. It is a matter of allowing people to be in a position to choose for themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said, the best antidote to overpopulation is a growing economy, but that is an extremely long-term prospect for many countries in the developing world that are burdened with debt; for example, the Ugandan economy is growing at 5, 6 or 7 per cent. a year, which is favourable progress, but it is pulled back by the debt that it has to service. Many countries will not have strong economies in my lifetime, so shorter-term population measures will have to be considered.

It was disingenuous of the hon. Member for Congleton to talk of the Muslim community; I do not know what that means, as there is no such thing as the Christian community. In the aftermath of the Cairo conference, Benazir Bhutto, the hapless ex-Prime Minister of Pakistan, said that it was the lack of adequate services, not ideology, that confronted us in population stabilisation. The way in which Islam is marshalled in an attempt to support the arguments of the hon. Lady and her hon. Friends is unfortunate, as the Koran is clear on the right of women to choose.

I ask for more clarity and more understanding of the position of those of us who have a general interest in aid and who consider reproductive health a central issue. It has been helpful to have this debate and, notwithstanding my criticisms of the hon. Member for Congleton, I hope that our discussions will inform future debates on the subject.

12.1 pm

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): I join in the genuine congratulations to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on securing this debate and on her diligence is pursuing the issue, although we are not in agreement on every point.

This has been a summer of change in overseas development. I pay genuine and warm tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Miss Lestor) who has done a sterling and splendid job not only as a Front-Bench spokesman on overseas development but in a lifetime of political service: she is a model and inspiration to us all.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Ms Short) to her new post as principal Opposition spokesman on overseas development. She is with Baroness Chalker at the moment at an Action Aid launch. People have already realised that she brings her usual dynamism to her new portfolio; in the past couple of weeks she has raised the profile of development almost single-handedly and, as the Americans say, "We ain't seen nothing yet."

I welcome the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) to his new position as Under–Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. The Government have made a good appointment and I am optimistic for his future, short-term though it may be in office. As a Scotsman from East Kilbride, he will bring good sense and intelligence to his new responsibility. The hon. Member for Bolton, North–East (Mr. Thurnham) has undergone an even more spectacular change and we welcome him to our side of the House, where he seems much more at home.

At the Tory party conference a great deal was heard about opportunities—with the catch phrase "opportunities for all"—but lost opportunities would be a more appropriate description of the past 17 years. As some of my hon. Friends have said, the lost opportunities both at home and abroad could stand as a fitting epitaph for the Government.

Morality, we hear, is high on the Government's agenda. The real morality of the Government on the issue that we are discussing will be judged later this month, when, as the hon. Member for Congleton said, we get the results of the public expenditure round. I fear that there will be yet another cut in overseas development, at the same time as the Government continue to offer more tax cuts to the privileged of this country. To reduce inheritance tax for the rich while assistance to the poorest both at home and abroad is cut further is typical of the Government's lack of morality.

It is unacceptable to live with such huge inequalities within and between nations. Those inequalities breed poverty, disease, suffering and conflict, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said. We in the Labour movement believe that morality consists in ensuring that people throughout the world have their basic rights upheld.

What are those basic rights? They are the basic right to food, when 800 million people do not get enough food every day; the basic right to water, when 1.3 billion people lack access to safe drinking water; and the basic right to a home, when 27 million people have fled their homes as refugees and a further 15 million are displaced within their own countries. Those are the rights and that is the morality that we want from the Government. That is where the opportunity and the challenge lie for the British aid programme—a programme which can and should make a difference.

Opportunities abound for Britain, which retains a privileged position in international institutions: we are a member of G7 and of the Commonwealth, and we have a place on the boards of the International Monetary Fund and the World bank. Labour will institute a change in the World bank and appoint an executive director who is an expert in development rather than in finance. The IMF's structural adjustment criteria for the developing world seem almost designed to increase rather than to reduce poverty in the developing world.

The Government are losing the opportunities that their position gives to influence responses to poverty. They have ideal springboards for action, another of which is a permanent seat on the Security Council, which allows us to play a significant role in the United Nations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham welcomed the re-election of President Clinton, as I do. I hope that the Americans will now support the United Nations much more strongly in its peacekeeping and peacemaking role, in early warning and in conflict resolution, because conflict is one of the principal causes of poverty, as my hon. Friend said. Let the Americans ensure that their contributions are up to date.

The Government have various opportunities in the coming weeks and months. The world food summit in Rome has already been mentioned. Can the Minister tell us what the Government's approach will be there? Will they press for an end to the dumping of European Union

agricultural surpluses in developing countries, ruining food production in those countries? That would be a step in the right direction.

The World Trade Organisation conference in Singapore in December would be an ideal opportunity for the Government to show their commitment to the developing world. Will the Minister follow up what my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said and argue the case for a social clause to be added to international trading agreements to ensure that all countries in the world trading system uphold the human rights standards enshrined in the UN convention, to prevent child exploitation, forced labour and prison labour and to guarantee the right to join a trade union?

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham told the moving story of Kali; such inspiration should motivate the Government at the Singapore conference. It is astonishing that the American Government are far more progressive on the social clause than the British Government. I hope that we shall get a more positive statement from the Government today. Beyond that, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh next year is a great opportunity for further progress.

I hope that we shall get a more positive statement from the Government today on development education. We hear too much in education about bringing back the cane. That is a very English term. As the Minister knows, it would be the strap in Scotland. Let us hear less about that and more about development education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ladywood said yesterday to the Development Education Association, development education should be an integral part of children's schooling to give them the opportunity to learn about the challenges and causes of poverty and the opportunities to eradicate it.

The hon. Member for Congleton said that we must take account of public opinion on spending. The public care about development. Opinion polls consistently show that nearly 80 per cent. of Britons think that aid should be given to the developing world. We have heard in the past few weeks about the Defence Secretary fighting in Cabinet for his spending commitments, about the Health Secretary fighting for the health budget and the Transport Secretary fighting for the transport budget.

The problem is that the Minister for Overseas Development is not a member of the Cabinet. She cannot argue the case for overseas development where the real decisions are made. That is why the budget has gone down year on year. It was 0.52 per cent. of gross national product and rising when Labour left office; now it is 0.29 per cent. of GNP and set to fall with the Tory Government. That is why Labour will restore the Minister for Overseas Development to a position in the Cabinet to argue the case for overseas development alongside the other Secretaries of State.

I want briefly to mention recent events in Zaire, on which I hope that the Minister will also touch. Many minds in the House and in the country have been focused by the awful pictures on television of refugees fleeing their homes as the crisis grows deeper day by day. We know that that region of Africa has had a long and bitter political past. The eastern and western sides of the former split in the world of cold war politics allowed the people of the region to be abused and made the crisis almost inevitable. Our past actions, as well as basic morality, make it a duty on us to assist those in need.

I welcome, of course, Baroness Chalker's statement and her commitment of £130 million over two years, but I want to ask the Minister to go a bit further. Will he undertake to use the Government's influence in the UN Security Council and the European Union to press to ensure that our excellent non-governmental organisations, to which the hon. Member for Congleton referred, have access to help and have some security assistance? They have been in severe difficulties in the past few days, as the Minister knows. Will he bring pressure on the Governments of the region to seek a regional political settlement? Will he push to strengthen the international war crimes tribunal to ensure that those responsible for the genocide are punished and that justice is seen to be done?

I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to dissociate himself from the remarks of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Upminster (Sir N. Bonsor), who said at Foreign Office Question Time:

"There is a limit to what the international community can do to help those who will not help themselves."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 649.]

That is an appalling attitude and illustrates the attitude of some Tories to British aid. It undermines the work of our non-governmental organisations in the region. I hope that the Minister, who is a bit more intelligent than his colleague, will dissociate himself from it.

We heard about tied aid and the aid and trade programme. We want to reduce the amount spent on consultancy: 32 per cent. of our bilateral programme is spent on payments to consultants. That is an appallingly large amount. I hope that it will be reduced; it certainly will be with a change of Government.

I want to mention the scandal of the delay in the publication of the National Audit Office report on British aid to Indonesia. That investigation was begun in the wake of the Pergau dam scandal, but the final report is a year behind schedule. I understand that it is being held up in the Foreign Office while Ministers search for excuses to explain it away. The Opposition and the public will not tolerate another cover-up. Ministers have promised that the Government will abide by any recommendations in the report. I hope that it will be published as quickly as possible.

The hon. Member for Congleton mentioned human rights abuses and coercive population practices in China. For two days, I was able to join an Overseas Development Administration independent assessment team that carried out in September an assessment of the policies and activities in China of the ODA, the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities. I ask her to await the publication of that report, which is imminent, before rushing to judgment. Knowing her preconceptions, I fear that my request is vain. I hope that she will realise that it is wrong to infer from the presence of those bodies that they in any way support and tolerate such practices. That is not the situation. When she sees the report, she will realise that her comments were over the top.

The Government will be judged not by their fine words today, but by their actions: their actions in the public spending round, at the world food summit and at the World Trade Organisation. If they miss any more opportunities, the British people have not much longer to wait. They will soon have the opportunity of putting that right and giving a Labour Government the chance to put Britain's overseas policies back on the right track.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Dr. Liam Fox): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on obtaining this important debate and for the doughty way in which she follows these issues in the House. Not for the first time, we are in complete agreement.

I also have the pleasure of congratulating my right hon. Friend Baroness Chalker on all her work. Government and Opposition Members will want to add their congratulations on the job that she does on our behalf. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) for his kind words. That may be the last time that we shall agree in this debate.

This is an important debate. We need to see aid in a wider context than that of bilateral aid. I am sorry that aid has been treated as a political football and reduced to a trite and simplistic debate in recent years. We need to build support for development. The debate needs to be updated in the light of the changing pattern of aid. It is not only how the aid is given that matters, but how it is used: we need to change the focus of debate from input to outcomes.

There is a moral case to be made for aid. It is not just a matter of soundbites about what great Christians hon. Members of whatever party may be. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said that charity begins at home, as more harm has been done to the case for aid by that phrase than by any other. The House is full of knockabout politics, but it is not mature to pretend that the relative poverty in which some people in the United Kingdom undoubtedly live is in any way comparable with the starvation and absolute poverty that exist overseas. It does not help us to have a mature debate to have it premised on that phrase.

The Government's overall aims on aid are clear: to relieve poverty and suffering and to promote sustainable growth. We do that through bilateral aid, a multilateral programme, the non-governmental organisations, debt relief, trade development and private investment. The nature of our aid has changed. We have moved away from bricks and mortar aid to more sustainable aid, as my hon. Friend mentioned, by providing expertise. I am sad that that was not brought out more in the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton was correct in the figures that she gave for our aid budget. Our bilateral budget was £2,154 million in 1996-97. We are the sixth largest donor, behind Japan, France, America, Germany and the Netherlands, and at 0.28 per cent. of GDP, our overseas development assistance is above the average of all donors and ahead of the United States, Japan and Italy. All those figures are on the record.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson) was correct when he said that we needed to use our wealth to help those less fortunate than ourselves. That is what I refer to as the moral case. The hon. Gentleman has written a book entitled "Rags to Riches", which could have been a history of the economy under the Conservative Government but which I believe is something else.

We need now to look at the output from our aid programme and where it goes. Where the aid goes matters greatly. Three quarters of our bilateral aid goes to the poorest countries. I recently visited slum clearance projects in Calcutta. No one can tell me that that was not money well spent. People now have clean water and, for the first time, sewers that are covered. They can live cleanly without having to wade through mud to get to their houses. That is a proper use of our aid budget. We must concentrate our aid where it is most needed if we are to have any sort of priorities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton asked whether, by placing greater emphasis on our multilateral aid, we were losing a foreign policy tool. That would be so if we played no role in directing multilateral policy and the recipients did not recognise any benefit as coming from the United Kingdom's role. My hon. Friend is correct in saying that in our European projects and some other projects, we need to get better value for money, simplify administration and reduce costs. That has to be the United Kingdom's role, because our model of aid is regarded, as the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) will have seen when he goes abroad, as a prime model for other countries to follow. The one thing that is said wherever one goes in the world about British aid projects is that the quality of aid is second to none. We must ensure that that is also the case with the multilateral agencies.

The multilateral agencies give us an advantage of scale. We are part of the World bank, of which my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a governor. Through its concessional facility, the International Development Association, it has among the most effective multilateral aid programmes.

Perhaps my greatest sadness in today's debate has been the absence of an acknowledgement of the role of the non-governmental organisations. They are a national asset. They are something which Britain does very well. The NGOs can often reach areas that we cannot reach, for political as well as logistical reasons. Examples such as the work of Oxfam and Save the Children in Cambodia spring to mind.

The role of NGOs has changed. They exhibit greater professionalism. There is a greater willingness to work together and with bilateral and multilateral agencies. They take a longer-term perspective. They recognise our aims to encourage skills rather than provide bricks and mortar. They are able to operate in areas of political and cultural sensitivity in which government cannot always operate. They have also achieved—I am sure that this comment is echoed on both sides of the House—ever greater stature in recent years. For example, 10 years ago the then World Wildlife Fund was probably associated purely with pandas, but the organisation now operates on human development as well as environmental projects. That is a mature path for the organisation to have taken, and I welcome it. However, we have to point out that the United Kingdom's aid programme is six times the value of all the NGOs put together. We have to remember its scale when we talk about the size of our aid programme.

The Government have also concentrated on debt relief. It does not really matter to a country whether we give it money bilaterally, multilaterally or by writing off its debts. Money is money and the United Kingdom has taken a leading role in debt relief. We have written off aid loans to 31 of the world's poorest countries at a value of £1.2 billion. I am sorry that the Opposition did not give any credit to the Government for that. The official bilateral debt of 21 countries has so far been rescheduled under the Naples terms. That has provided up to 67 per

cent. debt relief. That was an initiative of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Do the Opposition ever mention it? Do we ever get the credit for doing that?

The heavily indebted poor countries debt initiative launched at last month's World bank and International Monetary Fund meeting was based on proposals made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor. None of this did we hear from the Opposition. None of this do we ever hear from them, because they like to concentrate on one narrow political football with which they think that they might score cheap political points rather than engage in a genuine debate. We need to have a genuine debate. The aid debate has been sidelined for too long and it is too important to be treated in the light-hearted and trite way in which it often is treated in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised some issues linked to abortion. She is well aware that she shares my personal views on the subject of abortion. The Government's position is clear. Abortion is not acceptable as a method of family planning. We are prepared to provide assistance to treat the complications of unsafe abortion, but coercion has no place in family planning policy. No United Kingdom bilateral aid supports Chinese family planning policy, as has already been stated in the debate. We are constantly engaged with the UNFPA and IPPF on related subjects. We shall continue to make our views known, as I have outlined.

So a spectrum of help is clearly available. We have direct aid. We have pump priming, for example, by the Commonwealth Development Corporation, the work of which is not often recognised in the House. Every £1 invested by CDC brings in £5 of private investment. We have private investment. We have trade. The World Trade Organisation summit will seek to give the least developed countries access to the developed markets. The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of that move. We regret that some others—the United States, some of our EU partners and Japan—are dragging their feet and we hope that they will not do so when the summit takes place.

Mr. Foulkes *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman will appreciate how little time I have.

We are historically a free trading nation. We pushed the general agreement on tariffs and trade last time. We are pushing free trade by the year 2020. We believe that that growth in the world economy will benefit most those in the least developed countries.

We must not forget the role of private investment. It provides huge amounts of money—now the largest amount—to the developing countries. One needs only to travel, as I have recently, in south Asia to realise the value of private investment to those countries. However, private investment needs to be attracted. It cannot be directed by government. Good governance, increased expertise and debt relief all make private investment more attractive.

At the outset, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned one United Nations target which is never mentioned by the Opposition. It is the UN target for combined private and official flows to developing countries. The target is 1 per cent. of GNP. The United Kingdom exceeds that target. The Government should get the credit for that because they have pushed the expertise and changes in the aid policy which have made private investment in those countries attractive and will provide them with greater prosperity in the longer term.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Does any other country hit that target?

Dr. Fox: My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not take her intervention, which was almost sedentary.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the tying of aid. I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said. Genuine multilateral untying of aid would be acceptable to us, but we cannot accept the untying of United Kingdom aid with the risk that others will not untie their aid. That would not be to the advantage of the United Kingdom, the aims of our aid policy or the recipient countries. We hope that we can reach a multilateral agreement on tying of aid, but it certainly is not the Government's intention to settle for a one-sided policy.

I am sorry that we do not have more time in this important debate to discuss Zaire, which was raised by the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. Political and security problems lie at the heart of the crisis. We all recognise that no purely humanitarian solution is possible, and he is right to suggest that we need a regional settlement. Yesterday, I met some of the British NGOs working there. The idea of humanitarian corridors merits further consideration. We currently await a detailed proposal from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The United Kingdom is doing a huge amount to provide aid. We have a proud record. Far too often in this country we are unwilling to say what we are doing, and what we are doing well because of the drip feed of cynicism from the media and doom mongering from the Opposition. I am proud of our record, which is the Government's record.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. Time is up, I am afraid.

Fire Services (Lancashire)

12.30 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I should like to thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to raise an important issue, which is of immense concern to my constituents and others throughout Lancashire.

A crisis is facing the fire service nationally and in my county. Lancashire is by far and away the busiest shire county fire authority. The county has dense urban areas, lots of industry, and of course, Blackpool, which poses particular fire risks, as does the rest of the Lancashire coast. Last year, the number of incidents shot up by 16 per cent. to 34,814. The number of calls that the Lancashire fire brigade dealt with rose by 14 per cent. to 55,872.

It is a busy fire brigade, and, like many fire authorities throughout the country, it is spending above the level that the Government consider to be right and appropriate. The county's chief executive, Gordon Johnson, wrote to the Minister's colleague Baroness Blatch, on 13 September:

"there is a major crisis developing with an alarming divergence opening up between central government allocation and actual spending here in Lancashire."

In 1993-94, Lancashire spent £33.6 million on its fire service, which is 4.2 per cent. above the fire services standard spending assessment—the figure that the Government believe to be right for the county to spend. In 1994-95, that percentage gap had widened to 4.9 per cent. Last year, the gap widened yet again to 5.8 per cent. The forecast difference between what the Government believe the county should spend and what it is actually spending on providing its fire service is a staggering 10.2 per cent. So, the county will be spending £37.9 million on our fire service, but its SSA is £34.4 million.

There are good reasons why Lancashire fire authority has to spend at that level, which I shall discuss in a moment. First, I refer to a document entitled "Standards of Fire Cover Review", which was produced by the county's chief fire officer, Gordon Russel, in June this year, dealing with fire cover standards across the county. He made it perfectly clear that the report was his and that its purpose was to give an up-to-date picture of the changed categories of risk around the county. He set out possible options for change. He said in his report that his review, which has been considered by county councillors, was

"based on existing national guidance"

according to the Home Office national minimum standards of fire cover.

Mr. Russel stated that one option was to cut one of the two retained pumps at Barnoldswick, in my constituency. Furthermore, were he to follow Home Office standards, he could remove one of the pumps at Colne. Those suggestions, which cause great anxiety, surface regularly every year when they are considered by the councillors. Nothing happens, but those suggestions have a tremendously damaging impact on the morale of the firefighters.

Barnoldswick is a designated C risk area, but it is home to many important industries such as Silentnight Beds, which could go up in a puff of smoke. I am not suggesting for a moment that that would happen, but the materials that it uses to make beds are highly combustible. The Rolls-Royce plant that manufactures fans for aeroplane engines is based there. It is also home to Albert Hartleys and a number of other textile firms. I also live in the town. It is not part of a wider conurbation, but its status as a separate town has implications for response times and other considerations.

Colne is a different kettle of fish, and is designated a B risk area. It is one of the busiest two-pump retained stations in the country. Last year, it took 460 calls. The suggestion that those two fire stations could lose one pump each has been made according to the minimum standards of fire cover set down by the Home Office, which were agreed in 1958, almost 40 years ago. I take the view, as does everyone else to whom I have spoken, that that suggests there is something fundamentally wrong with those standards, and that they should be looked at.

I should like to make it clear for the record that I do not want to see a reduction in fire cover in my constituency, and I do not believe that that will happen. Even if the fire authority were to decide to get rid of those two retained fire pumps, it would save about £30,000—a small sum against the fire authority's budget of £38 million.

My local council is, unfortunately, run by the Liberal Democrats, who have relentlessly exploited the issue year after year. Tragically, they chose to vote down a recommendation put last September to Pendle borough council by Councillor Carol Hopkins, who is the leader of the Labour group. All she asked the council to do was call on the Home Secretary to conduct a further review of the Home Office minimum standards of fire cover. The Liberals voted that down because they said it would

"detract from the united response to the County Council".

Those Liberal Democrats never miss the opportunity to vilify and condemn Lancashire county council if it suits their purpose.

The Liberals have shamelessly exploited the issue and stoked people's fears and anxieties by predicting that the fire engines at Barnoldswick and Colne would be cut as part of a wider package of cuts. They have ignored the fact that the possible loss of two fire engines was suggested by the county's chief fire officer, Gordon Russel, to the fire authority; instead they have dubbed it "Labour's crazy plan".

In Barnoldswick, the Liberals sent a personalised letter to my constituents stating:

"Taking one of our two fire engines away will make it less safe for people in Barnoldswick. It will put lives at risk. Voting Labour in the Council by election will give a green light to the Labour controlled authority that it is OK to take our fire engine away."

A *Focus* leaflet produced by county councillor and Pendle borough councillor, David Whipp, states:

"Do you want Barnoldswick to lose its fire engines? This is the only cut in services put forward for Barnoldswick—and it has come from the Labour run Fire Services Committee. This plan will put local lives and safety at risk. Yet only . . . the local Liberal team are fighting against it."

He said that, if people voted Liberal, it would be a protest

"against the Labour Party's crazy plan."

That sort of mendacity has an effect. The Liberal Democrats recently presented a petition signed by 3,500 people who are obviously concerned that the town's fire cover may be reduced. They have launched a propaganda

blitz. Hardly a week goes by without acres of coverage in the local press. There has been a blizzard of *Focus* leaflets perpetuating the lie that the Labour party wants to cut our local fire cover.

What is the position? In a letter that I received yesterday—Guy Fawkes day—the chief fire officer said that the Lancashire fire authority

"has given a continued commitment to sending two pumps to all known building fires, immaterial of risk classification. Home Office recommended minimum standards only require one pump to be sent to C and D Risk areas. The Authority has accepted that minimum Home Office standards in C and D Risk areas would not provide adequate protection for the Lancashire community in that any householders should reasonably expect, wherever they live, to have the same level of service delivery from its Fire Brigade, even though it will inevitably take longer for fire appliances to arrive at an incident."

We in Barnoldswick—a C risk area—remember the horrific fire that occurred earlier this year in the old Gwent fire authority, now the South Wales fire authority. Only one pump was sent to a blazing domestic fire in which children were trapped and two firefighters lost their lives. The question whether one or two pumps should be sent is not an academic one. When one pump is sent and that is inappropriate, people and firefighters can lose their lives—firefighters did lose their lives in Gwent earlier this year.

The chief fire officer told me that the safety of individuals is of paramount importance, but that he must have regard for the safety of his own firefighters. He concluded:

"It is our view in Lancashire that all emergency calls to building fires should have two pumps responding whenever an emergency call is received."

That is what I would like the Home Office minimum standards to say, because they are currently deficient.

I raised my concerns with Baroness Blatch on 30 July. She responded on 2 September. She reminded me—as if I need reminding—that

"all fire authorities have a statutory duty to provide an efficient fire service in their area and this is generally interpreted as a brigade which can meet the nationally recommended standards of fire cover."

As I have already pointed out, those national standards are grotesquely inadequate. I rely on the professional view of Gordon Russel, our chief fire officer. I repeat that I want the Government to give a firm commitment to an early review of the minimum standards.

Baroness Blatch spoke of "an efficient fire service", yet the Government, over the years, have asked fire authorities to push an enormous boulder uphill. The Government's assessment of the amount of money that fire authorities should spend to provide a common standard of fire cover across the country is plainly unrealistic. The SSAs have not kept pace with inflation or, indeed, with the firefighters' pay award, which is coming up.

A fact sheet from the local authority associations tells me that the Government are already providing less than is needed across the country, and that the situation is becoming "critical"—their word. The associations tell me that spending in fire authorities

"will rise by 5 per cent. next year due to factors beyond local authorities' control."

That has implications. We in Lancashire have an efficient and well-run fire service, but the Government are making it difficult for Gordon Russel and his team of firefighters to provide the service that people have a right to expect.

All sorts of nonsenses are built into the SSA formula. Lancashire was at the forefront of the effort to tackle the problem of malicious calls, yet the SSA formula does not reward its success. Although the number of malicious fire calls fell by a staggering 42 per cent., the perversity of the system docked £280,000 from Lancashire fire authority's SSA. Lancashire was penalised for being successful.

The cost of retirement and pensions is eating away at the funds that the county has to spend on delivering the fire service. At the beginning of the decade, Lancashire fire authority's pension bill was 8.8 per cent. of the fire service budget; in the current year it is 12 per cent., and no element in the SSA reflects that. I should say that, in fact, there is such an element but no additional money. The money has to come from the pot that has to be used to provide the fire service that people need today.

There has been a progressive reduction in the county's capital allocation, from £1.6 million in 1992 to £996,000 this year. That means that the fire stations we need, such as the one in Accrington, cannot open, and that vital fire appliances and equipment that firefighters need cannot be bought. If equipment can be leased, as has happened in Lancashire, the revenue costs of leasing are not recognised by the Government. Lancashire therefore loses yet again as a result of ensuring that its firefighters have the up-to-date equipment they need.

Not all fire authorities in the country take the same view. In their fact sheet, the local authority associations say that, throughout the country, the purchase of essential fire equipment is being deferred and that current spending levels are not being maintained. Vacancies in fire brigades are being frozen and there has been

"a 25 per cent. reduction in training by the Fire Service College."

The associations conclude that, all across Britain,

"service provision is being reduced to meet only minimum Home Office standards."

As I have explained, that is not happening in Lancashire. There, the county council is topping up from its own resources the cash that our firefighters need, but the council clearly needs help.

After a recent committee meeting, the fire authority wrote to Baroness Blatch asking for a meeting in which it could press its case. I hope that the Minister will give an assurance that he and his colleagues will meet councillors and the professional officers of the brigade as soon as possible. We also need an early commitment to a review of the antiquated minimum standards, which lie at the root of the crisis.

Blackpool and Blackburn are being wrenched from Lancashire county council following the local government review and, from April 1998, there will be a new combined fire authority. In the past, Lancashire fire authority has managed to get by because the county council has religiously topped up from its own resources the funding that the fire authority needs, but that might not continue after 1998. I want the Minister to give consideration to what is happening, not only in Lancashire, but in other parts of the country where new fire authorities are being created.

12.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Tom Sackville): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on securing

[Mr. Tom Sackville]

this debate on the fire service in Lancashire. We share his high regard for the fire service, for its professionalism, for the bravery of its firefighters and for the quality of the service it provides. The quality of this country's fire service is universally acknowledged.

The service was commended last year by the Audit Commission in its value for money study; and, in a report in April, the commission stated, in respect of the performance of the fire brigades in the year to that date:

"the fire service is one of the most consistently high-performing services in local government, with almost all brigades achieving national standards for at least nine out of ten fire calls."

Lancashire is one of those high-performing brigades. I would like to be able to say that I am a fellow Lancashire Member, but it is an historical fact that Bolton disappeared into something called Greater Manchester some years ago. I am nevertheless aware of the quality of the fire brigade in our neighbouring county, Lancashire, and I am aware that it has met the required response times to fire calls on 92 per cent. of occasions recently, which is a splendid achievement.

In its latest report on Lancashire, published in March, Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate commended the authority's continued commitment to the development of the brigade and the positive manner in which the brigade is led by the chief fire officer and his team. The report noted:

"It is clear that the service provided by the brigade is highly regarded by the public, with personnel at all levels having a marked and justifiable pride in their contribution to the Lancashire fire brigade."

I am aware that an extensive review of fire cover was completed by the brigade, and the results were circulated recently for public comment. Fire authorities necessarily review their fire cover arrangements periodically to keep them up to date. I understand that the recommendations of the review could, if implemented, have implications for the constituency of the hon. Member for Pendle. One implication may be that proposals will be made to remove one of the pumping appliances from Barnoldswick and from Colne fire stations.

Under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, the Home Secretary's approval is required before any fire authority reduces the number of its fire stations, fire appliances and fire fighting posts. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has a specific and limited role in considering applications under section 19. He grants approval where the following conditions are satisfied. First, the proposals must have been sufficiently widely publicised, in sufficient detail and with adequate time to enable any interested party to make representations. Secondly, the representations must have been considered by the authority. Thirdly, after taking advice from Her Majesty's inspectorate, my right hon. and learned Friend must be satisfied that the national recommended standards of fire cover will be maintained.

To date, we have not received any application from the fire authority to reduce the operational capability of its brigade in consequence of its fire cover review. I assure the hon. Member for Pendle that, should the county council make such an application to reduce fire cover in any part of the county, my right hon. and learned Friend will take account of any representations he receives in reaching his decisions.

I certainly agree that those who seek to cause panic and extreme distress among local residents, by causing them to fear that fire cover may become inadequate, should be ashamed of themselves. Anyone who indulges in such activity for political reasons should examine their conscience closely.

The Fire Services Act 1947 does not define the test of an effective and efficient fire service that a fire authority must provide, but it is longstanding practice to interpret that by reference to the national recommended standards of fire cover. Those standards dictate the initial response to a fire in weight and speed of attack. They rest on four main standards of service, according to the risk category in which an area has been placed. The system of risk is based on the characteristics of the buildings and property in an area, and assumes for each category that a predetermined number of firefighting appliances should attend in a certain time.

The standards are not only nationally recommended. They are nationally agreed in the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. They were also extensively reviewed by the Joint Committee on Standards of Fire Cover in 1985 for the central fire brigades advisory councils for England and Wales and for Scotland. The standards enable all concerned to know where they stand regarding the minimum level of service that they should deliver.

I hear what the hon. Member for Pendle says about the standards, but I have to tell him that we consider that the standards have served us well. That is not to say that we regard them as immutable. The Audit Commission's report recommended that there should be another fundamental review of levels of fire cover. It recognised, however, that no fundamental change should be considered without very careful research. A review of fire cover standards is being taken forward by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, but these are complex issues, as I hope the hon. Gentleman would agree, and much work will be needed before we make any changes.

The fire service is a local authority service, funded, like other local authority services, through the revenue support grant, national non-domestic rates and the council tax. Statutory responsibility for providing an effective and efficient fire service to meet all normal requirements rests with the local "fire authority".

It may be helpful for the debate if I say something about the national framework. For 1996-97, central Government support for local authorities in England increased by £966 million. Total standard spending in England for the year was set at £44.9 billion—an increase of 3.3 per cent. on the previous year. The total fire service element of standard spending assessments in England was increased by £17 million—1.5 per cent.—from £1.168 million to £1.185. That comprised £14 million for the additional costs of firefighters' pensions and £3 million for training.

It is true that the fire service is being asked to make efficiency savings, but so is virtually any public service. It is essential that the taxpayer gets the best value for money. After the Audit Commission considered the service, its report, published last year, highlighted specific areas in which it believed that efficiencies could be made, including reducing sickness rates and management costs to the level of performance achieved by the most efficient brigades.

I remind the hon. Member for Pendle that there were and are considerable variations in all sorts of efficiency indicators between one service and another, and there is plenty of evidence that, if all services came up to the standards of the best, further considerable savings could be made.

Mr. Prentice: Has the Minister not already conceded that Lancashire is one of the most efficient fire authorities in the country?

Mr. Sackville: But that is not to say that there cannot be further efficiencies. At the start of my speech, I praised the fire service in Lancashire. I recall that I used the words:

"one of the most consistently high-performing"

brigades. That is true, but that is not to say that efficiencies cannot be made in Lancashire and elsewhere. All that the Audit Commission has said is that considerable savings could be made if all services came up to the level of the best. That is not to say that considerable further savings could not be made if the very admirable efforts made by many brigades in finding new efficiencies were maintained.

The fire service element of the SSA is, of course, distributed by a formula, which takes account of many factors. It is kept under constant review. Although not everyone will agree with the way in which the formula works for them, we believe that at present that formula provides the fairest allocation of funds.

A shire county such as Lancashire is not limited in its spending on the fire brigade by the fire service share of the standard spending assessment. What matters is the overall SSA for the county. It is for the county council to decide its priorities for spending between all its services, bearing in mind its statutory and other responsibilities. I remind the House that, as in most counties, spending on the fire service represents a very small proportion of overall county expenditure—in the case of Lancashire, of the order of 4 per cent.—and any decisions about inability to spend further above the SSA must be taken in the light of that.

I commend the hon. Gentleman's wise and moderate approach, and condemn those who say that there is a crisis in the making. Lancashire receives an extremely good fire service, in great measure due to the commitment of those involved in delivering that service. I pay tribute to the Lancashire fire service, and reiterate the Government's commitment to ensuring adequate resourcing for all fire services.

Paper (Ecolabelling)

12.59 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I welcome the opportunity to introduce this short debate on the ecolabelling of copying paper, a subject in which I have a strong constituency interest because Arjo-Wiggins, the papermaker, is based in Basingstoke. Among other things, the firm, formerly Wiggins Teape, provides all the House of Commons stationery.

I put on record my thanks to the Paper Federation of Great Britain for the advice and help that it willingly provided at short notice.

My argument is straightforward and direct. There is nothing wrong in theory, and in many cases in practice, with the concept of ecolabelling, but the ecolabelling of copying paper is an ecolabel too far. Lessons should be learned from the wretched saga.

The ecolabelling of copying paper is a mistake, which is compounded by the fact that the criteria are seriously flawed. If we must have ecolabelling of copying paper, at least we should get the criteria right. To make matters worse, the ecolabelling of copying paper especially disadvantages the United Kingdom paper industry.

It is indisputable that the industry takes its environmental responsibilities seriously. Unfortunately, its experiences and warnings seem to have received insufficient attention. In a letter dated 17 September, my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State assured me that the industry's views had been taken on board, but that can scarcely be the case, as the industry's view is that the ecolabelling of copying paper should not have been introduced.

The main European paper producers, through their national and international trade associations, advised the European Union that it was not practical to define an ecolabel for paper because of the substantial variations in raw materials and manufacturing processes among the European Union countries. However, the industry strongly believes in eco-management systems and their continual improvement through annual targets. EMS environmental improvement standards are tough and take into account the whole site—what goes in and what goes out—energy consumption, raw materials, discharges into water, air and the ground, and much else.

In contrast, the criteria of the ecolabel have been brought together in a muddled and hasty manner. In reply to my barrage of letters, my hon. Friend referred to the lengthy consultations that preceded the finalising of the ecolabelling criteria. We should clarify what happened. The proposals were produced in April this year and were rejected by the Paper Federation of Great Britain. During the development of the proposals, there was communication between the president of the federation and the Secretary of State, as well as between the federation and the UK Ecolabelling Board, but no one should have been in doubt that the entire British paper industry was opposed to the developing and finally published proposals.

In the period between mid-April and 30 May, the proposals were changed and made more stringent. The changes were introduced without consultation with the Paper Federation of Great Britain and for one purpose: to change the voting preference of one member state of the European Union, Finland, so that the measure could be passed on qualified majority voting.

[Mr. Andrew Hunter]

My hon. Friend has emphasised that the scheme is voluntary and that no company is under any obligation to obtain the ecolabel. I regret that in that regard the experience and insight of the industry have received too little attention. The industry predicts that in due course Governments will make a company's possession of the label a precondition of their own purchasing. That will have a dire effect. Already noises to that effect are emerging from local government—specifically, from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities. That is hardly surprising, as the declared objectives of ecolabelling include creating peer pressure so that the label brings commercial advantage. The system will have failed if that is not the case. In the light of those realities, I suggest that my hon. Friend should modify or qualify his use of the word "voluntary" in respect of the scheme.

I have argued so far that ecolabelling is the wrong approach for the paper industry; environmental management systems are the way to proceed; too little attention has been paid to the industry's warnings and advice; and the idea that the ecolabelling scheme is voluntary is unrealistic.

If we must have the ecolabelling of copying paper, let us get the criteria as accurate as possible. The criteria do not relate to environmental impact or life cycle assessment in any significant way, and they therefore fail the basic requirement of the enabling EU regulation. I arbitrarily select a few points by way of illustration.

First, the criteria include a carbon dioxide factor. But as everyone knows, or ought to know, the papermaking process is carbon dioxide neutral. New planting of trees balances the harmful emissions from the use of energy. The Government have acknowledged that in other contexts. The inclusion of the ecolabelling criterion for carbon dioxide in the production of copying paper is simply wrong.

Secondly, the UK Environment Agency recognises that adsorbable organo-halogens—AOX—should be disregarded below a level of 1.5, because at that level AOX have no adverse environmental impact. However, a lower level than 1.5 is one of the criteria for the copying paper ecolabel. One of the Government's own agencies therefore rejects the position adopted by the Government in drawing up the scheme.

Thirdly, the chemical oxygen demand—COD—which governs the discharge of effluent into the watercourse to prevent pollution is lower—that means more stringent—for pulp and papermaking together than is generally achievable in pulp-making alone. That is absurd. The required COD is 30 kg per tonne, but that is not commercially feasible. The criterion also disregards existing international agreements. My hon. Friend will know that of the 109 pulp mills worldwide on which we have data, only 12 are sufficiently low in COD to enable UK papermakers to achieve the ecolabel chemical oxygen demand. I shall return to that point shortly. The ecolabel system will fundamentally distort world trade and it is not surprising that the Governments of the United States, Canada, Brazil and others are angry about it.

Fourthly, the ecolabel requirements for copier paper are more demanding than those for tissue products. There is no sense in that. The environmental impact of the two production processes is virtually identical. The same pulp is used and there is no significant difference in energy consumption or discharges. My point is not only that we should not have ecolabelling for copier paper, but that the system with which we have landed ourselves is fundamentally flawed.

To crown it all, the criteria disadvantage UK papermakers in particular. In the opinion of the federation, no UK company, with the possible exception of one that has unique practices in respect of energy acquisition, can currently meet the requirements. The criteria favour the integrated producer, the manufacturer who carries out the whole process from basic raw material to finished product, and disadvantage the non-integrated producer who buys in pulp and turns it into paper. There are no UK integrated papermakers. UK companies are therefore immediately disadvantaged.

I have already referred to the ecolabel's chemical oxygen demand criterion, which favours integrated manufacturers and correspondingly disadvantages UK companies that produce copier paper from purchased pulp. When the COD for papermaking is added, the limit will be unduly stringent for non-integrated operators and will favour the integrated operators of Scandinavia.

The disadvantage that UK companies experience is even more apparent from the energy criteria, which are described by the industry as "oblique and poorly defined". A mill that has invested in its own power plant—virtually all UK mills have done so—is penalised for emissions while generating energy, but the company that buys in its energy is not penalised for the emissions from the generating of that energy elsewhere. Moreover, the added consumption of energy is often and increasingly associated with greater environmental protection, because it is used to treat effluent and residues prior to discharge. That point is not reflected in the criteria.

In the opinion of the Paper Federation of Great Britain, the simple definition of energy use

"shows demonstrably that the concept is naive and not written by anyone with an understanding of the paper industry."

The UK paper industry exports 1 million tonnes of paper a year, which brings more than £1 billion a year to this country. The industry employs 25,000 people, and the total forest products chain contributes 6 per cent. of our gross domestic product. The interests of that important industry have been neither protected nor promoted by this piece of euro-nonsense. In the words of a senior executive of the Paper Federation of Great Britain:

"This is a rotten, lousy measure."

Environmental protection is best achieved in the industry by the ecomanagement system approach, but if we must have ecolabelling, we should at least have got it right. To compound matters, the measure disadvantages the UK industry. It is, I submit, a sorry story.

1.13 pm

Sir Roger Moate (Faversham): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) for allowing me a couple of minutes in this important debate, and I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke on his mastery of the subject, on securing this Adjournment debate and on his forceful speech to the House. To his constituents and to mine, this is, indeed, a matter of great importance. I should at this stage declare

my interest as parliamentary adviser to the Paper Federation of Great Britain. However, my concern today is principally for the paper mills in my constituency, in particular UK Paper plc, a company that only recently opened one of the most advanced plants in the world for the production of quality paper, particularly copier paper, essentially all of it from de-inked recycled paper.

This country should take pride in the fact that the paper industry leads the world in recycling technology, and is investing massively and contributing more than most other industries to environmental improvement. The industry is totally committed to continuous improvement through environmental management systems. Few industries have done or are doing so much to ensure that we have sustainable industrial development, and the industry's commitment to environmental improvement and to ecological standards is higher than that of almost any other industry. That is why its voice should be taken seriously and that is why I and others fear that the vote in Brussels on 29 May could inflict serious damage on our British industry—damage that will not confer any environmental gain on consumers.

My hon. Friend made the point that the proposed ecolabelling system is described as voluntary both for those who take part and for those who decide whether to purchase the materials. However, my hon. Friend also made the point that papermakers in his constituency supply paper to the House of Commons. It is possible that the House of Commons, the British Government and local authorities will say that they will buy only paper with an ecolabel. The system that we are talking about could ensure that the only ecolabelled copier paper would come from Scandinavia, because of the extraordinary criteria that have been adopted for the proposed ecolabels.

My hon. Friend has clearly described why the criteria are unacceptable, and why they are described as muddled, unsatisfactory and idiosyncratic. It cannot be right that such criteria should be adopted when they will inflict such damage, actual or potential, on this important British industry.

When one reads about how the qualified majority vote was secured, one begins to worry about the whole process whereby at the last moment, to secure one extra vote, an extra criterion that was not properly debated was suddenly introduced. The majority was then secured and the rules changed. That is a very unsatisfactory way in which to proceed.

On 19 January 1994, the matter was raised in the House. I said then to the Minister:

"Is it not more important to get ecolabelling right than to be rushed into premature judgments? Will my hon. Friend take particularly seriously the representations of the paper industry to ensure that any system of ecolabelling does not work to the disadvantage of British producers of what is an environmentally friendly and eminently recyclable product?"

The Minister for the Environment and Countryside replied:

"What my hon. Friend says is right. It is essential that we have a standard that is applicable throughout the European Union. In those circumstances, it is better to take time and get it right".—[*Official Report*, 19 January 1994; Vol. 235, c. 878.]

What has happened is that we have taken time and are now in serious danger of getting it wrong. A vote was taken on 29 May, which has caused serious concern to the British industry. I do not know what scope there is under the Brussels procedures to revise the criteria or to try to ensure that the regulations are not imposed in this country in this way.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister please, please to do everything he can to ensure that the voice of the British paper industry in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and in my own is listened to and taken seriously, and I ask him to do everything he can to ensure that we get it right for the industry, for our constituents and for the British consumer who is, rightly, concerned about choosing environmentally friendly products which are, essentially, what the British industry is producing.

1.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. James Clappison): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this important debate, in which my hon. Friends the Members for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) and for Faversham (Sir R. Moate) raised some important points. Both spoke forcefully on behalf of important constituency interests—business concerns that are, no doubt, employing many of their constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke gave me cause for thought as, at the beginning of the debate, I realised that my stationery could have been manufactured by Arjo-Wiggins in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham spoke forcefully on behalf of UK Paper plc and other important interests in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke spoke about the wider concerns of the paper industry. In my response to the debate, I do not want to be guilty of failing to acknowledge the efforts that have been made by the paper industry, to which my hon. Friends referred, in managing its process in keeping with recognised environmental management systems, as specified under the eco-management and audit scheme and other important industry standards, such as British standard 7750.

Ecolabelling is important in its own way. It is appropriate for me to begin by putting the scheme and the concerns of the paper industry in the wider context of ecolabelling. Environmental protection cannot be dealt with solely by legislation and regulation. Ordinary people need to play a part by being more aware of the consequences of their actions for the environment, and by doing something about it, even if only in a modest way. In aggregate, such efforts count.

The Government therefore encourage initiatives that go beyond what is required by law, so that businesses and consumers at an individual level can make a contribution to sustainable development. A great deal can be achieved by voluntary action, and by harnessing the power of the market as an instrument of change.

As people become more aware of the environmental challenge, their attitudes to pollution, waste and recycling change. In many households there is a greater readiness to make the effort to use resources more economically, to avoid or minimise waste and to reduce pollution.

Increasingly, the more far-sighted companies recognise the advantages of better environmental management of their production processes in the framework of the ecomanagement and audit scheme or BS 7750. As purchasers, companies and individuals can show their preference for more sustainable consumption by seeking

[Mr. James Clappison]

out products that do less damage to the environment. The difficulty for consumers is knowing which "green" products really are the genuine article.

The Government see a clear role for reliable information about the environmental impact of products to encourage markets to operate in ways that promote the aim of sustainable development. It is important to bear in mind the fact that Government, while they can try to steer developments in environmental information, can rarely expect to control them. Much depends on the views and actions of the market and of our constitutional partners in the European Union. The Government's policy is therefore about how to influence the development of environmental information, in the market and within a European framework, along coherent lines that can serve the overall aim of sustainable development.

The European Union ecolabelling scheme should be seen in that context. The purpose of the scheme is to identify products that are less harmful to the environment than equivalent brands across their whole life cycle. The aim is to encourage the design, production and use of such products, and so achieve a real environmental gain.

Under the scheme, which is voluntary—I note the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham on voluntariness in this context—manufacturers may apply to display the European ecolabel on their products if they meet the criteria. For consumers, the label identifies products that have satisfied stringent environmental criteria. Having a single Europewide scheme, backed by a Community regulation, ensures consistency in application, and offers real advantages for the industry in the United Kingdom.

The ecolabel currently appears on three groups of products in the United Kingdom—washing machines, paints and household tissue paper. The first ecolabel to be awarded in Europe was for a range of British-manufactured washing machines. In agreement with other member states, criteria for labelling have been developed for further groups of products, including soil improvers, kitchen paper, toilet rolls, laundry detergents, light bulbs, varnishes, tee-shirts, bed linen, refrigerators and copying paper.

In keeping with the requirements of the regulation, we established the UK Ecolabelling Board back in 1992 as the independent body to administer the scheme in the United Kingdom. The board also advises Ministers on the various operational aspects of the scheme. As well as being responsible for awarding the ecolabels to UK manufacturers, the board is closely involved at the European level in the development of the criteria for awarding labels to the different groups of products.

To that end, members of the board are appointed by my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for the Environment and for Trade and Industry, and the membership draws together experts from a wide range of relevant backgrounds. We feel that the board provides the necessary competence, independence and objectivity to ensure fair play in effecting a proper balance between the interests of manufacturers, consumers and the environment.

On the particular criteria for copying paper, the process of life-cycle assessment used by the scheme revealed that the main environmental impacts of that group of products resulted from the production processes involved in the manufacture of the pulp and paper. Those impacts are notably in the use of energy and chemicals, and the consequences for pollution of air and water.

The environmental criteria therefore aim to promote the reduction of toxic and otherwise polluting discharges. Limits have been set: to reduce water pollution from chemical discharges from the pulping and papermaking processes, and in particular from toxic chlorinated chemicals, and to minimise the environmental damage related to energy use from global warming and acidification, by setting limits on energy consumption and a limit on sulphur emissions from the production processes. The criteria also provide for the application of good management principles to forests from which fibres originate, thus promoting the sustainable use of those resources.

Those criteria were developed over a long period of wide consultation with all interested parties, including producers from outside Europe. During that time, the Commission and the UK Ecolabelling Board, and the ecolabelling bodies in other member states, actively sought the views of the paper industry and other interested parties. In agreeing the criteria, the Commission and the member states were satisfied that the measures chosen allowed for fair and justified opportunities both for European and for foreign copying-paper products.

A Europewide scheme necessarily entails reaching the best compromise to reflect the differing interests involved. That can and does entail some fine-tuning of certain elements to enable final agreement to be reached. I emphasise, however, that considerable care has been taken in arriving at the different elements of the criteria, and in setting the thresholds.

That process has drawn on current best practice among producers across the European market, combined with intelligence about the ability of producers to meet the criteria. By its very nature, the ecolabel is meant to be a reward for those whose performance is at the upper end of the spectrum. The key aim of ecolabelling criteria is, after all, to achieve an environmental gain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke referred to the criticisms of the criteria for copying paper that have been brought to his attention. I feel, however, that some of those criticisms spring from a context of more general opposition to the ecolabelling scheme itself. The Government support the scheme. As I explained, it provides an important opportunity for consumers to make an active contribution, through their purchasing decisions, to more sustainable development. The scheme provides market recognition for manufacturers who rise to meet the environmental challenge. In certain product areas, UK manufacturers have already risen to the challenge, and I applaud them for doing so.

In the case of copying paper, the UK Ecolabelling Board consulted interested parties widely by circulating drafts of the emerging criteria during their lengthy period of development—in 1994 and 1995, and in the first part of this year. However, during that process, the British paper industry, acting through the Paper Federation of Great Britain, decided that it would take no further part in the development of the criteria. That decision is a matter for the industry, but we feel that it is generally better for the industry to take part in the consultative process.

Accusations have be made that the scheme is subjective rather than scientifically sound, and that it inhibits innovation. It has also been said that the criteria are not based on science, because they have been changed during their development.

Those criticisms do not recognise the painstaking work involved in examining the scientific and technical factors involved precisely in order to develop criteria that are soundly based and justifiable in terms of the environmental concerns identified. As for making changes in developing the criteria, surely the very nature of arriving at well-considered criteria must reflect discussions and representations on the complex range of factors involved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke said, the matter involves some technical complexity, which he mastered with great skill and ingenuity.

In the case of copying paper, as I said, it has taken the best part of three years to develop and agree the criteria. Once in place, however, the resulting ecolabel has the potential to stimulate innovation by providing an incentive to improve the environmental performance related to those paper products, through the use of better technologies and sound environmental management. That is the overall purpose of the scheme. It is an important purpose that will, in its own way, allow consumers and the market to make a contribution to the important cause of sustainable development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised some important issues, some of which are of a technical nature. I shall, of course, examine carefully the concerns expressed by my hon. Friends in this short debate.

Higher Education (Scotland)

1.29 pm

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): I certainly welcome this opportunity to raise the issue of higher education in Scotland. It follows the successful debates that were held earlier this year on scottish education: on general scottish education, initiated by the hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh), and on further education in Scotland, initiated by the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan).

This debate is being held at an opportune time and gives me an opportunity to welcome the progress that has been made at the university of the Highland and Islands—especially after the recent announcement of millennium funding. Progress has been made at the university since I first raised the issue in the Scottish Grand Committee in February, and I willingly acknowledge the personal interest and helpful support shown by the Secretary of State for Scotland in the project, which has helped to make progress.

This debate also occurs at an opportune moment because it is being held a week after the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council published its "Analysis of Financing Forecasts for Scotland's Higher Education Institutions for the Period 1996-99", which somewhat ominously concluded that

"the sector's financial health is weakening over the forecast period."

The analysis went on to state that the forecast surpluses

"leave little scope for the sector to generate the resources necessary to maintain and replace fixed assets or to implement strategies for future development."

As the Minister will know, this debate is being held at a time when he and his colleagues are considering the share-out of the Scottish Office block funding. Last year, during one Question Time, the distribution caused the Minister to express his disappointment that higher education did not receive a bigger share of funding.

This debate also takes place against a background of both success and crisis. We are all aware and proud of Scotland's excellent educational heritage, but, in recent times, there has been no question of Scotland's higher education institutions resting on their laurels. Student numbers have risen in Scotland, so that, by 1994-95, it was estimated that 42.7 per cent. of young Scots under 24 had entered full-time higher education courses, which is 10 per cent. higher than the average for Great Britain overall.

The record of Scotland's universities in research is outstanding. The commercialisation inquiry conducted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and by Scottish Enterprise found that Scotland's publication performance in peer-review journals confirmed Scotland's international status in many subjects, and that, on a per capita basis, Scotland ranked third in the world—well ahead of both the United States and England.

The Scottish higher education system has managed to retain its distinctiveness. We still have our four-year honours degree, which perhaps explains why the Minister was able to claim, at Question Time on 3 July 1996, that Scottish students are funded 31 per cent. more per student than are students in England and Wales. The fact that courses are 33 per cent. longer for many Scottish students may be an important contributory factor in the funding difference.

[Mr. James Wallace]

It is important that we have the four-year degree course—although the popularity of the three-year degree is increasing again—and the flexibility that they allow in postponing until a late stage the decision to specialise. It is also important that our higher education institutions retain the ethos and approach demonstrated at earlier stages of education, which enables the breadth and depth of the Scottish educational system.

Quality has been identified as an important part of Scotland's international marketing strategy, and the latest "Survey of Scottish Service Sector Exports" states that Scottish higher education is leading the services sector as a top export market performer. Moreover, the McNicoll report on the "Impact on the Scottish Higher Education Sector on the Economy of Scotland" evaluated the very significant contribution that the higher education sector makes, directly and indirectly, to the Scottish economy in jobs and added value.

Scotland has established a background of success, and it is important that that success is sustained if Scotland is to compete effectively in global marketplaces by developing the skills and talents of Scotland's young people. Sustaining the success of Scotland's universities is important not only for Scotland's young people, however, because a great many students from the firth down—from England, and even from European countries and from Africa and the Pacific rim—take up study at Scottish universities because of the quality of education they provide.

The fact, however, is that higher education in Scotland is facing a financial crisis of dramatic proportions—a crisis that many people fear might threaten to undermine the achievements that I have mentioned. The downward trend in funding, with the year-on-year efficiency savings, was made worse last year by the Secretary of State's decision to impose a further 4.5 per cent. cut in funding for this financial year and by the additional cuts that are expected to amount to more than 10 per cent. in the three ensuing years.

The impact of the cuts is likely to be profound. The Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals believes that institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain quality. The joint working group on higher education expenditure—which was established through the collaboration of the Scottish Office, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals, and which is under the chairmanship of a senior official in the Scottish Office—noted the upward trend in the student-staff ratio, and concluded that it

"is having a damaging effect on staff morale and effectiveness. The pressures on staff in terms of uncertainty about the future, reductions in technical and clerical support and rationalisation of numbers of staff were beginning to take their toll."

COSHEP provisionally estimates that, without any relief from the funding cuts that are either taking place or are in train, approximately 1,100 full-time jobs will be lost in Scotland's universities between now and 1999. Almost half of those job losses will be suffered by academic staff. COSHEP stated that the job cuts may mean the loss of specialists, who can be very difficult to replace.

The cuts are having an effect on capital estate and equipment. There is a growing and significant backlog of repair and maintenance to buildings. The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council has had to provide £26 million over a three-year period—almost as emergency aid—to deal with items on the backlog which pose a threat to health and safety. The £26 million sum is modest compared to the £700 million that is thought to be required for investment in the capital estate over a 10-year period. I am not speaking only about buildings, but about furniture, computers, microscopes, other laboratory equipment and all the items that are essential if Scotland's universities are to maintain and enhance the level of quality that has been their hallmark for generations.

The impact of the cuts has not been only on buildings and staff but also on students. Students are obliged to use over-crowded and understocked libraries. They do not have the same opportunities as they had previously for laboratory work, and they face a reduction in quality learning time and face-to-face time with their tutors. Those are only some examples of the likely consequences that have been clearly described in many reports, none of which bode well for the future of Scottish higher education.

I do not think that it is an exaggeration to describe an educational sector that is in financial crisis. What has been the Government's response? They have implicitly realised the degree of the crisis, which has been caused to some extent by the threat of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals to impose top-up fees. Because of the pressure, the Government appointed an inquiry, under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing—which also has a Scottish committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Garrick. The concern that has been expressed in many quarters of higher education, however, is that those committees' report will not be made available until next summer at the earliest. The conclusions, if accepted, would be unlikely to be implemented for some time after that.

The message from university principals, lecturers, students or anyone connected with higher education that Scotland's higher educational institutions cannot wait for Dearing's committee to report, let alone implement its recommendations. Preferably, we should start by restoring some of the funding that has been cut in the past year. At the very least, there should be a moratorium on further efficiency gains pending the outcome of the Dearing inquiry. That plea has been made forcibly by COSHEP in its submission on the 1996 public expenditure survey and was supported by the recently published report of the Commission on Scottish Education.

In recognition of the growing concern within the educational sector, the Government have also set up a joint working group on expenditure in publicly funded higher education institutions. Not only did it note many of the concerns to which I have referred, but it reached a sceptical view on the extent to which the private finance initiative could meet the needs for much-needed capital investment. It concluded that PFI is

"likely to be applicable in relatively few circumstances".

Yet the Scottish Office publication "Serving Scotland's Needs" of March this year places much emphasis and reliance on access to private sources of capital to meet the shortfall in funding from the public sector. Even a committee with a significant input from the Government Department and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council—a public body—questioned the efficacy of the PFI in relation to funding capital needs in the higher education sector.

The other dimension of the funding crisis is that faced by our students. They now have the prospect of leaving university with a degree and a debt of several thousand pounds. Some do not leave with a degree, as is shown by the drop-out rate. Recent research by the Association of University Teachers in Scotland found increasing incidence of students taking evening and weekend work and lecturers reporting students falling asleep in class because of the strain of trying to combine work with full-time study. Worse still, students were missing lectures altogether because they had to be at work.

Surely that cannot be allowed to continue. My party voted against the tax cuts in last year's Budget.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Hear, hear.

Mr. Wallace: So did the hon. Lady's party. We did so because we believed that there was no scope for income tax cuts when vital sectors to the country's future such as higher education were being forced into crisis. Moreover, we are on record as having expressed a willingness to increase tax by a penny in the pound to fund further investment in education, including a commitment to lifelong learning in the tertiary sector.

That will not be enough, however. We were the first party to propose individual learning accounts which students could debit while they were at university and pay back at an affordable rate once they had reached a fixed earnings threshold using the national insurance contributions system. The Government would still cover fees and contribute to maintenance and there would be a partnership between Government, employers and students. Individual learning accounts would allow individuals to build up entitlements so that they could access what they had banked to take opportunities for reskilling and retraining later in adult life. The scheme has the advantage of securing additional funding for tertiary education and helping to alleviate student poverty.

That is not a particularly easy answer—indeed, there are none—but I hope that the Minister is prepared to take a step forward by acknowledging the scale and immediacy of the problem that has been highlighted by so many involved in higher education and let us know how he and his colleagues propose to address it.

1.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) on securing today's debate. As he said, it follows some useful debates we had last session on school education and further education. I note that the hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh), who initiated one of those debates, is in his place. I find it alarming that no Opposition Front-Bench Members felt that it was a sufficiently important topic to warrant attending the debate.

Before I respond to the specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised, let me make a few general remarks about higher education in Scotland. During the past decade and a half, the Government have given high and increasing levels of support to the higher education sector. We have done so through the grants made by the University Grants Committee, the Universities Funding Council and the funding councils, and through research councils and the fees element of student awards.

Total public expenditure on higher education in Scotland, including student maintenance awards, increased by some 25 per cent. in real terms between 1991-92 and 1995-96. The current figure is approximately £1 billion. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that that is a huge sum of money. As he said, the support is more generous than it is in England. The annual public expenditure on teaching an undergraduate student in a higher education institute is 10 per cent. higher in Scotland than in England. That support has funded a revolution in higher education, a spectacular increase in student numbers, a massive increase in the range, size and diversity of organisations and ever-widening access.

It is appropriate to refer to some of the measures of our achievement. The participation rate of our young people has broken through the 40 per cent. barrier—a level of attainment that we did not expect to reach until at least the year 2000. The number of people over 21 entering full-time higher education has increased by more than 200 per cent. since 1984-85. That represents a massive increase in opportunities for Scots of all ages. It is also good news for the economy, as the hon. Gentleman said.

The proportion of the total work force holding higher education qualifications has doubled in the past decade to 20 per cent. We can safely say that Scotland has a world-class system of higher education and research. If that is measured by the number of published papers, Scotland ranks an astonishing 16th in the world. On a per capita basis, it ranks third in the world. Its reputation for quality and excellence continues to attract large numbers of overseas students. The number has grown by 100 per cent. since 1984-85, and I am sure that it has helped to attract inward investment to Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the exciting university of the highlands and islands project. It is a revolutionary educational concept and I thank the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging the wholehearted support that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has given the project. The UHI will extend access to higher education for many people for whom opportunities are presently limited. It is also an important element in our strategy to restore prosperity to the highlands and islands. The region stands to receive an important economic boost as the project gathers momentum over the next few years. Three colleges in the hon. Gentleman's constituency will participate: Orkney college, Shetland college and the North Atlantic Fisheries college, which I was fortunate enough to visit last month.

The Government are giving concrete support to the project in numerous ways. We have provided resources to upgrade video-conferencing links and to support curriculum and staff development in the colleges. We have allowed expansion of higher education provision in the network colleges in the current academic year and beyond and we have approved a first degree specifically developed by the colleges in the UHI project at Lewis Castle college in Stornoway. The Scottish Office is ready to consider what further support can be given.

The project is pursuing a wide range of funding possibilities, including PFI. The decision of the Millennium Commission to meet half the capital costs was an important and significant vote of confidence in the project. We look forward to the UHI project developing in close partnership with the rest of the higher education sector in Scotland, and the existing universities that

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already provide services for the highlands and islands have much to offer in assisting the developers of the project.

Mrs. Ewing: The Minister said that Lewis college had already been given provision for a degree. Does he expect that other degrees will be accredited by the Scottish Office in the next year?

Mr. Robertson: We are willing to consider them as and when they come to us. The fact that one has been accredited does not mean that that will be the end of it. I hope that more will come on stream in the next academic year. That is a matter for the institutions, but we would do nothing to prevent it.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned the committee of inquiry into higher education. The Government's decision to establish an independent inquiry showed the value that we attach to higher education. Throughout the western world, the ever-increasing demand for higher education has raised fundamental questions about its future size, shape and, most importantly, funding. We wanted Sir Ron Dearing to take a long, impartial look at those issue to try to chart a way forward for the next 20 years.

We are determined that the distinctive contribution of Scottish higher education should not be overlooked by the committee of inquiry. That is why we were determined to establish a Scottish standing committee. We were delighted that Sir Ron Garrick agreed to chair it. I understand that the Dearing inquiry is making good progress. The Government are assisting by providing factual briefing material to inform the debate. The Scottish Office is providing material to the Scottish standing committee.

I do not want to pre-empt the inquiry's conclusions, but I must put firmly on the record the fact that the Government believe that there is no need to make students contribute top-up fees for the cost of tuition and we have no plans to introduce such a system. Such fees would put students from less well off families at a disadvantage. Scotland's track record of encouraging those from less well off backgrounds into higher and further education is second to none. We shall do nothing to change that. It is up to individual institutions to consider such options in the light of their circumstances. The terms of reference of the committee of inquiry cover funding, and it would be premature to speculate on what recommendations it might make.

Mr. Wallace: Will the Minister clarify what he means when he says that it is up to individual institutions to consider such options? We support his categorical opposition to top-up fees. Does his reference to "such options" mean fees?

Mr. Robertson: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the institutions are autonomous bodies. They are entitled to pursue that course of action, but the Government do not believe that the financial pressures are such that any institution in Scotland need do so and we would deplore such a decision. I am delighted that COSHEP has publicly distanced itself from the concept of top-up fees.

Since 1992, the Government have had no direct role in determining pay in higher education. Pay negotiations for all academics are in the hands of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association. Universities are autonomous institutions and the Government do not intervene in their internal affairs. It is for them to consider what is necessary and affordable to recruit and retain academic staff. We believe that a pay review body for higher education would fetter institutions by imposing externally determined settlements on their biggest single cost—salaries.

The Dearing committee will consider the principle that higher education institutions should be able to recruit, retain and motivate staff of the appropriate calibre. The committee may therefore consider the arguments for and against a pay review body. The Government will consider any recommendations carefully.

The Government have presided over a massive increase in opportunities for Scots of all ages to enter higher education. More Scots than ever are now studying in our universities and colleges. Two statistics highlight the growth in opportunities. First, the number of students entering full-time higher education has more than doubled since 1980-81—a remarkable 43 per cent. of young Scots entered higher education in 1994-95, compared with a participation rate of only 17 per cent. in 1980-81. Our expenditure plans will allow those record numbers of higher education students to be maintained.

Secondly, lifelong learning is becoming more and more of a reality in modern Scotland. Between 1984-5 and 1993-94, the number of over 21-year-olds entering full-time undergraduate courses increased by 215 per cent. Our institutions are now more responsive than ever to students' needs. Flexibility and adaptability are their watchwords. The number of part-time students entering higher education grew by 21 per cent. between 1984 and 1995.

Scottish institutions are at the forefront of the information revolution. The broad bands for highway links now in place in Scotland will transform the delivery of higher education and extend access, particularly in remote areas.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned our success in attracting overseas students. I am sure that he agrees that Scottish higher education is a magnet for students from all over the world. The number of overseas students on full-time higher education courses in Scottish institutions has grown by more than 100 per cent. since 1984-85.

Scottish higher education institutions are also generating real wealth for Scotland in other ways. Their international export earnings totalled £140 million in 1993-94. They lead the field with 20 per cent. of export market share, according to the Scottish Council for Development in Industry/Scottish Trade International 1996 survey.

Higher education is vital for the skills and flexibility that Scotland will need to compete successfully in the 21st century. It is therefore pleasing that Scotland has maintained its traditional strength in the key areas of science, engineering and technology. The number of full-time equivalent students on such courses in our higher education institutions has increased by more than 50 per cent. during the past decade. It is also vital for the economy that universities and industry co-operate in many

areas. That message is now well understood. The total income from external research grants has more than trebled in real terms since 1980.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made representations about this year's public expenditure survey. He has been in the House longer than me and he cannot expect me to give anything away at this stage. We have listened carefully to his representations and to those of COSHEP, the CVCP and the Association of University Teachers. I met representatives of the AUT during the summer, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will receive further representations this week. No doubt all those bodies will put the same case as the hon. Gentleman. It is only normal at this time of year that all those concerned with the outcome of the public expenditure survey make representations. We have listened to those representations. Later this month, the hon. Gentleman's expectations will be either fulfilled or dashed. It would be wrong to give anything away.

I am well aware of the views of many in the higher education community on resourcing and other issues. I give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that we shall listen carefully to all the representations made over the next few weeks. The Government believe that we should keep public expenditure and taxation levels as low as possible. We have set firm limits on overall public expenditure levels within which our decisions on priorities are made.

At least the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and his party are honest about the issue. They have said that they would increase taxation specifically for education. That is an honest position, unlike that of the Labour party.

Priorities have to take account of important demographic and other changes, particularly the needs of an increasingly elderly and dependent population, which makes particular demands on health care, social work and social security services. If more is to be spent on higher education, we must look at all possible sources of funding. We believe that it is desirable to find new ways of funding higher education if there is to be continued expansion and change. I mentioned the private finance initiative earlier, and ways of encouraging private funding of research.

There is a widespread view that we have reached an important crossroads in higher education. We need to consider the role and purpose of higher education, how it should be delivered and how it should be funded. That is what the Dearing inquiry and Sir Ron Garrick's Scottish committee are all about.

Mr. Wallace: Will the Minister address the fact that several bodies, including those on which his officials have sat, have expressed great scepticism about the usefulness of the private finance initiative for some of the capital investment that higher education institutions require?

Mr. Robertson: Of course I acknowledge that. I have told various institutions that we consider the private finance initiative as the first option when possible, but in some cases it will not, for whatever reason, be an option. In such cases, more traditional funding is required. The Government have acknowledged that, and I am happy to acknowledge it to the hon. Gentleman.

The Scottish Office is proud of the achievements of our universities and colleges. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall continue to do everything that we can to help them to maintain their international standing.

It being one minute to Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

City of Edinburgh Council Order Confirmation Bill

Edinburgh Merchant Company Order Confirmation Bill

Read the Third time, and passed.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Firework Injuries

1. **Mr. Jamieson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what recent discussions he has had with his officials about the latest firework injury statistics. [522]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. John M. Taylor): I discussed the 1995 firework injury statistics with my officials when formulating this year's extensive firework safety campaign.

I hope that it is in order for me to extend my condolences to the families of those killed and injured during the firework season. Nothing that I say can redeem those tragedies, and I will not trespass further on private grief.

Mr. Jamieson: Does the Minister now accept that the folly of deregulating the import controls on dangerous fireworks in 1993 has led to the doubling of firework injuries in the past few years, the serious injury of a man last night and the deaths of Steven Timcke and David Hattersley, a private primary school head teacher? Will the Minister now turn his condolences into action and ban those lethal bombs immediately?

Mr. Taylor: The import licensing regime was replaced in 1993, but the Health and Safety Executive has said that the single authorisation scheme that was put in its place in no way weakens safety controls. We have been running a thorough-going review of firework regulations since July, and nothing will be excluded from the consultation and analysis of the responses that we receive. If any constructive observations come from Opposition Members, I shall take them into account also.

Mr. Heppell: I thank the Minister for expressing his condolences—especially for one of my constituents, Dale Mitchell, a 10-year-old boy who died because of the misuse of fireworks—but consultation was no substitute for action in Dale's case. Will the Minister now take concrete action to ensure that only people aged over 18 are allowed to buy dangerous fireworks?

Mr. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and for their tone. At risk of saying this twice, our review is thorough-going and extensive; nothing will be excluded from it. The review has been running since 31 July, and we will get it right.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: May I express the condolences of the whole House to the relatives of those who have suffered death from fireworks? Is the Minister aware that the Health and Safety Executive got it wrong, and that aerial shell fireworks have killed three people since it expressed those views; that he was wrong to reject Labour's call in the House on 17 July to tackle those deadly items; that the Government's abolition of import controls on dangerous fireworks has been a deregulation disaster; and that action was needed before bonfire night, not after? Will the Minister now co-operate with Labour to speed legislation through the House to reinstate proper controls and reverse the disastrous deregulation?

Mr. Taylor: It is worth pointing out that we have run probably the most extensive safety campaign on record this year, with 5 million leaflets, 5,000 poster sites and more media communications than we could count. The system of authorisation that is operated by the Health and Safety Executive applies both to home-manufactured fireworks and to imports. Importers who do not seek authorisation, and who do not demonstrate that quality control systems are in place, break the law. That is a criminal offence. Trading standards officers, meanwhile, concentrate on wholesalers and retailers. We have a good system in operation, but we are prepared to review it root and branch.

Business Link

2. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what level of financial support business link will receive this year. [523]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Energy (Mr. Richard Page): My Department has made available a total of £130 million to business link this financial year, £81 million for business support services and £49 million for business link pump-priming.

Mr. Spring: Is my hon. Friend aware how valuable the services of business links are to many small and medium-sized businesses, especially in rural areas? Given the success of their services, will my hon. Friend assure the House that he is satisfied that the money expended is well spent?

Mr. Page: Without doubt, the creation of business link has provided a step change in the quality of support for the small business man and woman. Across the country, business links are helping to create many jobs, and I expect greater things from them in the future. With any success story, there are bound to be some setbacks, and I was disturbed to hear of the recent difficulties of Wirral business link. The board of directors recently identified evidence that indicated that there had been irregularities involving sums in the order of £600,000. The board has dismissed its managing director, begun civil proceedings to recover the money and appointed a major firm of independent accountants to conduct a thorough investigation.

Mr. Harvey: Will the Government reconsider their policy of cutting public funding for business links after three years? Cannot the Government see the obvious danger that business link will suffer badly if funding is taken away just as it is up and running and beginning to fulfil its potential? While the Government may be right that some private sector funding will be available, what evidence have they that it will be enough? Why, in principle, should not the public sector continue to contribute to that work?

Mr. Page: I do not wish to upset the hon. Gentleman, but the Government have no intention of cutting off funding for business link. As I said in my answer to my

hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Spring), some £81 million will be provided for business support services. The pump-priming will come to an end after three years, but the business support services will remain. Business links will therefore have a firm base from which to carry out the rest of their operations, which will include charging for some of their services.

Sir John Cope: Will my hon. Friend send his good wishes to the south Gloucestershire business link, which is being launched tomorrow by the south Gloucestershire chamber of commerce of which I am the honorary president, because it will further extend the number of businesses that can benefit from that excellent service?

Mr. Page: As my right hon. Friend would expect, I do extend my best wishes to that latest addition to business link. Already the statistics emerging from business link are most encouraging. More than a million businesses are registered, and we are helping 8,000 to 9,000 businesses every week. The numbers are growing and the success is starting to show. I am now telling business link that the figures are good, but I want output figures and I want to see how profitable are the companies that it is helping, how many jobs have been created and the companies' export figures. I am looking for hard and practical results from business link.

Mrs. Roche: We all support the principle of the one-stop shop that lies behind business link—indeed, it was in our 1992 manifesto—but how can the Minister and the Government escape responsibility in connection with Wirral business link, when it was one of only three business links in the country accredited by a DTI-appointed board for systems, including its own financial accounting systems? The British taxpayer has lost £600,000. Does not that show that the DTI's internal auditors were right to criticise the Deputy Prime Minister for exposing both business link and the Department to financial embarrassment?

Mr. Page: I share the hon. Lady's concern about any business link that does not operate to the highest possible standards, but unlike her I shall not shoot from the hip until a full independent inquiry has taken place and I have the facts to hand. May I help her to understand how the accreditation process works? It is designed to ensure that the quality of service to the customer is up to standard and to examine financial procedures within the business link—but it is not an audit of those finances. There is a fundamental difference between the two.

Business Support (Cornwall)

3. **Mr. Matthew Taylor:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the provision of financial support to businesses in Cornwall. [524]

The Minister for Industry (Mr. Greg Knight): More than £4.4 million of financial support has been offered so far in the current financial year to businesses in Cornwall, generating more than £26 million of investment and 538 jobs, and supporting research and development.

Mr. Taylor: It is some years since the West Country development corporation sponsored work by Coopers and Lybrand highlighting the differential financing as between Devon and Cornwall, and areas of Wales and Scotland with lower unemployment and higher wages. For example, DTI development area funding for such areas works out at £46 per head in Scotland and £65 per head in Wales, but only £21 per head in Cornwall and Devon. Does the Minister justify such a differential, especially in view of the great problems of people in Cornwall and Devon?

Mr. Knight: The hon. Gentleman's point is not as meaningful as he thinks. It is not possible to make meaningful comparisons between areas because a range of conditions determines whether a company wants to invest in a particular area. They usually include the availability of a skilled work force and a suitable site. What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that the assisted area of Cornwall has a higher level of regional selective assistance offers per capita of working population than does Great Britain as a whole.

Mr. Harris: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as a Minister and thus on ending his silence of several years as a Whip. I also welcome his answer. Does he agree that grants are not the beginning and end of everything, and that what industry in Cornwall would fear, probably above all else, is the imposition of the social chapter and the minimum wage—policies advocated by the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Knight: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. He is, of course, absolutely right. That is why Great Britain is No. 1 for inward investment. Indeed, only three weeks or so ago I announced a DTI grant that triggered £5.1 million of investment in Cornwall. An American company, Continental Sprayers, decided that it wanted to invest there.

European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardisation

4. **Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the recently announced decision of CENELEC. [526]

Mr. Page: CENELEC, which is the European electrical standards body, has voted for the second time in two years to reject proposals to harmonise electrical plugs and sockets in Europe.

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd: Was it not always crazy to try to create a standardised European plug, as some people advocated? Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that what happened was a massive victory for common sense? Is it not rather disquieting that the officials who attended the meeting that made the recommendation were enjoined not to talk about their discussions? Should not such decisions be made in a way that enables us to approve of or criticise them openly?

Mr. Page: As my hon. Friend says, this is a victory for common sense. Although the idea of harmonising plugs on electric appliances so that people can plug in their Hoover in Calais as well as in Dover seems to offer some advantages, the costs of achieving such a vast benefit outweigh it. I congratulate CENELEC on reaching its decision.

CENELEC decided that it would not publish the reasons and records behind its votes, but I can indicate to the House that there was a fairly massive majority against introducing any form of harmonisation.

Mr. MacShane: The Minister's reply shows the extent to which he lives in a cocooned world. Any business person who travels to Europe tries to plug in his laptop, recharge his mobile phone and perhaps send a fax, and has to take many different plugs for the various sockets. I am not for one, giant Euro-plug, although I am pro-European, but the Government would clearly like to pull the plug on Europe altogether. There is a serious point, however. We want to allow our businesses to work in Europe; they should be allowed to plug into Europe.

Mr. Page: Although I realise that the hon. Gentleman is a rather elderly jet-setting yuppie, I must tell him that the cost of converting some 20 million homes to a harmonised plug and socket regime is a little more than he might calculate.

Mr. Batiste: Will my hon. Friend remind the pseudo-yuppies on the Opposition Benches that, if they insist on taking their mobile computers with them, they can buy an adaptor that will fit any plug in the world? The question asked by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) was as ill informed as most Labour party policy.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend brings practicality to the political claptrap. If the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) takes my hon. Friend's advice, he will get on a lot better in this world.

Mr. Skinner: Does the Minister realise that it is enough to make a cat laugh to hear the Tories talking about what is happening in the Common Market? The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Sir M. Lennox–Boyd) is one of the people who dragged us into the Common Market. The Tories voted for it in 1971. The Tory Government, under Lady Thatcher, took us through the Single European Act in the 1980s. This Government passed the Bill on Maastricht; Labour voted solidly against it. I am very pleased to hear the sounds coming from my hon. Friends on the Front Bench and others, who are beginning to speak out against the single currency. The Minister wants to be careful when he talks about Labour because, when it comes to the election, it will once again be Labour that will be standing up for British working-class interests.

Mr. Page: I would like to get this absolutely clear: was that official Labour party policy, or just old Labour alive and well and kicking in Bolsover?

Electricity Regulator

5. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals his Department has to strengthen the powers of the electricity regulator. [527]

Mr. Page: I have no such plans.

Mr. Williams: Given that the electricity companies have made combined profits of more than £14 billion since privatisation, that the pay of their fat cats has doubled and that they are reputedly submitting takeover bids for virtually all cash machines, is it not time that we said enough is enough for Tory-style regulation, and that we had a Government who put the interests of the consumer first?

Mr. Page: The hon. Gentleman got the last part right—we have put the interests of the consumer first. Since privatisation, under the regulator, the cost to the private home owner has fallen by some 10 per cent., excluding VAT, in real terms, and the cost to industry has fallen by 14.7 per cent., excluding VAT, in real terms—the lowest figures since records began in 1970. The consumer is first. The hon. Gentleman must not muddle large sums of money with return on capital. If he did that when running a business, he would soon find that it ran into trouble and chaos.

Mr. John Marshall: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, apart from the massive reduction in electricity prices in real terms, there has been a massive increase in productivity since privatisation? Does that not demonstrate how irresponsible it was of the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) to lead the opposition to privatisation?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and there have been many other advantages. Since privatisation, disconnections are down by a massive 98 per cent. I endorse what my hon. Friend says. My only advice to the Opposition is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Mr. Battle: Disconnections are down only because most people have self-disconnection meters. Is it not the case that, since privatisation, eight out of the 12 electricity companies in England and Wales have been or are being taken over, for a total of £11.5 billion? Does not that show that, in this brave new world of takeovers and mergers, consumers increasingly are, and feel that they are, an afterthought in the face of high profits and redundancies? A Labour Government will positively put consumer interests first. Why do not the Government toughen up regulation to put consumer interests first now?

Mr. Page: I cannot square what the hon. Gentleman is saying with his party's willingness to have a windfall tax that would undoubtedly impact on prices for the consumer; it is double-talk. This country has the best inward investment record, and allowing our electrical industries to be owned by companies from other countries does not alter the fact that prices for the consumer have dropped. That has happened through privatisation, brought about by a Conservative Government.

Mr. Congdon: Does my hon. Friend agree that key proof of the success of privatisation of the electricity industry and of the role of the regulator is that consumers have benefited substantially from the reduction in prices in real terms, in contrast with what happened when it was nationalised and prices went up month in, month out? Does he share my concern that the proposals for a windfall tax on profits will put that success at risk and ensure higher prices for the consumer, who should beware the crazy proposals of the Labour party?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I should like to think that the Labour party would listen to and

learn from his wise words. In addition to what has already been achieved, there has been the £50 bonus from the flotation of National Grid. Further reductions will come through from the tightening of transmission price controls, which will help the consumer even more. All that has happened under a Conservative Government.

Manufactured Goods

6. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the years since 1979 in which the United Kingdom recorded a deficit in manufactured goods. [529]

The President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian Lang): The United Kingdom has recorded a deficit on trade in manufactured goods in each year since 1983, but since 1979 the volume of manufactured exports has doubled.

Mrs. Mahon: Is not the record of deficit after deficit, year after year, an appalling indictment of the Government? Contrary to what the Government would like the public to believe, is it not true that the Conservative party is neither the party of trade nor, as the record shows, the party of industry?

Mr. Lang: The hon. Lady is talking nonsense. The United Kingdom's capacity to trade successfully internationally has been transformed in recent years. It is the fifth largest trading nation on the face of the earth. The volume of manufactured exports has doubled since 1979, and we export more per head than either Japan or the United States. That is the product of the increased competitiveness achieved by the Government.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: In assessing the United Kingdom's manufacturing performance since 1979, is not it important to take into consideration the fact that the industrial base that we inherited from the last Labour Government had perhaps 30 or 40 per cent. obsolete capacity? Is not our economic and industrial performance the envy of our European partners, and is not that put at risk by the prospect of a Labour Government?

Mr. Lang: My hon. Friend is right. The great tragedy is that, during the 1960s and 1970s, under socialist Governments, Britain became so uncompetitive that we failed to prepare for the emerging manufacturing nations. The problems that were ignored in those days, such as nationalised industries being propped up by massive subsidies, overmanning, demarcation disputes and appalling industrial relations that brought the country to a halt, ended up putting us in the hands of the International Monetary Fund. They were at the root of the difficulties that this Government had to clear up in the early 1980s. We are now out there competing successfully and winning new markets all over the world.

Mrs. Beckett: I agree that the record of British companies and of Britain has been transformed under the Government's stewardship, but how can the Secretary of State complacently compare it with the record of the previous Government when he has just acknowledged that trade in manufactured goods was then in surplus, while under this Government it has been in deficit every year for 13 years? As to whether our partners in the European Union should envy that record as a sign of greater competitiveness, we are 15th out of 15 in export growth since 1979, and 13th out of 15 in trade results for 1995. We also have a trade deficit with the rest of the European Union of £4 billion. How can he call that a record of success?

Mr. Lang: The hon. Lady overlooks the facts that our current account for the second quarter of this year was in surplus by the largest amount for nine years; that our services produced a surplus last year of £6 billion; that the revenue from our overseas investment produces a surplus of £9.5 billion; that our exports are up by a third to record levels since the recovery began; that, since 1981, our exports have grown faster than those of France and Germany; and that, since 1979, when the Labour party was last in office, the volume of our exports has doubled. That has been achieved by the competitiveness that the Government have attained, reversing the decline of decades to which the Labour party so substantially contributed.

Mr. Waller: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is remarkable that some 40 per cent. of all inward investment in Europe comes to Britain? Does he accept that that is not an accident but because of the environment that the Government have created, which encourages manufacturing, and that it could easily be thrown away if a different Government were elected?

Mr. Lang: My hon. Friend is right. That is one of the reasons why employment in manufacturing has risen by some 150,000 over the past three years. That is a rate of about 1,000 new manufacturing jobs per week on average. The success of our inward investment is the world's verdict on the competitiveness of the United Kingdom. That is reflected in the fact that more than 400 new inward investment projects came to this country last year. They come because the Government have transformed Britain into the enterprise centre of Europe, able to compete with any country in the world.

Regional Policy

7. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals he has for the further review of regional policy and industrial incentives. [531]

Mr. Greg Knight: There are no plans at present to review regional policy and industrial incentives.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Ministers know that the designation of assisted area status is directly linked to the level of unemployment as shown in the statistics. I do not believe the official published statistics for unemployment in my constituency. I believe that they are fiddled, false and untrue, and that they grossly misrepresent the situation in Workington. Will Ministers sponsor a house-to-house survey in my constituency to establish precisely the real level of unemployment so that, the next time there is a review of assisted area status, real data can be taken into account?

Mr. Knight: The hon. Gentleman is being ridiculously downbeat about the situation in his constituency. West

Cumbria has objective 2 area status, which means that it is eligible for investment funds for business support measures. [HON. MEMBERS: "Reading."] I am not reading. On house-to-house surveys, I suggest that he does some canvassing. He will find that many of his constituents have seen the improvement in our economy, the continuing fall in unemployment and continuing inward investment.

Mr. Jacques Arnold: Is not the greatest industrial incentive a sound economy such as the Government have created here, and the absence of the social chapter which the Opposition would impose on this economy?

Mr. Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason why we are not reviewing this policy is that it has been and is a great success.

Mr. Pearson: Is the Minister aware that regions such as Baden-Württemberg in Germany and Emilia Romagna in Italy, whose manufacturing sectors compete directly with those in the west midlands, enjoy living standards that are, on average, 40 per cent. higher than those in that region? When will the Government instigate a real regional policy and provide the amount of industrial support that our competitors enjoy?

Mr. Knight: The other day, I saw a reference to a German report that praised the British economy and said that its strength explained why we were winning the lion's share of inward investment—not just in the west midlands but in the east midlands and other areas, too.

Mr. Atkins: Is my hon. Friend aware that the north-west region, where my constituency is, is doing extremely well in terms of the incentives that it offers to the rest of the world? That is why, for instance, that great Japanese company, Isuzu, decided to build trucks at Leyland in my constituency—it was the most profitable option on offer compared with anywhere else in the world. Does that not confirm the view that the President and my hon. Friend have expressed, that the only incentive needed is a continuation of a Conservative Government?

Mr. Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The motor industry is a good example. In the 1960s and 1970s, companies such as General Motors were looking to get out of Britain. Today, they are increasing their investment here. Only three weeks ago, Vauxhall announced a new £200 million investment in Ellesmere Port. General Motors is moving investment into Britain under our current arrangements.

Manufactured Goods

8. **Mr. Eastham:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he expects the United Kingdom trade in manufactured goods next to be in surplus. [532]

The Minister for Science and Technology (Mr. Ian Taylor): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out his latest estimate of the balance of trade in manufactured goods in his "Financial Statement and Budget Report" on 26 November.

The deficit on trade in manufactured goods in the last three months reduced by £250 million from the previous three months.

Mr. Eastham: I am not asking about the past three months. My question is about what progress we are making. The Government have been in power for nearly 18 years, yet it is always jam tomorrow. We want to know where all the hundreds of millions of pounds from North sea oil have gone, while the deficit continues. Does that not prove that this Government do not know how to manage trade?

Mr. Taylor: Unemployment in the hon. Gentleman's constituency has fallen by 9.4 per cent. in the past year, and Siemens Measurements Ltd. has made an inward investment there. He should welcome that success. We should celebrate the strength of manufacturing industry, the way it is adapting to new technologies and challenging suppliers all over the world, and the way it is penetrating new markets with a rapid rate of growth. In every year under the Conservative Government, annual growth rates in manufacturing output, investment and productivity have been higher than under the Labour Government.

Royal Mail

9. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the future of the Royal Mail. [533]

Mr. Lang: The Government's plan for the future of the Post Office, including Royal Mail, remains as set out in a statement on 11 May 1995 by my right hon. Friend the then President of the Board of Trade.

Mr. Greenway: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the public do not understand the recent strikes which have caused such disruption to their mail and that they certainly would not understand any disruption of their Christmas mail—or its complete stoppage? May I have his assurance that he will take all necessary steps to guarantee the smooth delivery of Christmas mail, bearing in mind how much that means to people in this country and all over the world?

Mr. Lang: To the extent that that is in my gift, of course the answer is yes. I do not believe that there is any need for further industrial unrest or strikes by the postal unions. It is quite clear from the ballot which was held that less than half the membership voted for the strike; 75,000 members did not vote to strike, which does not constitute a mandate. I invite the Labour party to join me in calling on the postal unions not to disrupt the Christmas mail, with all the hardship and misery that that would bring to the public.

Mr. O'Neill: Does the President of the Board of Trade realise that he has succeeded in uniting the unions and the Post Office on one thing—their condemnation of his increase in the external funding limits, which is crippling the investment programme of the Post Office? In the long term, that is more likely to jeopardise industrial relations and the harmony that should exist in that company than anything on which the unions and the management are failing to agree now.

Mr. Lang: The hon. Gentleman is talking absolute nonsense. Since May 1995, the Post Office has had a new

corporate planning process. We have abolished the restrictions on capital expenditure and we have granted the Post Office significant end-year flexibility. The important thing is that the Post Office uses that flexibility and its capacity to manage its own organisation for the benefit of the Post Office.

Research Establishments

10. **Mr. McWilliam:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the future of the public sector research establishments. [534]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The Government are determined to achieve the greatest possible benefit from the substantial resources devoted to the public sector research establishments. Discussions on the future of each establishment are taken on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. McWilliam: Will the Minister give an undertaking that the pensions cost of privatising those research establishments will not be borne by the research budget?

Mr. Taylor: In each of the cases of a prior options reviewed establishment that we are considering, pensions crystallisation will need to be taken into account. I am determined to maintain the strength of the science base, and obviously we would need to take into account the impact of not only pensions crystallisation but redundancies on the science budget or the public sector borrowing requirement. That would be a matter of negotiation with any party if a research establishment were to pass into the private sector.

Mr. Ingram: I think that the Minister is dodging the very question asked of him. Why does he not accept that this Gadarene rush to privatisation of those important research facilities not only demoralises the tens of thousands of scientists who work in those laboratories but has no support within many sectors of industry or the wider scientific community? According to the Royal Society, it could lead to a serious erosion of the United Kingdom research base. May I ask the Minister again whether he will give an unqualified assurance that the already overstretched science budget will not be further raided to pay for redundancies, pension transfer costs or generous sweeteners for the purchasers of the laboratories? A simple yes or no answer will do.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman clearly does not understand the complexity of the research establishments and the fact that they differ one from another, or he would not ask such a naive question.

It is impossible to know what the impact of the liabilities of a pension scheme will be until we look at it in the context of each department. The liabilities for pensions exist currently; they are not suddenly plucked out of the air. They are only crystallised if they are transferred out of the pay-as-you-go system in the public sector to the funded system of the private sector. That would need to be taken into account if there were to be a transfer, but I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to decisions that have already been made. In certain cases, a prior options reviewed establishment has gone into a Government agency; in other cases, it has gone into the private sector; and on other occasions, it has stayed in the public sector. There is no dogmatic precondition to the review process.

I challenge the hon. Gentleman's completely negative policy in his so-called manifesto, which states that Labour would not enter into prior options reviews. That is nonsense, when the civil research establishment's cost base accounts for 10 per cent. of total Government expenditure on research and development.

Visible Trade

11. **Ms Eagle:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade in which quarter the United Kingdom last recorded a surplus in the visible trade balance. [536]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The United Kingdom last recorded a surplus on visible trade in the fourth quarter of 1982. *[Interruption.]* Taking the current account as a whole, which one should, the House should know that the second quarter of 1996 produced the largest current account surplus for more than nine years.

Ms Eagle: How can we have that much-vaunted Conservative economic miracle when, according to their own figures, the Government are forecasting a £13.5 billion deficit on trade in goods this year alone? Will the Minister now get up, be honest and tell us when that figure will be in surplus?

Mr. Taylor: There have been only six years since 1946 in which there has been a surplus in visible trade. Those years were 1956, 1958, 1971, 1980, 1981 and 1982—all years of a Conservative Government.

Mr. Butterfill: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, notwithstanding the figures on the balance of trade, the United Kingdom's share of world markets has increased every year for the past few years, whereas Germany's, for example, has declined?

Mr. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding me of those matters. He is absolutely right, and the House should be aware of them.

Mr. Sheerman: The Minister knows the real truth—that the heart of the problems afflicting our economy, which has been so badly managed by this Government, is that our industrial base has shrunk and shrunk, year after year after year. When our manufacturing base is down to less than 20 per cent. of gross domestic product, compared to 25 and 26 per cent., we are getting close to a minimum level of viability as a manufacturing nation.

Mr. Taylor: I think that the hon. Gentleman is looking down the wrong end of his telescope. In the three months to August, exports of goods were at record levels and were 7 per cent. higher than they were a year earlier. Since 1979, the volume of both manufactured goods and total goods exported has doubled.

Inward Investment

12. **Mr. Riddick:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to encourage inward investment. [537]

Mr. Greg Knight: The Department's Invest in Britain Bureau will continue to promote the attractions of the

United Kingdom for mobile international investment to consolidate our position as the No. 1 location in Europe for such investment, especially from countries such as Japan, the United States and Korea.

Mr. Riddick: Is it not the case that almost 40 per cent. of the inward investment into the European Union comes to the United Kingdom? Is it not also true that, since 1979, inward investment has helped to create or safeguard almost 1 million jobs? Has not that tremendous success been achieved because, thanks to this Conservative Government, we have economic stability, moderate taxation and a willing and skilled work force and we have not signed up to those job destroyers, the social chapter and the minimum wage?

Mr. Knight: My hon. Friend is certainly right to say that 1995-96 has been the best year yet for record inward investment.

Mr. Pike: Does the Minister recognise that little of that mobile industrial investment goes to the traditional industrial areas of this country or into research and development, which is absolutely crucial to the future? Will he ensure that such investment is made according to those essential criteria?

Mr. Knight: I am sorry, but do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question. Indeed, on my way to the Chamber today, I happened to see the television set in the Library switched to Ceefax, on which the Department of the Environment had announced a £1 billion regeneration programme that would create 55,000 new jobs in areas of former coal mines in the north-east, north-west, Yorkshire and the midlands.

Mr. Bell: I add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman on reaching the exalted rank of Minister. We had a period of silence from him when he was in the Whips Office and, given the Government's programme, I can see that that will continue until the general election.

Is it not strange that all that inward investment pours into our country, year in and year out, despite four years of Labour party opinion polls showing that we have a 25 to 30 per cent. lead? Is it not a fact that the question of the social chapter and the national minimum wage holds no fear for those inward investors? Should not the Minister come to the Dispatch Box now, in deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), and tell us what studies his Department has done into the question of inward investment if we were to have a single currency?

Mr. Knight: First, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind opening remarks, although I am not sure that everyone who has served in the Whips Office would necessarily regard my position as a promotion.

I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should widen his reading and that, instead of merely picking off articles from the Walworth road approved list, he should speak to business men and the Institute of Directors and also read the IOD's annual reports. He will see that one of the major factors in inward investment is that we have lower production costs—not that we have lower wages, but that we do not have the job-destroying minimum wage or the social chapter. That is, indeed, a factor in many of those decisions.

National Prosperity

13. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on trends in the United Kingdom's position relative to other world economies in respect of prosperity since 1979. [538]

Mr. Lang: The Government have halted a relative decline in Britain's gross domestic product per head, which had taken place over several decades. That has been achieved through our policies of free enterprise and encouraging competition.

Mr. Gunnell: Is the Secretary of State not a little complacent about our achievements? We have fallen from 13th to 18th in the world prosperity league, we are ninth in the European prosperity league, and a large and increasing number of people live in poverty. Surely that should concern the Government. They should not be complacent about economic progress.

Is it not time that the Government, instead of reciting the litany of success that they claim, sought to make this country a real enterprise country and to improve our economic prosperity? I should have thought that the Minister would not be so complacent.

Mr. Lang: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. Between 1970 and 1979, the United Kingdom fell from 11th to 15th place in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on the basis of GDP per head. Some further fall took place immediately after that as the Conservative Government cleared up the mess that we inherited from the Labour party, but over the last international cycle, from 1982 to 1993, only Japan among G7 countries outpaced the United Kingdom in terms of GDP per capita growth. The United Kingdom significantly outpaced France, Italy, Canada and the EU average. I think that the hon. Gentleman should be less complacent.

Ferry Services (Merger)

14. **Mr. David Shaw:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what role his Department is undertaking in respect of the impact on the Dover and Deal area in relation to the proposed merger of P and O and Stena Sealink's ferry services. [540]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The proposed merger between P and O and Stena is still under examination by the competition authorities. Meanwhile, on 31 October, I hosted a meeting of local public and private sector organisations and companies to discuss effective co-operation to tackle the economic challenges facing the Dover area.

Mr. Shaw: I thank my hon. Friend for the meeting that he hosted last week; it was enormously helpful to those of us from Dover and Deal who attended. We felt that he had really addressed the issues. The message which he was able to give, that retraining can begin immediately, will be of enormous help to the people of Dover and Deal.

May I also say to my hon. Friend that it will be extremely helpful if he has anything further to say on the point about English Partnerships coming in to help in

Dover and Deal? Several other matters were discussed that will affect my constituency, for which I am extremely grateful to him.

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that, if one wants to give thanks, perhaps one should do so in an Adjournment debate, when they can be reciprocated, but I have not yet really heard a question from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Shaw: Madam Speaker, I was hoping to get out the point that my hon. Friend the Minister made several other suggestions that were enormously helpful to Dover and Deal, and I was going to ask if he could make any further comments on those suggestions now.

Mr. Taylor: Madam Speaker, I recognise our mutual role in trying to restrain the natural enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) on behalf of his constituents; he fights very hard on their behalf.

I can confirm that the local training and enterprise council will declare Dover and Deal to be an area of large-scale unemployment, which will give immediate access to training courses rather than the usual six-month wait. I have asked English Partnerships to look very closely at the sites in Dover to discover whether further progress may be made. The Ministry of Defence is moving rapidly; it has issued invitations to tender on some seven sites that it has there.

We well understand the worries in the local community about a merger. I cannot comment on that, because of competition implications, but I can, as south coast sponsor Minister, study the implications carefully.

Currency Exchange Charges

15. **Mr. Dykes:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will undertake an interdepartmental investigation with Her Majesty's Treasury on the charges levied for exchanging currencies on consumers using exchange bureaux and banks. [542]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I have no plans to initiate such an investigation.

Mr. Dykes: Will my hon. Friend please look at that again? When I complained about an effective commission rate of nearly 10 per cent. at the monopoly currency exchange service at Heathrow airport when I exchanged French francs back into sterling in September, I was told by the service provider that the currency exchange service was just charging the rates that the high street banks do, and in fact was slightly cheaper. Would it not be right for the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry to look into that matter to stop that outrageous rip-off of customers at foreign currency exchanges, and does that not also show that the single currency in future will be not only for the central banking elites but for ordinary members of the public, avoiding such unnecessary charges and making greater deregulation possible?

Mr. Taylor: I should be surprised if there was a monopoly in bureaux de change at Heathrow. I thought that there was more than one outlet for exchanging foreign currency at Heathrow; but if there is any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour or breach of competition law, it should be referred to the Director General of Fair Trading, who has the responsibility to keep the operation of markets under review, and powers to act where he believes that to be necessary.

Fireworks

16. **Mr. French:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the balance of payments position in the fireworks industry. [543]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The crude deficit with all countries for 1995 was £11.6 million.

Mr. French: Does my hon. Friend accept that Britain is exporting an increasing number of fireworks that are safe and reliable products, but importing an increasing number that turn out not to be safe and reliable? Notwithstanding the safety checks about which my hon. Friend spoke in answer to an earlier question, will he consider increasing the sanctions against importing companies that do not satisfy themselves adequately about the quality of the products that they import?

Mr. Taylor: In the spirit of the root-and-branch review that I am conducting, the answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes.

Trade Surplus

17. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when UK trade in goods is to be in surplus on current trends. [544]

Mr. Ian Taylor: My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out his latest estimate of the balance of trade in goods in his financial statement on 26 November. The latest data show the trend deficit narrowing.

Mr. Jones: Although we welcome the recent short-lived improvement, the Government's own forecasts show that the UK is in deficit by £13.5 billion in its goods exports for this year. That is £2.5 billion more than last year and £3 billion more than the year before. Do not those figures—as opposed to the Government's propaganda—prove the Government's record of economic mismanagement over the past few years?

Mr. Taylor: They prove nothing of the sort. They show the vibrancy of British manufacturers in an expanding global trade position. The deficit is merely a netting off of imports and exports across the board. Look at how exports have been doubling. Look at how we have penetrated markets more successfully than the French and Germans in competition with us. Look at how new technologies have been applied by British industries. Look at how we have attracted inward investment, because of our high skills base. Those are all extremely positive developments. The Confederation of British Industry predicts a 4 per cent. increase in manufacturing output next year and a 7.5 per cent. increase in manufacturing investment.

Industrial Support

18. **Mr. Foulkes:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will carry out an examination of the relative cost-effectiveness of Government support for indigenous and inward investment in industry. [545]

Mr. Greg Knight: In 1993, the Department of Trade and Industry, in conjunction with the Scottish and Welsh Offices, published a report of an evaluation of regional selective assistance. The three Departments will shortly be commissioning further work to evaluate the continuing cost-effectiveness of the scheme.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful for that answer. Of course we all welcome inward investment by companies such as Toyota, Chunghwa and Lucky Goldstar from Japan, Korea and Taiwan. That raises an interesting question, however. Why can British companies no longer manufacture cars, picture tubes and electronics for the European market? Is that because of some deficiency in British industry, or because there is a bias in the Department of Trade and Industry in favour of inward investment and against indigenous industries?

Mr. Knight: The hon. Gentleman is working under a misapprehension. The availability of regional selective assistance does not depend on the ownership of the company; it is available to British companies, as well as to foreign companies.

Mr. Beggs: When the Minister is further considering regional assistance for inward investment, will he make representations to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Northern Ireland with respect to increasing investment in the A75 in Scotland and the A8 in Northern Ireland, thereby increasing the free flow of passengers and freight and the success of tourism in those areas?

Mr. Knight: I will certainly pass on those comments to my right hon. Friends.

Business Links

20. **Mr. Congdon:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of business links. [547]

Mr. Page: The Government have an on-going programme of assessing the effectiveness of business links. This includes regular monitoring returns, measuring the awareness, perceptions, and use of business links by businesses through biannual surveys, and assessing the quality of information and services received by businesses through a mystery shopper exercise. In addition, a series of evaluation projects are being carried out by independent consultants.

On the basis of the evidence provided by these studies, I am satisfied that business links are highly effective in providing integrated, high-quality, business support systems which lead to improved performance by assisted businesses.

Mr. Congdon: Does my hon. Friend agree that businesses are often too busy trying to sell their goods and services to be able to scurry around to different organisations to seek advice and that they therefore greatly value the one-stop service provided by business links? Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the recent Select Committee report, which said that, while recognising that business links concentrated on firms with more than 10 employees, more attention should be paid to ensuring that firms with fewer than 10 employees were pointed in the right direction?

Mr. Page: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that the one-stop shop—the one doorway through which business men and women can go—is the most effective way in which to provide support. In the past, a number of partner organisations tried to do a good job, but they were competing with each other, overlapping in the services they provided and presenting a confused picture to small business men and women.

With business link, we now have one focus, and it is interesting to note that in the short time it has been going, more than 100,000 businesses have used it. The use of business link has doubled since last year and more than 8,200 businesses are using it every single week. It is a success story and it is going the right way.

I am disturbed to hear that the impression has been given that we are not there to help all businesses irrespective of size. My clear message is that business link is there to help any business man or woman, irrespective of the size of company, because from little acorns grow the big oak trees.

Inward Investment

21. **Mr. Batiste:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the figures for inward investment into (a) the United Kingdom, (b) Germany and (c) France for the period since 1991. [549]

Mr. Greg Knight: The most recent information from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that inward investment flows into the United Kingdom in the period from 1991 to 1995 totalled $87.7 billion, compared with $62.3 billion into France and $13.2 billion into Germany.

Mr. Batiste: Is it not clear that Britain not only receives the lion's share of inward investment from Japan, Korea and the United States, but is increasingly getting inward investment from France and Germany as well? Is it not the clearest sign that the Government have got their policies right on the economy, on social costs and on trade union reform when even French and German business men vote with their feet and come to Britain?

Mr. Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the period from 1991 to 1993, Germany invested £2.3 billion in the United Kingdom and France invested £2.1 billion.

Mr. Clapham: Is the Minister aware that the American utilities are working with some local government departments to attract inward investment? Georgia Power, for example, working with some of the departments of the state government, attracted 32,000 jobs into the state in 12 months. Will the Minister undertake to look at some of those schemes to see what lessons might be learned for the United Kingdom?

Mr. Knight: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I am certainly prepared to look at any information he

pushes my way. We are not doing too badly, are we, with 4,500 US firms located in the United Kingdom, including 99 of the top 100?

Sir Michael Grylls: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just a question of investment? From analysing the figures my right hon. Friend has just given, one sees that jobs are being exported from Germany and France to Great Britain, to the benefit of the British people who are getting extra jobs.

Mr. Knight: My hon. Friend makes his point well. The figures also show that, in Britain, we have a skilled, flexible and positive work force.

Mr. Purchase: Should not the Minister come clean about aggregate investment in those three economies and admit that Britain is seriously lagging behind? Should he not disaggregate the figures for inward investment in Britain between mere share churning, takeovers and genuine new money investment? Should he not also tell us the extent of external investment from this country? In 1994-95, it was running at £40 billion, which is more than three times the amount of inward investment.

Mr. Knight: That last comment sums up what is wrong with the Labour party. Britain is a trading nation, and we will always be a trading nation. We will be a successful trading nation so long as we have a Conservative Government.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. George Robertson (Hamilton): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. May I ask whether you have received a request from the Scottish Office for a Minister to make a statement to the House this afternoon about the severe gales that have affected central Scotland? The gales of 80 mph—in one place they were 95 mph—have left thousands of homes in central Scotland without electricity. Remarkably, Glasgow and Edinburgh airports were closed, as were roads across central Scotland. Substantial damage has been caused, and ferries have been stopped. Buildings have been damaged from Oban to Prestonpans, including in my area.

A Scottish Office Minister has visited two of those locations. Will Ministers come to the House to explain what is happening about damage caused by this natural disaster? Will sympathetic consideration be given by the Scottish Office to those who have been affected personally or whose buildings have been damaged? Will the Government do anything in the short term?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that any Minister is seeking to make a statement on that issue today. A Minister from the Scottish Office is sitting on the Government Front Bench, and I am sure that he has taken the hon. Gentleman's point of order to heart.

Mr. Charles Hendry (High Peak): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. As you will be aware, new photocopying paper has been provided in the House that bears the portcullis watermark to prevent an abuse of that stationery. I was concerned, therefore, when I received a copy of a letter printed on that paper, which is headed "North London Young Labour" and says:

"What does Labour mean for us?"

It advertises a partisan Labour party meeting, for which the contact is Jake Sumner, who is in the office of the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), to whom I have written about this matter.

I seek your advice on two counts. First, should not the hon. Lady be representing her constituents, who are in east London and not in a north London borough where she was formerly the leader? Secondly, is not the use of this paper the type of abuse of House of Commons stationery that you are seeking to end?

Madam Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will let the Serjeant at Arms see the notepaper to which he refers. As to his first question, I am not clear about the boundaries, but the hon. Gentleman has obviously made the point to the hon. Member for Barking in the letter that he has written to her. If he would let the Serjeant at Arms have the copy, I am sure that he will clear up the matter. If there is an abuse, it will have to be paid for: there is no doubt about that.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will recall that last week I asked a question about the Leader of the Opposition's agent, who had been sending out Labour party literature in paid envelopes. As this disgraceful venture occurred at a high level, can you tell me how much money will be paid by the right hon. Gentleman, and how many of those leaflets were sent?

Madam Speaker: That is not a matter for me. I recall very well the hon. Gentleman raising that matter with me last week, and I gave him the right advice. Not only the stationery but the postage will have to be paid for. The Serjeant at Arms will calculate that when he has made his inquiries.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Further to the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson), Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot take further points of order on that matter. I realise that the hon. Gentleman represents a Scottish constituency, and he is no doubt concerned about the matter raised by the hon. Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson). We cannot go on with such points of order. The hon. Member for Hamilton leads for the Opposition on Scotland, and he has made his point to the House, so we must leave it there. I cannot force a Scottish Minister to come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement now.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): Why not?

Madam Speaker: Order. I do not have that authority, and the House knows it.

Mr. Home Robertson: I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker. Although a Scottish Office Minister is visiting the scene of devastation in my constituency, another Scottish Office Minister is in the Chamber. Would it not be helpful if he could take this opportunity to explain whether the Scottish Office will do anything about the situation?

Madam Speaker: Order. Points of order are directed to me, not to Ministers. The hon. Gentleman is asking a question of the Minister, and that is not the procedure that we follow here. When Scottish Office Ministers answer questions, the questions are listed on the Order Paper. Points of order are directed to me.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. George Kynoch) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: I can see that the Scottish Office Minister wishes to be helpful to the House.

Mr. Kynoch: Madam Speaker, perhaps Opposition Members are totally unaware of normal emergency procedures. In fact, the emergency planning department in the Scottish Office has been in contact with all the local authorities, and Lord Lindsay has, on the instructions of the Secretary of State for Scotland, visited the areas. We continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Nick Ainger (Pembroke): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I wonder whether you have received any notification from the Secretary of State for Wales that he will make a statement about today's announcement that the Gulf oil refinery in my constituency will close in the

[Mr. Nick Ainger]

summer, with the loss of 350 direct jobs and the loss of a similar number of jobs in the wider community? As you know, my constituency is one of the areas of the United Kingdom with the highest levels of unemployment and the lowest pay. I merely wonder whether the Secretary of State has recognised the seriousness of the announcement and told you that he will make a statement?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that a statement will be made, but, of course, the hon. Gentleman will have every opportunity in coming weeks to raise the issue in an Adjournment debate or in parliamentary questions directed to the Secretary of State for Wales.

Orders of the Day

Local Government and Rating Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When we published our rural White Paper last year, we made clear our continuing commitment to a living, working and thriving countryside. We said that we were not interested in a museum countryside, but in a workaday countryside, in which people could live, work and make their money from the countryside. We said that it was as important for the countryside to thrive between Monday and Friday as it was over the weekend. We therefore said that we should avoid prescriptive, inflexible policies imposed from outside, and that we needed complementary action by all levels of government in order to achieve our overriding objective of securing a sustainable future for our countryside.

The Local Government and Rating Bill represents the first fruit of the Government's endeavour on the rural White Paper, and is manifest proof of the Government's commitment to rural life, rural businesses and rural government. It extends subsidiarity and will mean a welcome boost for rural businesses through a rate-relief scheme. It will mean new powers for parish councils on crime prevention and transport, and better consultation between principal authorities and local councils.

When discussions were held about local government reorganisation, many county and district councils promised that, in future, they would take much more notice of parish councils. They promised all types of participation, partnership, devolution and subsidiarity. Some of the councils have delivered on the promises they made, in their desire to maintain their position, but other councils have been less assiduous in doing so. In the Bill, we seek to ensure that the participation and subsidiarity that are so much a part of a sensible local government system shall be continued.

To deal with the problems of rural England, however, we start with the village shops. If villages are to flourish in a living, working countryside, they require shops in which people can buy a range of daily necessities. That requirement is particularly true for older people, for the young and for those who cannot afford a vehicle or who do not have contact with someone who has one.

The problem in England and Wales is that, for some time, the nature of communities has meant that more people have chosen to shop elsewhere, so fewer people use the village shop. That has increased pressure on the village shop. The Bill will provide much-needed financial help to those businesses by reducing their non-domestic rates bills.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Minister put his opening remarks about rural post offices in the specific context of rural England. Will he clarify exactly where the Bill stands, not only in regard to post offices but generally? There seem to be contradictions running through it. The preparatory notes state:

"Part II applies to local authorities in England."

However, clause 35 states:

"Sections ... 9 to 31 extend to England and Wales."

Those two statements are contradictory. The title of clause 25 is

"Application of Part II to England only",

yet some clauses in part III are dependent on part II, which should apply to Wales. The Bill appears confused, to say the least.

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman is right about the confusion. We are trying to meet concerns that should interest him in particular, as they involve the difference between the Principality and England. I am particularly keen to ensure that those differences remain, so parts of the Bill refer to England and Wales. Other parts of the Bill clearly refer to Wales.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will raise any particular concerns, but the explanatory notes to the Bill make it perfectly clear which part refers to which. He will find that some parts of my speech—particularly when I am referring to the English White Paper on rural matters as that was my responsibility—will differ from others when I am referring to the Welsh White Paper, which was the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. I shall try to make sure that it is clear, at least in my speech. If the hon. Gentleman requires further explanation that goes beyond what is already in the Bill, I shall be happy to assist him.

In both England and Wales, the village shop has a particular role to play that is not restricted simply to providing the necessities of life, although that is important. It also provides a centre where it is noticed if someone has not collected their pension or if someone has not been seen for a couple of days. The village shop is the centre of a web of information that should not be lost.

The rating causes real problems, because the village shopkeeper is unable to diminish the cost. He may be able to deal with other overheads, perhaps with careful husbandry, but he cannot affect the rates. That is why we sought to do something about what is often the most onerous part of the overheads.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is dealing with village shops, about which we have corresponded for many years. May I press him a little further on schedule 1? Schedule 1 refers to the hereditament which benefits the local community. Few amenities are of more benefit to the local community than a really good local garage. I have one in my constituency, and this morning I received a letter from a constituent saying:

"Lambs of Hornby is more to this valley than just a garage. It is a community centre and an information bureau."

I know that because, if I want to know the time of a funeral or if someone is ill or any other information, I have only to ring Lambs of Hornby. I very much hope that it will be eligible for the discretionary rate reduction under the Bill.

Mr. Gummer: I can assure my hon. Friend that the village garage to which she rightly refers can be helped by the discretionary rates scheme that we are proposing today. Those village garages that double as the village shop, selling a significant quantity of groceries and the like, may well qualify for mandatory rate relief. [*Laughter.*]

Those Opposition Members who find the subject amusing clearly do not understand how central it is to rural life. I understand that some Opposition Members do not have rural communities in their constituencies. One or two of them do, and I have noticed how they have given cross-party support to our proposals. I hope that they will ensure that those of their hon. Friends who are not so interested might at least let us talk about those issues on which we are agreed. There are many other issues about which we can argue.

Happily, we have been able to ensure that the mandatory rate relief of which we have been talking extends not only to England and Wales, but also to Scotland.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Why is Northern Ireland to be excluded from the benefits that will arise from the Bill?

Mr. Gummer: The Bill relates in large part to England and Wales, with some provisions covering Scotland. We pay particular attention to hon. Members from Northern Ireland on issues relating to local government in Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that, if they wanted the measures extended to Northern Ireland, my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would be happy to consider it.

I believe the proposals to be beneficial. The hon. Gentleman may want to talk to my right hon. and learned Friend, who I know is apprised of his concern. I have talked to my right hon. and learned Friend about the measures, and he may want to extend them to the rest of the United Kingdom, as the hon. Gentleman proposes.

Sir Jim Lester (Broxtowe): While my right hon. Friend is on that point, may I ask a related question? I live in a village with neither a post office nor a village shop. However, it has a village pub, around which everything circulates. The pub has struggled to stay in existence, mainly because of the changes in people's drinking habits, but it is a vital part of the community. Is there some way to facilitate the continued existence of village pubs as well as the vital post offices and village shops?

Mr. Gummer: I remind my hon. Friend that one of the best ways of ensuring that the village pub stays in business is to take into account the well-known phrase, "Use it or lose it." I hope that my hon. Friend will ensure that the pub has continued support from his own patronage and that of his friends.

I assure him that village pubs will have the chance to be involved in the discretionary scheme. That is helpful, and will enable local authorities, with considerable help from the Exchequer, to give support to village pubs, which are often important community centres.

My hon. Friend made the important point that the great advantage of our rural scene is variety. Different villages operate in different ways. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman) mentioned a village garage. In that valley, the garage is the centre of village life, and it will be up to the local authority to consider the opportunity of supporting it. In some villages in my

[Mr. Gummer]

constituency, the village pub performs that role, but in others—the majority—it is the post office and the village store. I hope that the Bill is flexible enough to cope with that variety.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): The real problem for small village shops in the north-east of England is the oppressively high level of rates levied on them by local Labour councils. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Bill contains no proposal for a further oppressively expensive local authority in the form of any kind of regional government run from Newcastle?

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to say that many areas suffered considerably when their local authority controlled the business rate. For example, before the Government changed the rules, a shop in Newcastle could pay three times as much in rates as a similar store in Oxford street. Labour councils drove shops out of the centre of Newcastle by charging them three times the rate charged in Conservative-controlled Westminster. Happily, as a result of the change in the business rates, that is no longer a problem.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Devlin) is right to suggest that the problem would return if a regional system of government were introduced. Such a regional government would then impose an extra tax—one of the so-called "advantages" of an extra tier of government—to do what it is difficult to imagine needs to be done. My hon. Friend is perfectly right—*[Interruption.]*

The laughter from Opposition Members shows their uneasiness about their devolution proposals. They know perfectly well that regional government is a cover-up, and that what they want is to give a degree of independence to Scotland and Wales, without losing the votes of Scottish and Welsh Members in this House. We know what the Opposition are about. They are as uneasy in general as the hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford)—who sits with a permanent smile on his face—is uneasy in particular. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall certainly stand against regional government.

General stores have particular problems, and that is why we provided a mandatory reduction in rates. The non-domestic rates are a disproportionate burden of the costs on a small business, and the Bill will automatically halve the rates bills of the only general store and the only post office in a village. That will reduce the rates bills of some 6,000 shops by an average of £500 a year, and, as a result, will transfer from the rates bill to the profits of a small business a significant sum of money. Very often, that money will provide the difference between a company continuing and going out of business, and that is of great importance.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Can the measures be extended to include village pubs, many of which are extremely vulnerable—particularly in the rural areas that I represent—and can be isolated and under severe financial pressure?

Mr. Gummer: As I explained to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Sir J. Lester), there are two ways to help village pubs. One is to adopt the "use it or lose it" attitude, while the other is to accept that discretionary rate relief will be provided for village pubs in particular circumstance. My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow will be pleased to know that a pub that is the only available community facility in a village will be eligible in some circumstances to receive the discretionary rate relief of up to 50 per cent.

The discretionary power will help local authorities to give assistance where it is necessary. At the moment, the only way in which a local authority can reduce the rates bills of such businesses is if the ratepayer is able to prove hardship, which inevitably means that help goes only to those in particularly serious financial difficulties. One of the things we discovered during our discussions on the rural White Paper—both in advance of its publication and afterwards—was that many businesses could not be saved if they reached the point of having to seek hardship relief. We need to give businesses help before they reach that point, and the change in the discretionary arrangements makes that possible.

In recognition of the importance to the community of such businesses, we are seeking to allow local authorities to provide help in time. Instead of being a safety net, the measure will be a means of helping businesses to flourish. In all, we anticipate that the measure will help up to 30,000 businesses in England and Wales by reducing their rates bills by some £20 million. The full cost of the mandatory scheme will be met by the Exchequer, with some £3 million going to the 6,000 or so general stores and post offices, and 75 per cent. of the cost of discretionary relief will be met by the Exchequer, giving more than £12 million for other rural shops and businesses.

Therefore, for both the mandatory scheme and the discretionary scheme, the Treasury will pick up most of the bill, so that people in the locality will be able to make decisions on the discretionary scheme without concerns about the weight that might be placed on other local businesses. But the local authorities will have to make sufficient contribution to ensure that they are sensible and choose appropriate businesses for the necessary support.

Mr. Keith Mans (Wyre): Will the discretionary relief be available in cases in which the hardship has been caused by the councils themselves? For instance, both Lancashire borough council and Wyre borough council are imposing car parking charges and voucher schemes that are driving people out of towns such as Garstaing and Poulton-le-Fylde, which is causing hardship to local small business men and putting them out of business. People are driven to shop in out-of-town shopping centres and to support national chains rather than local shops.

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to point out that, although our proposals will be important to shops of all kinds in villages, other factors contribute to their ability to survive. One is the provision of proper car parking to enable people to use village shops in the way in which they use out-of-town shopping centres.

I know that the Labour party has made it clear to the newspapers that it would, were it ever elected, reverse the policy on out-of-town shopping centres, so I hope that Opposition Members will listen to my next point, which is important. One reason why it is important to get local

authorities to support our plans is that, without proper parking, people—especially women with children, who constitute a high proportion of shoppers—find it impossible to bring their cars close to the shops.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: In one second.

The discretionary relief will not depend on hardship, and the shopkeeper will not have to prove hardship. That is an important change, which I am sure will be welcomed on both sides of the House.

Mr. Rendel *rose—*

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), because I promised to do so earlier.

Mr. Rendel: Will the Secretary of State clarify a point about which businesses will come within the scope of the legislation? He has talked of businesses that are, in some senses, the centre of the local community. I fully understand that, and everyone appreciates their importance, but the Bill states that those businesses must be of benefit to the local community.

That provision could have a much wider scope, in that many local businesses may provide, for example, employment for the local community, and that could bring in many more businesses than the Secretary of State has so far identified. Will businesses be included if their benefit to the local community lies in providing employment?

Mr. Gummer: The proposition is to deal with those businesses that provide the kind of services that are of benefit to the community, especially those members of it who are older, younger or less well-off, and for whom the motor car is not available. The scheme is designed to help the village shop that acts as a post office or general store. The discretionary part of the scheme will enable it to be extended to such businesses as garages or pubs.

Of course, the businesses must be in communities of fewer than 3,000 people, and must also be the only such business. It would be unfair to provide mandatory rate relief for a shop that was competing with another shop but was not doing as well because it was not as good as the other one.

Mr. Day *rose—*

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): On that point—

Mr. Gummer: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Nicholson: I am most grateful—

Mr. Gummer: I am sorry, but I had better give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day).

Mr. Day: Although I welcome the provisions of the Bill, I am disappointed that they do not apply to metropolitan districts. My right hon. Friend will appreciate that there are villages within those, and within the former metropolitan counties. That applies to my area. He has been to Cheadle and knows that, in Cheadle Hulme and Bramhall, village centres are struggling because of out-of-town shopping developments. I hope that he will not forget that traders in such areas need help, too.

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. My problem is that, when we propose measures such as those in the Bill, the immediate reaction of people who would stop one doing anything—I am afraid that there are still some of them around—is, "If you propose this, people will ask," as my hon. Friend has done, "why it does not extend to their area." The fact is that we must try to target the help as well as we can.

I hope that, if I am not interrupted too much more, I shall soon reach another part of the Bill that will please my hon. Friend. We hope both to be able to extend the powers to parish councils and to enable parish councils to be formed more easily than hitherto. There are many urban parish councils, and I should like to see more.

I enjoyed my visit to Cheadle, with its attractive village atmosphere. The traders seemed to be doing extremely well in building up their reputation and gaining adherents who had previously used out-of-town shopping centres beyond the area. I am sure that my hon. Friend's battles on their behalf are part of the reason for that success.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: If I am to get anywhere near the end of my speech, I must make some progress. Then I shall certainly give way both to my hon. Friends and to some Opposition Members.

Mr. Thomas Graham (Renfrew, West and Inverclyde) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall not forget the hon. Gentleman. He is unforgettable, so I shall not miss him, and shall be happy to give way to him later.

The new discretionary powers mean that local authorities will be able to reduce or waive the rate bills of businesses before they get into financial difficulty. In case anyone is worried about the prospect, I stress that there will remain the right to do that on hardship grounds, as well as the ability to extend it. That is an important difference.

The Bill contains several other measures important for rural life. For example, it will end the anomaly whereby sporting rights—fowling, shooting, taking or killing game or rabbits, and fishing—are rated in England and Wales but not in Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) *rose—*

Mr. Hugh Bayley (York) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I am interested in the fact that the hon. Member for Camden—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman wants, I shall refer to him as the hon. Member

[Mr. Gummer]

for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), so that the whole world will know who I mean when I say that he giggles as soon as one mentions sporting rights.

For many of our constituents, those rights are the difference between having a business and not having a business. The fact that the hon. Gentleman laughs shows how little interest the Labour party has in rural England. He really should contain himself when we talk about that subject. He is now falling about with laughter, because he does not understand what it means in rural England when people manage—*[Interruption.]*

Of course the hon. Gentleman would like me not to make this point, because it is so embarrassing for Labour candidates throughout the country to realise how little interest the Labour party has in rural England. I hope that his Back Benchers understand that, from the perspective of Holborn and St. Pancras, it is difficult to know about the very limited means on which people operate in the country. For those people, the measure will make a significant difference.

As a result of the measures to be introduced in the Bill, sporting rights in England and Wales will become exempt from rates, and their value will be disregarded in assessing the rateable value of the land over which they are exercised. In our rural White Paper, we made clear our support for country sports. We believe that they contribute significantly to the landscape and the economy of the countryside.

We also believe that decisions on country sports should be made by country people, not imposed from outside. Conservatives remain committed to that principle.

Mr. Foulkes: As the Secretary of State knows, I represent a large rural constituency, so I take a particular interest in the subject. The Bill says:

"Such an exemption already exists in Scotland."

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that exemption came about under the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994. In April 1994, while serving on the Standing Committee on that Bill, I raised the issue because it was of concern to my constituents.

The then Minister, the right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro), who I see is with us today, said that the step was being taken to bring Scottish practice into line with that in England and Wales. That just does not make sense. Was I being misled by the right hon. Member for Dumfries? Should he apologise? What has gone wrong? This is very strange. Could the Minister explain?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman may rest assured that both England and Wales and Scotland will now be in the same position. The manner in which we have achieved this miraculous circumstance may lie in the mists of history—I think that we can manage to get by without being too precise about it. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro), who no doubt extended to the hon. Gentleman the full information that was available to him at the time, would now extend to him rather different information, that information being fuller.

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): The matter is not entirely humorous. If the Secretary of State is now telling the truth, it could not possibly have been told on 19 April 1994 in the First Scottish Standing Committee considering the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Bill, when virtually the sole justification for the change in law in Scotland was to bring it into line with the law in England. That turns out not be true, and, bizarrely, the Government are now saying that we have to bring the law in England into line with the law in Scotland. Either way, it is bunging money at their rich friends.

Mr. Gummer: All those who live in the country will now know what the hon. Gentleman thinks about helping the countryside. He knows so little about it that he can make that comment. Any of us who represent country constituencies know perfectly well that the rights are owned not only by rich people but by all sorts of different people.

The last time that the hon. Gentleman went into the countryside must have been on a Sunday school outing, and he must have had his eyes closed at the time. He has a Milly Molly Mandy view of the countryside; he got it from children's books. It is about time he visited the countryside. I would be happy to take him. If he would like to come for the weekend, I shall spend a weekend with him. Greater love hath no man in offering to give up one of my weekends for the hon. Gentleman in order that he may understand—

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Get on with the Bill.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Get on with it.

Mr. Gummer: Of course Opposition Members want me to get on with it, because they do not like what the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) has said. The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), who is a great countryman and knows a great deal about the matter, wants me to get on with the Bill because he does not want the House to know that the official Labour party spokesman does not think that the measure is necessary.

Mr. Dobson *indicated assent.*

Mr. Gummer: He does not; that is very good. I shall ensure that that is made very clear in my constituency, and that my Labour party opponent will have to say whether he takes the same view.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Would you advise the Secretary of State?

Madam Speaker: That is a point of frustration rather than a point of order. I was rather enjoying the exchange.

Mr. Gummer: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I ought to address the serious point made by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, for the following reason. If, in the course of previous discussions in this House, anyone has inadvertently said something that was other than exactly right, of course I and my right hon. Friend will look at the record and ensure that the House is made fully aware.

I am not introducing this measure merely because it brings England and Wales into line with Scotland: I am introducing it because I think that it is necessary for the health of the countryside. It is something that we have insisted would be valuable. It will not cost the taxpayer a great deal, but it will remove an enormous amount of frustration and some pretty difficult arrangements that have to be made in order to follow up matters. It will recognise—it seems—an important matter for the countryside.

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): I should like to clear up this minimal issue that the Opposition have raised. If they knew anything about sporting rating, they would know the difference between rating in Scotland, which was extremely high before we made the change, and the infinitesimal level in England. Naturally, we brought the Scottish level down to what it ought to be—which was nil. I am so glad that my right hon. Friend has made such a positive statement about country sports in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Gummer: I thank my right hon. Friend, but I will ensure that any scintilla of difference is ironed out. I hope that the House has noticed that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was more interested in trying to trip up my right hon. Friend for something that he may or may not have said some time ago than in welcoming an advantageous measure for the country community. We are faced with an Opposition who neither know about nor are interested in the environment, and we now know that they have the same attitude to the countryside.

Mr. Bayley *rose—*

Mr. Graham *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I think that I ought to give way first to the hon. Member for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde (Mr. Graham), but I shall not forget the hon. Member for York (Mr. Bayley).

Mr. Graham: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State.

I represent an area with many rural communities, but I also travel the length and breadth of Scotland—I even have a holiday home in Scotland—and see many rural communities suffering because petrol stations are closed most of the time in the winter and businesses cannot compete.

I welcome a measure that will help those communities, but it has taken far too long for the Government to respond to the needs of rural villages. I am delighted that something is being done for Scotland, but how much will it cost local authorities? Will they need to employ people to discuss the discretionary rates; will there be more bureaucracy to deal with; will the Government simply allow everything to rumble on and cost us all a fortune; or will there be genuine help for local communities?

Mr. Gummer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. However, he criticises the timing of a measure that his party has never even suggested; I have been under no pressure whatever from that quarter. One can see why, when the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras does not even know about the countryside. I sense anger from the Opposition Benches, perhaps because I am striking home.

On local authorities, even in the case of the discretionary grant, 75 per cent. will be paid for centrally from the Treasury, and the mandatory grant will be wholly centrally paid for. At this rate, I may never get to the part of my speech dealing with parish councils, but I hope that they will play a part in England and Wales in deciding on *which occasions it would be sensible to have a* discretionary grant; they will put their point of view to the district councils, which can then decide.

I shall now give way to the hon. Member for York, after which I must make some progress.

Mr. Bayley: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State.

I want to raise an issue concerning shooting rights in Hagg wood in Dunnington, a village just outside my constituency, which is a wood that my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) knows extremely well, because he was born and grew up in the village and lived there much of his life; it is quite wrong for the Secretary of State to suggest that he does not understand rural life.

Hagg wood is owned by the Church Commissioners, but the Forestry Commission has a 999-year lease on it. For many years past, my constituents and residents in Dunnington have been able to walk and ride in the wood and to use it for recreation. Now, because the Forestry Commission is selling the land, the Church Commissioners feel that they can no longer extend open access, as they want to exploit the shooting rights. Instead of being able to ride in safety in a wood, children will have to ride on the roads, and people will no longer have access.

Has the Secretary of State considered the effect that this provision in the Bill will have in closing access to countryside and woodland to the general public, and will he ask the Secretary of State for Scotland to ask the Forestry Commission to delay the sale, so that the matter of shooting rights and access can be sorted out, and access can continue should the wood be sold?

Mr. Gummer: Of course I shall be happy to talk to my right hon. Friend, but the provisions in the Bill make no difference to the circumstance to which the hon. Gentleman refers, because the shooting rights are there in any case; the question is whether rates are paid on them, and that is a matter that must be marginal to a decision of the Church Commissioners. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and I shall investigate the matter and ensure that my right hon. Friend does so, too.

The Bill has an important provision on Crown exemption, which will bring Crown property, such as the buildings of Government Departments, within the rating system. That is a very important change. I do not think that the Government should be protected against the normal effects of the cost of running a business. Such buildings are technically exempt from rates, although, since the late 19th century, the occupiers of Crown property have paid a contribution in lieu of rates. That is a different sort of contribution. It does not mean that they have the same reaction to the rating system as normal businesses. It is necessary that they should. The Bill ends that exemption.

[Mr. Gummer]

The House recognises that parish councils come in all shapes and sizes. There are very small ones, such as Snape in my constituency, but the parish council of Felixstowe, which is called the town council, covers an area containing more than 20,000 people. It is a much different business from the village of Snape. Between them are towns of other sizes, such as Aldeburgh or Woodbridge, all of which have what are technically parish councils.

Many urban areas have parish councils. The question is how to provide for them to play a better part in the community. Many would like to do something more. I do not expect that to happen in Stone parish in the borough of Swale in Kent, because it has no population. That is one end of the scale. Parish councils with more than 20,000 people may want to do much more than they do now.

At present, such parish councils are significantly restricted. I am not seeking to give them duties that they must carry out but to offer them opportunities to choose to carry out things that they feel that they could do. For that reason, and because we found in the response to the rural White Paper that many parish councils want new powers, the idea is that the powers will be permissive. The powers will not be forced upon the parish councils; they will choose.

The powers will give additional opportunities in respect of five matters: first, to establish and support a car-sharing scheme; secondly, to pay revenue grants for a community or voluntary group running a bus for the benefit of elderly or disabled people; thirdly, to grant taxi fare concessions for people in the categories covered by local authority concessionary fare schemes; fourthly, to investigate transport needs and publicise public transport services; and fifthly, to fund traffic calming works to be carried out by the highways authorities.

Those five powers are necessary for many local parish councils to be able to things from which they are currently prohibited by law. I believe that the House will generally welcome that.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Can the Secretary of State explain why the Bill would allow parish councils, no matter how small, to raise a precept for extra public expenditure while his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland is utterly opposed to a Scottish Parliament raising extra funds for its expenditure? Do not Cabinet members talk to each other?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Lady has totally different views. We are talking about local councils close to people, and about people who know the people who are running the council. They know perfectly well whether they are prepared to pay. The hon. Lady is putting forward a fictitious and fake proposition: that there should be a Parliament for Scotland that would raise money but would not contribute to the wealth or economic advancement of Scotland. It would drive people out of Scotland, because they would be much more likely to site their businesses where they did not have to pay the tartan tax.

The Opposition are attempting a sleight-of-hand by making sure that Scottish Members of Parliament are different from English Members of Parliament. Scottish Members, under the hon. Lady's proposals, would have votes on English matters in the House of Commons, whereas English Members would have no votes on Scottish matters. That is unacceptable to my constituents and to all English constituents.

What is more, the hon. Lady's ideas would take away from this country its enormous advantage in the world of being a United Kingdom, able to fight for its position collectively, not just in the European Union but in the councils of the world. The hon. Lady would not just damage Scotland; she would charge the Scots for the damage she does. Her policies are unpopular in the United Kingdom in any event. *[Interruption.]*

It is interesting to see how many Opposition Members feel uncomfortable about the devolution proposals, and to note how many Scottish Labour Members are beginning to worry about the extra taxation that would be involved. They know that taxes will be higher under a Labour Government anyway. The hon. Lady's constituents do not want her to be a half Member of Parliament, which is what she would be if her party came to power.

Some parish and community councils already do many of these things. However, parish spending on transport and crime prevention—matters of tremendous importance to many villages—is currently limited to £3.50 per elector—the sum that parishes can raise for general purpose spending. The new powers will give parishes the freedom to increase their precept beyond that limit to cover the costs of new community transport initiatives.

The same is true of crime prevention. Crime and the fear of crime are highly relevant to rural areas, just as they are to the inner cities. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford) might like to listen to this, even though he does not represent a rural area. It would be nice to find him caring about rural issues, since the principal Opposition spokesman on these matters has clearly forgotten whatever youthful touch he may have had.

We have taken the opportunity here to give parish and community councils in England and Wales a new power to help the police and support local crime prevention efforts. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) has not been listening to what I am saying. We are increasing the £3.50 expenditure limit, so other parts of general spending are not excluded. The hon. Lady should listen and not talk so much. She continually tries to help out the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, because she, unlike him, has some rural interests.

The new provision will give parishes a new and separate statutory power to raise money so as to be able to help police authorities in their fight against crime. In so doing, parishes will be able to set conditions governing what their money is spent on, subject to the agreement of the chief police officer in the area concerned.

We have not been prescriptive. We want parishes to choose, but consultation will be important. I said at the beginning that one of the problems attending recent discussions of local government reorganisation was the number of promises made by larger councils to consult smaller ones. Some of those promises appear not to have been fulfilled. It is hard to see, for instance, how Lancashire county council has carried the promise through. But we have a list of the promises that have been made. I intend to insist that consultations continue.

That is why, in the Bill, we are taking powers to enforce consultation between tiers of government when people refuse it.

In this context, planning is significant. Parish councils have an important part to play in planning. They can make recommendations to the district council, but it is, of course, for the district council to decide. The problem is that the latter usually does not tell the parish council why it has chosen to disregard its advice. If the district council has to explain its reasons, it is more likely that a consensus on planning matters will emerge. I know that the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) would agree with me here, and I also see the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) nodding in agreement.

Mr. David Nicholson: All the measures that my right hon. Friend has spoken about so far give the lie to all those who rather sniffily said that there would be no flesh on or money devoted to the White Paper on rural areas.

On the specific powers of parish councils, could he be more positive about the ability of those parishes that raise extra money for a special parish constable to employ that person in their area, such as Exmoor in my constituency, instead of him being hived off to Bristol? Secondly, on planning powers, and going back to our discussion about garages and village shops, will parishes have the power to stop garages opening up as a shop as well, which would then compete with and possibly have a destructive effect on the village shop, as recently happened at Wheddon Cross in my constituency?

Mr. Gummer: The second part of my hon. Friend's question does not relate so much to the village garage, but to chains of garages which are increasingly seeking to offer retail provisions as well as to sell petrol. I am watching that pattern carefully. I do not think, however, that it is a matter for parish councils.

Mr. Vaz: Oh!

Mr. Gummer: It is about time the hon. Gentleman came clean with the House. He appears to be going round the country giving comfort to various large retailers by saying that, if there were a Labour Government, there would be no problems about restrictions on out-of-town shopping centres. That is widely reported, and it does not appear to be as widely denied. That is interesting.

Mr. Vaz: Wait and see.

Mr. Gummer: I do not have to wait, because those circumstances will not arise. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall not change my views after the election, when I shall continue to be in a position to make sure that such developments do not happen.

As for the other question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson), the contract for the parish constable will be a local one. A parish constable is different from a special constable, who is at the beck and call of the chief constable. In my area, that special constable often finds himself policing the Ipswich Town football match at Portman road rather than patrolling the small village that he had hoped to look after.

That local contract will enable someone to opt for the real village policing that we are particularly keen to support. The envisaged arrangements make it possible for that to happen.

Dame Elaine Kellett–Bowman: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gummer: I must get on—

Dame Elaine Kellett–Bowman: Just for half a minute.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Gummer: I rather think that you, Madam Speaker, would wish me to draw my remarks to a conclusion soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett Bowman) and I are as one on the issues. I want to make progress, because the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras has spent a lot of time asking me to get on because I have said some rather uncomfortable things about him, which I notice he has not so far denied.

There are some real problems about parish councils, because at the moment they cannot easily be formed.

Ms Hilary Armstrong (North–West Durham): Whose fault is that?

Mr. Gummer: Many people would like to have a parish, but the system is arcane and out of date. Although there are already 10,000 parishes in England, of which 8,000 have parish councils, there are areas without parishes where local feelings strongly favour the creation of a parish council to reflect the clear local identity and sense of community. That is natural where a community is well established and settled. The hon. Member for North-West Durham (Ms Armstrong) might listen to what I intend to do to help to make that possible.

Demographic changes over the decades mean that some existing parishes no longer properly reflect the shape of the local community or local identities. Such areas want not a new parish but a different, specific area to be included in that parish. We therefore want a flexible system to deal with parish reviews.

Under the current system, even the smallest amendment to a parish area requires the full weight of the Local Government Commission's consideration. Here I might find common cause with the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, because that commission is perhaps not always the organisation to which so small a matter should be referred. We have included provisions in the Bill to make it much easier to react to local demand for new parishes and alterations to existing ones.

The Bill enables district councils to review parish arrangements and to recommend new parishes or parish boundary changes directly to the Secretary of State. In addition, electors will be able to start a process leading to a new parish for an unparished area by means of a public petition. We must, of course, be sure that such a petition represents broad measure of support for a new parish. Under the terms of the Bill, as long as a petition is signed by 250 people, or 10 per cent. of the electors for the proposed parish, whichever is the greater, that will set the ball rolling.

[Mr. Gummer]

There is also provision in the Bill to enable me to direct the Local Government Commission to conduct a review of parishing arrangements only. At present, I cannot do that, and such a review has to be part of a much bigger exercise. We shall shortly issue draft guidance for consultation to explain what the basis for a new parish should be.

The measures in the Bill will mean that it will be far easier to respond to local opinion where there is demand for a new parish or changes to existing arrangements. The Bill enables us to direct help to the very parts of the rural world where help is most needed.

In the preparation of the rural White Paper, which has been widely welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House, we consulted widely. Since its publication, an enormous number of meetings have taken place all over the United Kingdom to discuss those issues, with the result that we now know even more about people's concerns. I recently published the first anniversary report to set out what we had done to fulfil our promises in the rural White Paper. Part of that report refers to the Bill.

The Bill makes sure that we can help the rural post office, village shop, garage or local pub. It enables us to give parish councils greater powers, and makes sure that those who are dependent on the life and the livelihood of country sports will not find themselves rated. It ensures that parish councils can be set up because people want them, and not after an enormously complicated and arcane process. Above all, it is designed to ensure that the parish council plays a much more important role in British society than it has until now.

I believe in subsidiarity—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."]—but I notice that most people think that subsidiarity is all right when it means taking power from people on a superior rung of the system, but they are not terribly good at pushing the power down to people on lower rungs. I notice that district councils are keen to take county council or Government powers, but less eager to hand them on to school governors, hospital trusts or, indeed, parish councils. The Bill is designed to ensure that parish councils play a more important role in our lives. That is right, and I commend the Bill to the House.

4.31 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): The Bill covers mainly local government and rating in rural areas, as the Secretary of State has been at infinite pains to point out. It was introduced to put right things that are wrong in rural areas, and there are certainly many things that need to be put right. Over the past 17 years, little attention has been paid to the problems faced by people living in rural areas. Many of those problems have got much worse, some are getting worse and some are a direct result of Government policies.

Just look at the record. Crime has more than doubled in rural areas. Unemployment has risen more sharply in rural areas than elsewhere. Homelessness has doubled in rural England and rural Wales; in rural Scotland, it has trebled—yet still the Government stop councils building houses. Deregulation has deprived hundreds of villages of any bus service at all. Village schools have disappeared because the Government forced local education authorities to get rid of surplus places. Small local hospitals and cottage hospitals have been swept away and village shops have closed.

The Local Government and Rating Bill is a belated recognition that those things have gone wrong. It has been described by some as a confession of failure, because it highlights the Government's failures. If the Bill is a confession, it is a signed confession. It carries the names of the guilty on the back page: the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Secretary of State for Transport, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales have all had to sign the confession. For some curious reason, however, this Bill dealing with rural areas does not carry the name of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It has been suggested by one of my less pleasant hon. Friends that another confession of failure on his part would probably be the final straw.

If the Secretary of State does not like my calling his Bill a confession of failure, it might be more pleasing to his ecclesiastical habit of mind if I were to call it a deathbed conversion. The Government have been in power for 910 weeks and now, with a maximum of 26 weeks to go before the election, they have seen the light, recognised the harm that they are doing to our green and pleasant land and, belatedly, started to put things right.

The Bill is both a confession of failure and a deathbed conversion, but I believe that it is intended to be something different—an attempted plea bargain by the Government. They hope that, if they plead guilty and promise to start making restitution, voters in rural areas will not punish them at the general election. Apparently, the Conservatives intend to fight the next election on the slogan "Better late than never".

This belated Bill will not save the Tory party from the consequences of action and inaction, which have left rural communities in their present state. The Bill provides much too little, far too late. It does not relate to many of the problems that afflict local communities. Its proposals will not be enough to solve the problems to which it relates, and it will force local people to pay for most of the improvements that it intends to make.

In the Bill, the Government are not making restitution for what has gone wrong. The Bill proposes to change the law so that the victims of the Government's rural policies will be permitted to spend their own money, to put right the things that the Government have got wrong. The Government are telling local communities, "If you have a problem, put it on the parish rate."

For 17 years, the Conservatives have said that market forces can solve everything and have claimed to be the low-taxation party, but in the Bill they acknowledge that market forces cannot meet all the needs of rural communities, and propose instead a new local tax that local people must pay for putting things right in their area. It is the Government's 23rd new tax since the previous general election.

The Bill provides that, through parish councils, local people can, at their own expense, promote crime prevention and local transport services. We favour the idea of local communities being able to take such initiatives, but we need to consider the scale of what is proposed against the scale of the problems.

A tidal wave of crime has engulfed many rural areas in the past few years. Places where local people were proud to be able to leave doors unlocked, or even open, are increasingly besieged by thieves. Villages are robbed and burgled. Organised gangs knock off huge truckloads of livestock, chicken's eggs, or—as will happen in a month or two—Christmas trees.

In rural areas, the increases in crime are enormous. In Gloucestershire, crime has more than trebled, with violent crime up by 260 per cent.

Mr. Gill: Has it not occurred to the hon. Gentleman that much of the crime that he alleges occurs in rural areas is displaced crime from the urban areas that he represents?

Mr. Dobson: It is a fair stride for a knock-off merchant in Kentish Town to get to Gloucestershire to do a robbery, but it may happen. I am saying—the hon. Gentleman makes my point entirely—that what the Government propose today will not stop the long-distance professional criminal. We need a national crackdown on such people. The problem cannot be solved locally.

In Shropshire and in Hereford and Worcester, crime has more than doubled. In Lincolnshire, it has increased by 170 per cent. In Leicestershire, crime has trebled and violent crime has quadrupled. In Cambridgeshire, represented by the Prime Minister and the chairman of the Tory party, violent crimes have doubled, but I do not blame them for all of them.

Those are the official figures. They do not give the full picture.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House why the Labour party has voted consistently against every crime measure presented by the Government? Why has the Labour party always been soft on the criminal and hard on the victim? Why will it not change its views?

Mr. Dobson: I shall treat the Secretary of State's intervention with the contempt that it deserves. What he said is simply not true, and it is no good him burbling on about it.

The reality is: drug squads in every police force in rural areas, lager louts in many a country town and old people's lives dominated by crime and the fear of crime. Hon. Members who represent rural seats know that what I say is true.

Although rural communities should be given the power to protect themselves, that alone will not solve the problem. We need a nationwide drive against crime, a nationwide—indeed, international—drive against drugs and a commitment to tackle the causes of crime. Labour is committed to those policies.

The Bill will empower parish councils to promote local transport. That is to be welcomed. It follows the example set all over the county by Labour councils that have used their powers to improve bus and train services—for example, the initiative taken by Lancashire county council and district councils in the county, in conjunction with parish councils, to improve local railway services and stations, so encouraging more people to use the local railway service. That initiative was ritually denounced by the Secretary of State a few minutes ago.

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): Is it not possible that a problem could arise if parish councils were allowed to raise more in their precepts? If district and county councils that already provided services such as those that my hon. Friend describes were capped and strapped for cash, they could say to the parish councils, "You can raise the brass; get on and do it," and the service might deteriorate, rather than improve.

Mr. Dobson: Nothing in this world is all gain: there are advantages and disadvantages. Unless great care is taken, the situation described by my hon. Friend might arise.

The Government now recognise that a local effort is necessary, but it is a struggle in the face of the Government's overall transport policies, and above all their policy of bus deregulation. Clauses 26 to 30 have had to be introduced to give the parishes powers to offset the harmful impact of bus deregulation. The Government are giving with one hand the power to deal with the lack of the service that they have taken away with the other.

As a result of bus deregulation, the number of passengers going by bus in shire counties has fallen by 20 per cent. Less than one third of rural parishes have any bus service at all, and many others have no bus service after dark. Yet people in villages have to travel much further for vital services than people who live in towns. Fewer than one in five villages have a permanent GP, half do not have a school, fewer than half have a shop and one third do not even have a pub.

The measures proposed by the Government will help, but much more is needed, starting with the reregulation of the buses, as Labour proposes. In exchange for the right to run services on the most popular routes at the most popular times of day, bus companies will be required to run buses on less popular routes at less popular times of day. That is how the system worked before, when there were many more bus services than there are now.

Housing is one rural problem that is not addressed at all in the Bill. The sale of council houses and the failure to build more to replace them has contributed to the record levels of homelessness in rural areas. Many young people have had to leave the village where they grew up, in order to find somewhere decent to live. It is often forgotten that, when the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), now the Deputy Prime Minister, introduced the sale of council houses, it was intended that the takings should be used to build more. Except for one short lucid spell, that has not happened. Recently Ministers have taken to denouncing the whole idea; I do not know whether they have cleared that with the Deputy Prime Minister.

Labour will encourage councils to invest the takings from the sale of council houses to build new houses and rehabilitate old ones. That will be phased to give councils and the building industry the benefit of steady expansion. Such a programme offers real hope to many people, especially young people in rural areas, that they will be able to afford somewhere decent to live in the village where they grew up. That is vital to local communities so that they do not become devoid of young people, and to ensure that there are people to provide vital services such as the post and the milk round.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman give a guarantee that the same amount of money for spending on capital matters would be provided at the same time, or would the spending of capital receipts replace that?

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Furthermore, will he give a guarantee that only the capital receipts held by the authority concerned would be spent, and that no capital receipts would be transferred to other, less careful authorities?

Mr. Dobson: We intend that the capital receipts from the sale of council houses should be released in phases to enable councils to get on with building houses. We have no intention of compulsorily transferring any such assets from one council to another, which we must have said a dozen times. I think that the Secretary of State is losing his marbles.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman be kind enough to answer the other question? Would the same amount be given to local authorities for spending on capital matters, and what is the difference between the phased release that the hon. Gentleman talks about and the fact that local authorities are already, in most cases, able to spend much of their capital receipts on enabling housing associations to build houses?

Mr. Dobson: Again, the Secretary of State is in danger of misleading the House. There are severe restrictions on what councils can do with the takings from the right to buy, whether in relation to housing associations or not. What I am saying—I have said it before and I shall say it again—is that we shall release the takings from the right to buy. That proposal is welcomed by every housing association and by everybody committed to providing housing. The only person who apparently cannot understand it is the Secretary of State. As he cannot understand it after I have explained it to him twice, I do not propose to give him a third opportunity.

Mr. Gummer: I asked the hon. Gentleman a direct question. Will he guarantee that, alongside his proposal, the money provided for councils by the Government for capital expenditure will not be reduced?

Mr. Dobson: The object is to increase the amount of housing being built. These questions are from a man who sits in a Cabinet that will not even guarantee money next year for any hospital in the country, yet he is asking me to dish out guarantees. What I am saying—I shall repeat it yet again, in case the Secretary of State still fails to understand—is that, as a result of our policies, there will be more money for the house-building programme. We have made that clear, and that is why even Tory building companies welcome the proposition.

Sir Roger Moate (Faversham): Following the hon. Gentleman's earlier remark, will there be more money for buses? He told us that there would be a new system of bus regulation, which would require bus operators to operate services other than those they operate at present. Presumably that means more financial support and a return to the old transport commissioners. Can the hon. Gentleman tell us more about that?

Mr. Dobson: That does not follow at all. With bus deregulation and, in some cases, privatisation, we have seen a massive increase of semi-private monopolies all over the country. They are rolling in money, and, under the regulatory system, they will be expected to provide services on the less popular routes at less popular times of day in exchange for the right to operate at popular times of day on the popular routes. They will not get subsidies to help them.

I give one example of a dire housing situation. In the Forest of Dean, the number of applications for housing by homeless families has almost doubled in three years, from 185 in the whole of 1993-94 to 164 in the first six months of this year. The council expects a further escalation in youth homelessness as a result of the lack of new house building and the changes in social security rules. The young single homeless project run by Gloucestershire county council and Shelter is also threatened by the change in housing benefit regulations. Last year, the project dealt with more than 200 young people in the Forest of Dean. Having nowhere to live leaves those young people especially vulnerable to drug pushers and other criminals, whose presence in the Forest of Dean has been growing.

Most disturbing of all are recent reports that some of the drug barons have been buying up houses which they then let to young homeless people, a move calculated to entrap the young people, to increase the evil profits of the drug pushers and to terrify local families and the local police. All that is happening in Gloucestershire, which has already seen the biggest rise in crime in any part of England—a rise that the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who has now left the Chamber, attributed to outsiders. The provisions in the Bill that will allow parish councils to put some of their own money into crime prevention are welcome, but they will not counter developments such as those that I have described in the Forest of Dean.

The proposal in the Bill that has attracted the most attention is rate relief for village shops and other village businesses. It is certainly true that local shops have taken a pounding under the Government, who, until recently, actively promoted out-of-town shopping developments, which undermined village shops as well as high street shopping centres. When they changed their policy, we welcomed their belated recognition of the damage that the planning policy was inflicting on existing retailers, both rural and urban.

We welcome the Government's adoption of a policy based on a presumption against such developments. We continue to believe that town centres should be the preferred location for major retail developments, although we recognise that some out-of-town developments may be justified in particular local circumstances. If the Secretary of State wants to rely on rumours and lies in the papers instead of on what I have just said, that is entirely up to him.

Although help for rural shops is welcome, it should not be overestimated. By the Government's calculation, the saving from the mandatory rate reduction will average £500 a shop. When the shop is rented, it is not clear from the Bill whether that saving will go to the shopkeeper: it may go to the landlord, who is not required to pass it on. As drafted, the Bill leaves many questions about definitions unanswered. The concession is for rural settlements, but what is a rural settlement? Will the concession apply to rural settlements in a city, metropolitan or unitary district? There are many sensible definitions of a rural settlement.

Why have local pharmacies not been singled out to receive the concession, as recommended by the Select Committee on the Environment? I raise that point because of the new threat to local pharmacies: the proposed abolition of resale price maintenance on non-prescription medicines. That has raised fears all over the country that local chemists will be forced to close, reducing the service available to people living in small towns and villages. For example, in Colne valley hundreds of people signed petitions about the threat to pharmacies in Linthwaite, Slaithwaite, Milnesbridge and Golcar. The Bill does not address the new threat to local services.

The proposal to help local shops raises a matter of principle. Why does the concession apply only to villages? Why does it not apply to other areas where there are one or two shops that can hardly make ends meet? There are plenty of large estates, both council and private, on the edge of towns whose residents will feel that they equally deserve such financial support. Some such shops may be even more badly placed than village shops because of high insurance and security costs, on top of the fact that many of their customers are out of work or on low incomes.

Shops on the Matson estate on the edge of Gloucester have closed. The situation is so bad that a small shop selling basic groceries has had to be provided in the voluntary neighbourhood centre. That centre pays no rates except on the shop premises. People living on that and similar estates will want to know why the concession does not apply to their local shops.

Another example is the Lumbertubs estate on the edge of Northampton, where the general store is threatened with closure. If it closes, residents without their own transport will be isolated. On top of the usual problems, that shop has been repeatedly broken into. Local people want closed circuit television in such areas, because they have seen its benefits in the town centre. CCTV was pioneered by Northampton borough council without Government help, and still nothing is forthcoming.

The Bill proposes a number of sensible changes to help and expedite the setting up of parish councils: indeed, it returns the law to what it was before the Government made a mess of it by changing it. It increases the entitlement of parish councils to be involved in the decision-making processes of their district and county councils. The Secretary of State again referred scathingly to Lancashire county. When I last met representatives of parish councils in Lancashire, they had no word of criticism of the county council about consultation.

All those developments are a welcome acceptance by the Government of the merits of the policies that we have advocated for a long time. Unfortunately, the sensible aspects are marred by what appears at first sight to be the highly prescriptive nature of the Government's proposals, which look as if they will require the Secretary of State literally to lay down the law to individual parish councils. It seems that the Government cannot break the habits of a lifetime. Fortunately, however, that lifetime is rapidly drawing to a close.

Planning is a major responsibility of local government, and it should have been included in the Bill. Opencast mining is a major planning aspect, and it should have been dealt with in the Bill—but that has not happened. It is the rural blight that the Tories always forget. It has not been dealt with in the Bill; it was not mentioned in last month's White Paper on rural England; and it was not mentioned last year in the Government's rural White Paper. Opencast mining is the biggest, ugliest and most environmentally damaging activity in rural England, but the Tories dare not even speak its name.

Opencast mining is ugly, noisy, unhealthy, dangerous and dirty. It threatens rural communities in Gloucestershire, Lancashire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Staffordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire and Nottinghamshire. The Government do nothing and say nothing about it, because they have encouraged it and sold off the rights to private companies that are willing to destroy thousands of acres of countryside for short-term gain.

I shall give one or two examples of the problems faced by people in rural areas. In west Yorkshire, RJB Mining is the owner of most of the 660-acre Windsor site, which straddles the boundaries of Dewsbury, Batley and Spen, Normanton and Morley. It includes woods and watercourses, and it is criss-crossed by rights of way. It is a green lung for the surrounding communities, but it is now under threat.

In Derbyshire, RJB has just emerged as the buyer of an even larger site—the Shilo North site—which extends around Amber valley, Ashfield, Broxtowe and Erewash. In a joint effort with local people, the Labour-controlled Amber Valley and Broxtowe councils—supported by Tory Members of Parliament for the area, who are both Treasury Ministers—tried to buy the site, but they were outbid by RJB. It is another example of Tory profiteering getting the better of local people's interests.

Labour intends to change the rules so that opencast mining will be permitted only where it benefits the local community and environment. We also believe that the law should be changed to protect communities from repeated applications for the same or similar opencast developments. The Bill could have done that, but it does not.

I shall give an example of what is so upsetting for local people. In north-west Leicestershire, in 1993, an application to opencast a 500-acre site was rejected. At that time, the site was called Coalfield West. Now, the villages of Heather, Normanton-le-Heath and Ravenstone are beset by another application to opencast the same site—only this time, it is called Thorntree. As far as the local people are concerned, enough is enough. They want no to mean no. They want the law to be changed, and so do we.

What about the problems that people face when they are ill in rural areas? Their problems are mainly connected with transport, which parishes may wish to try to deal with under the new powers set out in the Bill. The national health service, whose anniversary was yesterday, was founded on the principle that the best health services should be available to all, wherever people live or whatever their circumstances. But that is not so in many rural areas. There, the groups most in need of health care—children, women of childbearing age and people who are poor, disabled or old—have the least access to the NHS. Instead, rural health care is most readily available to the best-off and healthiest people. That cannot be the right priority.

People living in rural areas need treatment even if they do not have enough sick relatives and neighbours nearby to attract a doctor to set up in their village. Similarly,

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they may need a hospital or an ambulance even if they, their family and their neighbours will not use either as intensively as the residents of a more densely populated suburb or town. They will still need a hospital and an ambulance service.

Unfortunately, most of the changes in the NHS have made matters worse. Countless local hospitals have been closed or have seen the number of beds reduced in the NHS's mad dash for centralisation. Leicestershire presents a good example, because it has experienced the closure or partial closure of Markfield hospital, Zachary Merton home, Ellen Towle home and Groby Road hospital, while services have been concentrated in the city of Leicester.

What about the problem of schools in rural areas? That, too, is very much a question of distance and transport. Hundreds of village primary schools have gone, as local education authorities have been forced to respond to Government and Audit Commission pressure to reduce the number of places. Village schools make a vital contribution to village life. The Government could have included some help in the Bill, but they have not. Instead, they are proposing to make matters worse.

As the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said, where there is only one school, there is no choice. That is true in many rural areas. In many sparsely populated areas, not only is there only one primary school, but only one or, at most, two secondary schools are within reach, usually in or near the local market town. They are usually genuinely comprehensive, taking in pupils of a full range of abilities. They are successful comprehensives, but what would happen if the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment got their way and tried to set up a grammar school in every town? That would foul up the whole system—and I am not the only one to say that.

To his credit, the right hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Jopling), who is in his place and knows that I am about to mention what he said, told the House about the two comprehensive schools in Kendal—

"one the old grammar school and the other the former secondary modern school, whose A-level examination results last year showed them to be the 14th best state school in the country and the best comprehensive school in the country."

He then advised the Secretary of State to

"remember the old adage: 'if it works, don't start trying to fix it'."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1996; Vol. 280, c. 162.]

Sadly, many other schools will soon be at risk from the "Gill'll fix it" brigade.

It is not just a matter of Government policies having made country living more difficult in the past. They are still at it, and their most recent policies are likely to prove just as harmful.

Parish councils have powers to protect rights of way and to promote their use by signposting and other means. Unfortunately, neither they nor highway authorities have the power to do anything to counter what is happening to footpaths through woodlands, as a result of the Government forcing the Forestry Commission to sell off individual stretches of woodland.

Figures produced in response to parliamentary questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), the vice-president of the Ramblers Association, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) show that, until April this year, 92 per cent. of those woodlands had been sold without any agreement to retain public access. Of 81 woodlands up for sale in June, only 14 had agreements to safeguard public access.

The Government do not understand the depth of feeling on the subject. Privatisation is restricting ancient rights and customs, producing large gains for the privileged few and a loss of amenity for everyone else. New landlords are telling people that they can no longer go where they have wandered unhindered for generations. I know exactly how they feel.

As my hon. Friend the Member for York (Mr. Bayley) said, the Forestry Commission is to sell off Hagg wood in Dunningham, the village where I was born and grew up, and which I still frequently visit. I have walked over every part of that 100-acre wood since I first went there on my father's shoulders with my grandfather. Later, I went there with my brother and my friends, and in due course I took my own children there, so four generations of my family—and others in the village—have roamed all over the wood. Now, as a result of Government policy, access is to be restricted, partly as a result of the actions of the Forestry Commission and partly by the Church Commissioners, who own the shooting rights. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "church militant".

That is happening all over the country. The rights of access to woodlands should be extended, not restricted, and the Bill could have made the necessary changes, but it does not. We shall be tabling amendments to that effect.

Mr. Bayley: Is my hon. Friend aware that, according to the Register of Members' Interests, the Secretary of State for the Environment used to be an adviser on legal and parliamentary affairs to the Country Landowners Association? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State might have made a mistake about the role to take when the Bill was drafted, by proposing a significant tax exemption for landowners on their country estates?

Mr. Dobson: I have made it a general principle that, although the Secretary of State usually devotes about 10 minutes of every speech to personal attacks on me, I do not indulge in personal attacks on him.

Many people remain concerned about other treasured aspects of the rural landscape, including hedgerows. After 17 years of promising protection for hedgerows, the Government are at long last consulting on draft regulations. They spent 17 years drifting before they could start drafting. In the meantime, more than 200,000 km of hedgerows have been rooted out. At the present rate of loss, every existing hedgerow will be gone within 20 years.

Existing measures to protect other landscape features are all too frequently overridden. The privatisation and break-up of the power industry has resulted in an increase in power lines that otherwise would not have occurred. The much contested proposal to build a duplicate line of pylons down the vale of York is just one example.

Although they have done nothing about those matters, the Government have found time and space to include one extraordinary measure in the Bill: the proposal to do away with the business rate on shooting and fishing rights,

which have been subject to rates for more than 100 years because they are a valuable asset. That rating is now to be abolished, at a cost of about £5 million. The Government have introduced 22 new taxes on everyone else, but they have now decided to bung £5 million to their friends at the top end of the shooting and fishing market.

I challenge the Government to say whether the concession will benefit ordinary anglers or shooters. Are they really claiming that a fishing licence will cost less? It is a racket. The £5 million concession will bring most benefit to the wealthiest and least benefit to the poorest, so it is a good example of Tory priorities.

The Government have tried to explain that away by saying that the Bill brings England and Wales into line with Scotland, but when they proposed abolishing the tax in Scotland, they said that it was to bring Scotland into line with England and Wales. It is a tax concession for the landed gentry, a backhander for the best-off.

The Government claim that the field sports industry is worth £2,700 million a year. A £2,700 million industry does not need £5 million a year. The measure is intended to help not the industry but a limited number of toffs.

The concession is designed to please the House of Lords. It could be a pay-off to the hereditary peers who turned up to support the Government changing the law to make it more likely that homeless people would have to live in cardboard boxes. They are the stately hypocrites of England.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Does the hon. Gentleman realise that the business of sporting rights works both ways? For example, if the owner of Hagg wood let that wood to the Forestry Commission, but did not wish to exercise his shooting rights, he would still have to pay the rates on it. Those who have land that they let and who, for various reasons, do not wish to exercise their sporting rights—of whom there are many—will also be better off under the proposal.

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman raises two issues. First, it is not clear whether the Church Commissioners pay business rates, although the right hon. Member representing the Church Commissioners, who also represents Hagg wood, might be able to enlighten us.

Mr. Michael Alison (Selby): I do not know whether to catch the hon. Gentleman's eye to respond to some of the points that he raised, or yours, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that, in due course, I shall successfully catch someone's eye and nail many of the misrepresentations and false points that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. If the right hon. Gentleman seeks to intervene, that must be a matter for the hon. Gentleman who has the Floor. If he seeks to catch my eye during the debate, I shall of course bear it in mind.

Mr. Dobson: I am perfectly willing to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but perhaps it would be better if I dealt with the points raised by the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson).

The fact that somebody pays a tax does not make it a terrible burden. When the tax was abolished in Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) spoke against its abolition, pointing out that he was probably the only person in the Chamber who actually paid it, because as a big landowner he had shooting rights on which he paid £100 in tax. As he pointed out, someone with so much property will usually be sufficiently well off not to have to go cringing to the Secretary of State and ask to be let off at the expense of others.

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): It is marginal and hardly worth collecting.

Mr. Dobson: The Secretary of State told my hon. Friend the Member for York that it would be entirely marginal, but apparently it is so marginal that we can ignore it if we are making that argument, yet the Secretary of State is also trying to tell us that it is crucial to the future of the field sports industry. The Government will have to make up their mind.

I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Alison), but I must tell him that, to the best of my knowledge, I have said nothing about Hagg wood but the truth. I take great care with what I say. Until now, people have been able to use the wood without let or hindrance, going where they like. Even a combination of the Church Commissioners and the Forestry Commission cannot do away with certain rights of way through the wood. However, we have been told that, if the wood is sold, as part of the transaction the Church Commissioners will refuse to allow people the access that they have had before. They will be confined to the rights of way. That greatly diminishes the amenity.

All the hereditary owners of grouse moors and fishing rights will get a tax cut, but there are other sports in this country. Sports clubs that serve hundreds of thousands of less well-connected communities will still have to pay their rates. If the Government are interested in sport, why not pass a measure for all sporting industries rather than just one? It is a measure for the privileged few, with no money for anybody else.

At the very least, the concession should have been made available only to owners who intended to permit genuine public access to the land. If the Government do not support amendments that we shall table to secure such access, they will confirm that they remain the party of the privileged. The Prime Minister may want to go back to the old grouse moor image, although I think that he will have his work cut out.

While the Government have been in power, there has been a big increase in unemployment in rural areas. Many of those working there are badly paid. But for the opposition of the agricultural workers section of the Transport and General Workers Union, ably assisted by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang), even more people in rural areas might have been receiving low wages, because the Government wanted to get rid of the agricultural wages board. They eventually gave up when they finally had to concede that the farmers did not want rid of the board.

No current debate on rural areas can avoid a mention of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, which has been extremely damaging. It is probably the biggest catastrophe to hit rural Britain this century—there are only three years left in the century. The Government's handling of the issue has been inept from start to finish. They have

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lurched from complacency to panic, gone back to complacency and then panicked again. They are still nowhere near resolving the issue. Their crass ineptitude has made life well nigh impossible for farmers and others working in rural-based industries. The Government's handling of the beef crisis has made them the toast of the vegetarian movement.

Despite that, the Secretary of State attempts to portray the Tory party as the party of rural England. He gets upset when Labour Members refer to rural affairs. He is out of date and out of touch. These days, the Labour party represents communities in every part of England, from the centres of the largest cities to the smallest hamlets, through suburbs, market towns and villages. Rural England is not a no-go area for Labour. Throughout England, many predominantly rural areas have elected Labour representatives to parish, district and county councils, to the Westminster Parliament and to the European Parliament. That is one good reason why our policies include practical answers to the day-to-day problems faced by communities throughout rural Britain.

The leader of the Labour party represents Sedgefield—a mainly rural constituency in the north of England. His predecessor, John Smith, grew up in rural Scotland. His predecessor, Neil Kinnock, grew up in and represented a fairly rural part of Wales. There is nothing recent or strange about Labour's commitment to rural areas.

Labour covers the whole country, and our policies, including those on local government and rating, address the problems of the whole country. That must be right, because on planning policy, housing policy, environment policy or rating policy, we cannot separate what happens in towns from what happens in the country. They affect one another and they always will.

Consider the way in which the decline of market towns harms their residents and those from miles around. Leek, in Staffordshire—known as the Queen of the Moorlands—ought to be a prosperous market town, but it is a shadow of its former self. It had its own county court 20 years ago, but it has lost that, along with its Crown post office and its jobcentre. Its tax and benefits office is under threat for the second time. Magistrates courts in Biddulph and Kidsgrove have closed recently, and it is feared that Leek magistrates court will follow suit. Banks are withdrawing from the town, and more and more local people are forced to travel elsewhere for work. The cattle market has been badly hit by the BSE crisis. That is just one of the market towns in trouble under the Tories.

Town and country depend on one another. Their relationship is symbiotic—they live off one another to their mutual advantage. However, the countryside exists not just to serve the needs of towns and townspeople. It is also the place where local people live, die, work, play and have their being.

Mr. Charles Hendry (High Peak): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments about Leek, because I know the area well, representing a neighbouring constituency. Would he care to contrast the situation in Leek, which is under the Labour-controlled Staffordshire Moorlands council, with that of the neighbouring borough of Macclesfield—a booming market town with a Conservative council?

Mr. Dobson: There are some substantial differences between the two places, including a considerable difference in population. One of those towns has the advantage of being on the west coast main line. That would be a greater advantage if the Government had not allowed the line to run down.

In the first speech that I made as shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, I spelled out the importance to us all of having a sense of place, personal loyalty and concern. People have that sense of place in the Yorkshire village where I was born and lived for the first 19 years of my life. They have it equally in Holborn, Camden Town and Kentish Town—the areas that I represent in Parliament. In government, we want to draw on that sense of place and local loyalty, that personal commitment of individuals and communities, so that we can work in partnership to make the whole country, urban and rural, more prosperous, safe, clean and healthy and make each part of our country more desirable.

To the extent that most of the Bill is a limited move in the right direction, we give it a critical welcome. We shall seek to improve it in Committee. The most necessary changes must await Labour's victory in the coming general election.

5.17 pm

Sir Roger Moate (Faversham): The Bill offers real, positive help to rural communities. It was a pity that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) spent so little time talking about its main purpose, which is to help village shops, and so much time airing his prejudices against those whom he described as "toffs"—a term which shows his lack of understanding of those who live in the countryside—and his prejudices against country sports. However, it is probably better to gloss over the barrage of inaccuracies from the hon. Gentleman and return to the Bill, which is a practical and helpful measure. It may well be possible to improve it in Committee, but it is a good Bill and I warmly welcome it.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to the parish of Stone, near Faversham, in my constituency. Alas, the boundary commission is removing that parish, for the extraordinary reason that nobody lives there. There is a fine Romano-British Christian church surrounded by a burial ground, but alas, we cannot consult those people. Nevertheless, some of us do not want the parish to be removed.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: With regard to parishes without populations, my hon. Friend may be aware that Dallinghoo in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State contained a parish called Dallinghoo Weald, which I represented as a county councillor many years ago, but I am sad to say that my right hon. Friend encouraged its amalgamation and so we lost another such parish.

Sir Roger Moate *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: For the record, I fought hard against the abolition of Dallinghoo Weald and of Havergate island,

but I am afraid that the sensible policies that I intend to implement did not apply at that time. I will ensure that the necessary change in policy is carried through.

Sir Roger Moate: We should have liked to keep the parish of Stone, but it is hard to argue the case when there are no residents there.

Under the consultation requirements, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will seek to ensure that planning authorities advise parishes of the reasons why planning applications are rejected or accepted contrary to the wishes of the parish council. That is a matter of some significance, and the news will be warmly welcomed by parish councils which find the way in which the system operates at present to be irksome.

I wish to refer to the main thrust of the Bill—the help for village shops. Like other hon. Members, I have offered my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer my advice on what the Budget should contain, and my main suggestion was that we should try to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the unified business rate. I argued for that because I believe that the removal of that burden would do more than anything else to stimulate the small businesses of this country and to encourage enterprise. Alas, it is a £12 billion tax—a little beyond the probable scope of one Budget, and certainly beyond the scope of the Bill.

Nevertheless, I see the Bill as a £22 million start, as that is the estimated cost of the rural rate relief scheme proposed in it. One of the reasons why I welcome the Bill is that it is the first crack in the structure of the business property tax, which is still based on the totally artificial device of notional rental values. That flawed concept eventually destroyed the old domestic rating system, and I welcome this move as a small step in the right direction.

I also welcome the fact that the Bill is specifically aimed at helping those small shops which are an essential part of the fabric of rural life and of small communities. If we are going to start anywhere, this is probably the right place. A 50 per cent. mandatory reduction in rates will be immensely important to shops in my constituency, the county of Kent and the rest of the United Kingdom. A 100 per cent. discretionary reduction could also be crucial, as it could help shops to survive and also encourage new shops to open. We are all aware of enterprising individuals who are seeking to establish new businesses in rural areas. It is a difficult challenge, and this type of help is important.

The proposals beg more questions than they answer. That is why the Committee stage will be so important. We should not always complain about what we have been given and say that we should have been given more. Inevitably, however, the Bill's provisions lead to crucial questions. I am not clear from the Bill, or from the answers given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today, why we are applying the concessions only to village general stores and village post offices, as other retail activities in our villages are also important—equally so, in some cases.

The village butcher, for example, is a much treasured retail establishment in many villages and should be supported. Also, small souvenir shops in rural communities, picture framing shops, book shops, pubs—as have been mentioned—and garages should also receive support. One can understand the argument that the general store offers a crucial lifeline for many people, but all those other establishments play a crucial role in the rural economy, and we should try to help them. I hope that we can explore the possibility of a more flexible definition in Committee.

Mr. Rendel: That is an interesting point, which comes back to an intervention that I made on the Secretary of State, who unfortunately did not attempt to answer it. The hon. Member is perhaps mistaken in thinking that the definition needs greater flexibility, as the Bill simply refers to businesses which may "benefit the local community". It is possible to interpret that widely to include businesses which benefit the local community by employing a large part of the local work force. What is needed is a change of mind from the Government on how the Bill could be interpreted, rather than a change in the Bill itself.

Sir Roger Moate: The Bill refers specifically to general stores and post offices. The hon. Gentleman will find that the definition is drawn fairly narrowly.

That leads me on to the discretionary 100 per cent. grant. Again, I am not clear how this will operate. Will it operate at the discretion of local authorities for one shop as opposed to another, or will it apply to a broad category of premises or businesses across an area? If it is the latter, the measure may be much more expensive than the Government expect. It will be difficult to exercise a judgment in favour of one business against another, particularly if it is not being done on the basis of need or following means testing. It is a good principle to give local authorities the power to help small businesses, but we must get it right. This is a marvellous opportunity: we must build on it and explore how the system will work.

My next question has been touched upon already and concerns the rural area itself. What is a rural settlement? The definition, we are told, is a rural settlement with a population of 3,000. But is that a parish boundary? Is it a large village, or a small town? It is hard to define the terms. I fully understand the Government's saying that this is a difficult matter and that it is preferable to do something than to do nothing, but there are large villages in every area with populations of more than 3,000 whose village stores are just as much in need of support as those with populations under 3,000. It will be hard to give grants to a small village while another village further away gets no grant at all.

Mr. Wigley: During the consultation in Wales, the Secretary of State for Wales at one stage referred to the density of the population in relation to the definition. I do not know whether that was referred to during the consultation in England or whether it is irrelevant. Does the hon. Gentleman have any thoughts on that? Could such an approach deal with the question of where those 3,000 people can live?

Sir Roger Moate: I am not aware of any such consultation; nor do I want it to be thought that I am suggesting that this is a simple matter when it is not.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration (Mr. David Curry): Perhaps I can help my hon. Friend. The definitions of rurality are different in the Principality from those applied in England. In Wales, a concept of population density is used which draws on an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

[Mr. David Curry]

Development definition. In England, we use the concept of a settlement, a well known Rural Development Commission definition of rurality.

When we introduced the housing legislation, questions were raised about the right to buy in rural settlements. Those settlements were drawn up on the RDC definition, and we published detailed maps and explanations of the areas concerned. We did not want to be stuck with the concept of a parish or a village as that was often a less generous definition of a settlement than the one that we had.

I shall be happy to try to expand on the matter when I wind up the debate. If my hon. Friend wishes to explore it further, I have no doubt that conversations will take place in Committee about definition problems.

Sir Roger Moate: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, because he has confirmed that the Government will seek to interpret the definition generously and flexibly, whether or not it meets people's requirements. That is the right spirit and I hope that the legislation will eventually reflect that sensible and helpful objective.

The definitions are important if we are to make the legislation work well for villages and create good will rather than animosity and jealousy. We desperately want to get them right because this is a splendid Bill which will be helpful and provide genuine assistance to the rural community.

That point leads me to the bigger issue which prompted me to write to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and urge that the burden of the business rate eventually be lifted altogether. The problems facing market towns and high streets have already been mentioned. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is an amiable chap, but some of his comments were nonsense. We all know that enormous changes have taken place in the retail world and that tremendous social pressures have created great problems in many of our communities. Supermarkets, whether in the heart of town or out of town—we all have many examples in our constituencies—have had a tremendous impact on our market towns and high streets. We have to face that fact rather than make the kind of nonsensical accusations in which the hon. Member indulged.

In my area—I am sure that others have the same problems—the small high streets are fighting the battle for survival, not because of politics and the performance of the economy, but because of the changing pattern of shopping. Many of those shops will struggle to survive and the greatest help that we could give them is relief from the unified business rate.

Mr. Tim Smith (Beaconsfield): Is my hon. Friend suggesting that we should give business rate relief to the high street shop but not to the out-of-town superstore? If we do away with business rates for every shop, that will not advantage the high street stores.

Sir Roger Moate: I believe that we must, and will, eventually get rid of the system of business rating completely. It is an anomalous and outdated system. I welcome the Bill, because it creates exemptions from business rates, and we have not had many exemptions in the past. Once we pull out one brick, the whole edifice will start to crumble.

We must build on the propositions in the Bill. The business rate is not an efficient or sensible system of taxation although, alas, it raises a lot of revenue now and will not be easy to abolish. It is not a local tax, which was its original concept, and the fact that it is based on property values and notional rental values means that it is fundamentally nonsense. All the evidence shows that it is an unfair tax, and I have figures to show that it hurts smaller businesses much more than bigger ones. My figures suggest that less than 6 per cent. of total rateable value is accounted for by properties with a rateable value of less than £1,000, which suggests that we could lighten the burden on those business without losing too much revenue. I have other figures which show that, in terms of profit and turnover, a small business pays 10 times as much, on average, in business rate as the largest of firms.

If we consider the impact of rates as a percentage of overheads, we see that the unified business rate bill for small businesses is 13.7 per cent. of overheads, but for large businesses the figure is 3 per cent. of overheads. By reducing or eliminating the business rate, we would give disproportionate help to smaller companies. Clearly, it would help larger companies if we eliminated business rates, but in practice the price war between the big stores would probably mean that much of any saving that they made would be passed on in concessions to their customers. However, high street businesses would receive major help.

That is why I hope that the Government will consider any suggestions for reducing the burden of business rates on the retail sector and replacing it, ultimately, with much fairer systems of corporate tax, which are more acceptable to the general public and to business. The Bill is only the beginning, but I welcome it for that reason. If it is well handled, the proposal for rate relief will help my constituents and those of most other hon. Members.

Other proposals in the Bill will strengthen the role of parish councils. In some respects, the proposals amend the Local Government Act 1972. I served on the Committee stage of that legislation, which went on for many months. I have no nostalgia for that, but I look back with some pride on the battle that I and other hon. Members fought then to strengthen the roles of successor parishes and community councils. It was not generally accepted by the Government at the time, but I believe that parish councils are a crucial part of local government because they represent the local community in a way that other councils cannot.

Some of the proposals in the Bill, albeit relatively small, will be important to those who control our parish councils, especially the right to levy greater rates and more powers on transport, roads and crime prevention. Of course, it is one thing to give people powers and another to find the resources. That is a problem at any level of government. Nevertheless, the Bill will be a catalyst and will provide extra power for parish councils, so that, in co-operation with local authorities and other institutions, they will be able to tackle challenges that they cannot tackle now.

Because I believe in parish councils, I especially welcome the proposals in the Bill to facilitate the creation of new parishes, which is currently a cumbersome procedure. Most of us know areas in our constituencies which do not have parish councils, but the current procedures to create them are difficult. The Bill will make it easier to create parish councils, and I welcome that.

Those small measures are all important and, in years to come, all will be seen to have contributed significantly to the strength of rural communities and the rural economy.

I conclude with a more general point. The Bill, the White Paper and the speeches that we have heard have emphasised time and again our belief in the countryside and the rural economy, but those of us who live in or represent rural areas—my constituency is both heavily industrial and heavily rural, so I have a bit of everything—worry when we see the inexorable demands placed on the countryside by the housing growth figures endorsed by central Government.

Unless we get the planning guidance right, there is little point in defending the countryside. Despite all the fine words about building on brown land and reclaimed land, we see the inexorable threat of more developments around our villages, orchards and farmlands. The planners tell us that, in the next 20 years, some 4.4 million new households will be required; I forget the exact figure, but somehow those planners have become family planners and have gained powers of infallibility in the process. I do not understand why we accept those assertions as though they were written on tablets of stone.

We are also told by the planning guidelines, which have already been mentioned, that 45 to 50 per cent. of the new housing has to be built on reclaimed land, but there is no reclaimable land in many rural areas. If those high target figures for housing are accepted as gospel truth and the houses have to be built on reclaimed land when in fact we have no reclaimable land, in the end they will be built on agricultural land. The Ministry of Agriculture sometimes enters objections, but those objections seem to melt away like the snow and disappear. The result is continuous and unacceptable growth.

I want the Secretary of State and his Department to provide in the planning process more entrenched protections against encroachment into the countryside. If that is not done and encroachment is too easy, there will be no pressure to use derelict and reclaimable land and no initiatives for new planning policy in urban areas.

I welcome the whole package in the Bill as a real effort to improve our countryside. I want to strengthen the defences of the countryside, because we all want to see the rural economy prosper. We hope during the progress of the Bill to make it even better, but it is already a good start.

5.39 pm

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I hope that the Bill will be the last piece of local government legislation that the Government bring before the House. The Library tells me that there have been more than 200 pieces of legislation affecting local government since the Tories took office in 1979. Those have left a once proud system of local democracy in a shambles, so let us all hope that this will be the last of them.

The Bill is narrowly focused, closely directed at parliamentary seats in which Tories are defecting in droves and putting Tory majorities at risk. It is a fairly blatant last-ditch attempt to win votes in marginal seats. That is a shame, because much in the Bill is worthy of support. The drawback stems from the motive that has driven it on to the Government's last legislative agenda.

There are two principal problems. First, the Bill's effect will be marginalised, because it is out of line with the drift of mainstream Government policies. The thrust of those policies, whether on jobs, transport, housing, industry or even agriculture—the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis has significantly added to poverty among small farmers—has damaged rural and urban economies and communities alike.

The second principal problem is that, without any new resources, other than an apparently unlimited parish precept—all new tax—and with a lack of clarity about the cost-effectiveness and the arrangements for establishing an additional layer of bureaucracy, it is doubtful whether the Bill's worthy ambitions of greater community participation and public good will be realised.

We live on a crowded island, and urban decay and rural communities are close neighbours. I am not sure that the measures in the Bill will not serve to exacerbate existing tensions and help to set urban areas against rural areas in a negative way, rather than producing a positive result. For example, the decision to put crime prevention policies in place could be driven by the feeling, "Let's keep the townies out of our little area," rather than being a valuable attempt to build more satisfactory social cohesion. Could that measure be seen, as I read in the *Local Government Chronicle* this week, as little more than a

"subsidy for the middle classes"?

When the Environment Select Committee read the White Paper, we were delighted that the Government had acknowledged—

Sir Roger Moate: I am genuinely puzzled by what the hon. Lady says. In a typical village, the people who use the store are not middle class; everybody uses it. Why does the hon. Lady think that helping a village shop to survive is help for the middle classes?

Mrs. Jackson: The hon. Gentleman should wait for me to continue my speech. I was citing the concerns expressed by a wide range of local authorities in the *Local Government Chronicle*. I believe that they could be right about one of the effects of the Bill, and I shall explain how and why.

Unemployment in rural communities has wide effects throughout the country. If more Conservative Members represented urban areas, they would realise that the problems of rural unemployment are mirrored and multiplied by unemployment in the urban areas that Labour Members tend to represent. Indeed, as a result of Government policies, the effects of unemployment and poverty are spreading like a disease to every part of the country.

For example, the town of Stocksbridge in my constituency is nearly 10 miles from Sheffield, yet, as part of the Government's programme of cuts and part of the so-called benefit change programme, it is proposed to close both the jobcentre and the Benefits Agency office from 1 January. That will affect people living in all the rural communities around Stocksbridge. They will have to pay £1.40 there and £1.40 back on the bus even to go and look for a job, and the same to go for an interview about their benefit. That will not promote the health and welfare of rural areas, yet there is nothing about it in the Bill.

There is nothing to help with housing, either. When the Select Committee considered housing need, we made strong, well-supported, cross-party recommendations

[Mrs. Jackson]

about the need for more affordable housing in rural areas. It is a pity that there is nothing in the Bill to address that continuing problem.

The same applies to education, which my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) mentioned. My constituency was faced with a proposal to put three rural schools on the closure list because of Government pressure to close schools with surplus places. Only after an enormous effort and a campaign by people in the rural communities dependent on the schools were the Government persuaded to allow the local authority to keep two of the three schools open.

Those are the Government policies that people in the rural areas of my constituency will remember; although they will welcome what is in the Bill, they will be aware of the wider issues, and the fact that wider Government policy is doing them no good.

I shall now be a bit more positive, in that I welcome the proposal to help shops, post offices and other businesses in rural areas with their business rates to enable them to survive. I should like an assurance today from the Minister that such measures will be allowed where villages and rural communities are part of a metropolitan area. I was concerned to hear an exchange between the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) which implied that that might not happen.

The residents of Bolsterstone, Dungworth, Bradfield and Wharncliffe Side—all villages with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants and one general store—will be extremely angry if the proposal does not extend to them and to their shops and communities, simply because they are on the rural fringe of a large urban area. That would be extremely unsatisfactory. Many of the seats that the Government intend the proposals in the Bill to protect are part of rural areas on the edges of major urban areas. Unless the Government understand the essential link between urban and rural, which is now so close, the drive behind the Bill will not be fulfilled.

To be positive, I should like to believe that the proposals on transport are a long-overdue recognition that bus deregulation has been an unmitigated disaster in rural areas. Three quarters of all rural parishes now have no bus service. Where services run on a commercial basis, they can be restricted, changed or cut altogether at short notice. That happened recently in Colne valley, for example, where the Blue Bus company suddenly and without consultation withdrew its services from Slaithewaite Hill Top through Wellhouse and Milnesbridge to Huddersfield, affecting 1,000 people and their bus journeys.

Only because of a concerted campaign by the local community, backed by Labour, was another bus company persuaded to fill the gap—but for how long? When will the next company withdraw the service without consultation? Similar things have happened in my constituency in connection with the Bradfield school and its bus services. There is absolute chaos, because of the lack of certainty that bus deregulation has meant for rural areas.

I welcome the possibility that the drive, advice and guidelines aimed at extending community transport schemes and local bus-sharing initiatives, which may well be promoted by parish councils, will be beneficial to people in rural areas. I am sure that the Opposition would support that.

I turn to the other main drawback. I agree with the hon. Member for Faversham (Sir R. Moate) that there is a lack of clarity about the role and nature of the devolution of such services to parish councils and its effect. I agree with the thrust of the proposals that parish councils should provide a chance for local action. They provide an opportunity for voluntary work and a strengthening of the sort of community activity that is effective in preventing crime and promoting the rich variety of cultural life enjoyed by many villages.

I should like to place on record the excellent efforts of Bradfield, one of my parish councils, which looks after all 200 miles of footpaths in my constituency and has been partly responsible for South Yorkshire coming top of the footpath league in the recent Countryside Commission report on the state of rights of way. It is at such a local level that women in the community can play a very active role in developing community initiatives.

My worries about lack of clarity, however, are founded on the fact that other community and voluntary-based groups also undertake excellent work—possibly on a wider basis than the parishes—such as the Sheffield community transport scheme. The group operates services in rural areas and throughout the city. It has an excellent partnership arrangement, funded by the city council, to which parishes contribute, but it is an independent, voluntary group. I could mention other groups, and I am sure that other hon. Members could cite similar examples.

What concerns me is that, in Sheffield's experience, it has been easier to build sound partnerships between the local authority and such independent development trusts or groups, with some support from parish councils, than it has been to build them between authorities—higher tier with lower tier. It concerns me that putting too much emphasis on the parish council undertaking this work will mean that the drive towards partnership that allows two authorities to work together will be lost.

There is no question—we in the House know—but that much of the time of an elected authority at any level can be spent in moaning, groaning and criticising the higher tier rather than getting on with implementing the positive policies. Authorities may have their own political agendas, and may even find it more appropriate to that agenda to carry on their lobbying roles rather than getting on with implementing the very useful proposals in the Bill. That is relevant not just to developing a two-tier system within a relatively urban rural area; such activity in parish councils in more rural district local authority or county areas could be a recipe for conflict rather than positive progress.

It is important, therefore, that, where a parish council decides to take on new work and responsibility, it is prepared to carry the can for failure as well as for success. I assume that the district audit service will have to assume an additional role in monitoring the spending of parish councils where they take on extra work. There is still not enough clarity about where the functions will begin and end, how those functions will be financed and what limitations will be placed on them.

For example, if a parish decides to raise its precept—even double it—to take on road safety and traffic-calming measures, how will that affect the district allocation for

road safety? Do the Government expect that allocation to remain more or less the same, or will it be reduced as the parish precept is increased? If the latter happens, there would be a serious danger of skewing the overall authority's priorities. If one area on the fringe of the authority wants to implement traffic-calming measures, therefore, will it take away the possibility of the wider authority introducing the same measures in a wider area?

An enormous number of complications will need to be addressed and sorted out in Committee to ensure that extra money is provided for these proposals. In his winding-up speech, will the Minister address the point made in an intervention by one of my hon. Friends about whether increased spending as a result of an increased precept by a parish council or a number of them in a larger area will affect the overall spending allocation that is taken on board where capping criteria are set? We need an absolute guarantee that, pound for pound, the proposals will not affect what the umbrella authority will be able to spend.

Such issues are extremely important, since a wider authority may end up failing the majority of its citizens because of the activity of one or two fringe areas. The Bill's lack of clarity on such financial issues will produce endless wrangles rather than productive projects, many of which are already under way.

I wish the Bill well in principle. I am sorry that it has been presented at a time and in a way that looks as if it is window dressing for targeted areas of the country. I do not believe that voters will be fooled, because the wider issues that affect the economy and people's standard of living are not restricted to either rural or urban areas. Such problems face both types of area and we badly need a Government who begin to legislate for the whole nation.

5.58 pm

Mr. Simon Coombs (Swindon): I give a general welcome to the Bill, which is timely. It is right that the House should have the opportunity to consider some of the problems that face rural communities. I agree with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) when she says that there is much work to be done on the detail of the Bill, and some of my remarks will concern details that are as yet a little unclear. The rural White Paper set out the direction in which the Government intended to go, and the Bill contains the first set of measures that were adumbrated in that White Paper.

I represent two thirds of the borough of Thamesdown in Wiltshire, which is a mixture of urban and rural communities. It was formed in 1973 by bringing together the town of Swindon with several smaller towns and villages in what was then the Highworth rural district council. There was some unease at that time, some of which still remains.

However, whereas in those days the name Swindon was not acceptable to everyone in the new borough—which is why the name Thamesdown was concocted, from the River Thames to the north and the Marlborough downs to the south—as the authority moves towards unitary status next year, it appears to be satisfactory to the majority of the population for the name Swindon to be brought back into use. For those hon. Members who have had some difficulty with the concept of Thamesdown, and assumed that it was somewhere down the river from here, the confusion will be removed.

The combination of urban and rural creates a sense of uncertainty and fear in the villages, some of which are near enough to the urban mass of Swindon to feel threatened by creeping expansion, but distant enough to be extremely independent-minded.

The rate relief scheme, which is in my view the principal proposal in the Bill, is welcome in principle, but there are some questions that the Government must address. For example, the upper limit has been set at about 3,000 people, but should there be a lower limit? Could a settlement be so small that it would not be possible to justify expenditure as set out in the Bill to ensure the continuation of a small shop or post office? I hope that the answer is no, but I would appreciate a reassurance from the Government that such a consideration would not enter their mind.

I think, for example, of the village of Hinton Parva in Thamesdown, the mere name of which will tell Latin scholars in the House that it is a small settlement—it has about 200 inhabitants. The post office operates part time and is run from their garage by John and Margaret Cook of Hollytree house, which, ironically, is next door to a house called The Old Post Office. Hon. Members will be able to guess what happened to the old post office. It is an example of people trying to maintain postal services in a village.

Will a part-time post office in a garage qualify for the relief that is designed to help rural post offices? I seek reassurance from my right hon. Friend the Minister on that point, because that is what the village of Hinton Parva has been reduced to, and I am sure that all the inhabitants are anxious to ensure that their access to postal services is reduced no further.

What about villages that have already lost their local shop or post office? Will the relief be available immediately to any individual seeking to provide those services afresh? Can we look to the Government, or to the local authority as it will be, to offer that relief?

What about settlements that are too large to qualify? I am thinking of the smallish town of Wroughton, near Swindon, which is extremely anxious to find a bank willing to provide a branch in the town; none of the high street banks has been interested in offering banking services there. It is unreasonable to expect bank branches to be established in settlements with a population as low as 3,000, but would the Government consider setting a different size for different activities, so that a town such as Wroughton could get some help with its rates for payments to bank branches?

Such possibilities are raised by contemplation of what is in the Bill. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) ranged widely over many issues that are not in the Bill, so I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will forgive me for ranging on a much narrower scale and for enticing him to embrace the possibility that help could be given in other ways than the rather limited ones set out in the Bill.

What about village halls and schools? Could any help be given to promote the idea that village schools should be more widely used for community purposes, to extract the maximum value from buildings that might in future combine the two functions?

What about relief for a limited number of new dwellings in villages? More and more villages are finding it difficult to provide enough accommodation to enable

[Mr. Simon Coombs]

young people to stay and keep the villages alive, while the growth of dormitory living—people living in villages and working in neighbouring towns—becomes ever more apparent. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras raised the matter in a rather gruff way, but it is reasonable that we should discuss it, perhaps at a later stage in the progress of the Bill.

Local rural transport is dealt with in part III of the Bill. We should pay tribute to the way in which post buses, provided by the Post Office, have over the years filled part of the gap in the needs of rural transport, but they do not operate in the evenings. Those who live in rural communities and do not have access to a car have a right to go into towns, and it would be good if the Bill encouraged parishes to promote rural transport more than they do at present.

The rate relief proposed is of two kinds: mandatory and discretionary. Experience teaches that discretionary relief is not always effective as a means of implementing Government policy. I am thinking of the discretion given to local authorities to reduce the level of community charge on second homes. The Government clearly thought that there was a case for doing that, and the local authorities clearly did not.

Mr. Wigley: Hear, hear.

Mr. Coombs: The hon. Gentleman's interjection does not entirely surprise me, but I am not talking about the rightness or wrongness of what the Government did; the point is that, if the Government want to do something, it is probably best for them to do it themselves and not leave it to others who might well decide not to do it. That could be the case with discretionary relief, because it is estimated that the cost to local authorities even of their 25 per cent. share will be £4 million. I am not altogether inclined to blame authorities that say that they would rather not part with any of the money to which they are entitled. I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider that.

Until recently, Thamesdown borough council did not allow the disregard on war pensions. The amount in question was only about £20,000, but for years several of my elderly constituents, with some help from me, fought a campaign to persuade the local authority to give a complete disregard on housing benefit for war pensions. I am glad to say that in the end the authority agreed, and that that is now being done. This is a good opportunity for me to congratulate Mr. Patrick Bourke, who led that campaign to its successful conclusion.

The campaign took a long time and cost many people a great deal of money. The Government were happy with the concept of discretion but were not inclined to do anything to promote it. I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to think carefully about the concept of discretionary grants. If the Government want to achieve something in this direction, as they do, we need to consider whether local authorities are willing to support the policy.

I welcome the proposed new parish council powers on transport and crime prevention. I have already mentioned evening bus services to rural communities, which will clearly require co-operation with bus companies and with district and county councils if they are to be an effective additional measure. I also welcome the involvement of parishes in traffic calming, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hillsborough. She is not now in her place, but I wanted to say again that I agree with her. I am sorry that she had to leave so precipitately.

Traffic calming gives local people much assurance. I was recently approached by residents of Kite hill and Rotten row in the village of Wanborough just outside the main urban area of Swindon with a request for traffic calming. Unfortunately, many cars had found a rat run and were making their way down a steep hill. Some negotiated the right-hand bend; others went straight into the field, once knocking down the gate. All of them cause the risk of death or injury to the many children who live there.

Mr. Lawrence Trout of Rotten row raised the matter with me. I automatically wrote to the local authority, Thamesdown borough council. Like the hon. Member for Hillsborough, I want to be clear about what the position will be. Should hon. Members write to the parish council or to the district council? What will be the balance of responsibility in a matter as important—and sometimes emotional—as traffic calming?

I do not want to delay the House. Much of what I was going to say has been covered by other hon. Members. I welcome this first tranche of measures to revitalise the countryside. They are designed to help country dwellers to help themselves. No matter what we may seek to do in the House to assist them, it is important that they understand their responsibilities.

One of those was eloquently expressed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he said that people who wanted to keep the village pub should be encouraged to drink there, although not to excess and not if they propose to drive. Happily, the rural areas of Thamesdown have so many pubs, so closely packed together, that the inhabitants will have no difficulty in walking a short distance to and from them to keep them alive. I look forward to supporting the further measures that were mentioned in the rural White Paper, which I am sure will be introduced by the Conservative Government elected some time next year.

6.12 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Like other hon. Members, I welcome the Bill in principle. It has many good things in it. There are some things that we do not like so much and, unfortunately, many things have been left out that should be in it. I shall not take up too much time, because much of the detail will be better dealt with in Committee.

The flavour of the Bill demonstrates the Government's rather colonial attitude to local authorities and their visible anxiety about the extent to which they are prepared to let go and devolve power downwards. The Secretary of State several times said that he believes in subsidiarity and wishes that district and county councils would demonstrate a greater fervour for it in devolving their power down to parish, town and community councils. I, too, want that to happen but I also wish that our national authority would devolve more power to lower levels.

I shall take the Bill part by part and start, logically, with part I, which concerns non-domestic rates and the changes to relief, which are, on the whole, welcome. Rural and village shops provide an essential service and are not simply businesses. It is welcome that more rate

relief is being provided. The speech by the hon. Member for Faversham (Sir R. Moate) could easily have been made from our Bench. Perhaps that is a sign of things to come, given what has happened over the past few months. I welcomed the emphasis that he gave to the need to get rid of the uniform business rate altogether in the longer term. It has penalised small shops and businesses and favoured larger ones.

No doubt the Government have seen great benefits in favouring the larger businesses that provide a large part of their party's money. That is not a good reason for supporting that method of taxing businesses. I hope that we will ultimately abolish the UBR. I wish that the hon. Member for Faversham was here so that I could tell him that the fact that the Government are making small changes around the edges suggests that they have no real intention of abolishing the UBR in the near future, if at all.

Mr. Tim Smith: If the hon. Gentleman's party is committed to abolishing the UBR at a cost of £12 billion a year, what proposals has it to raise the revenue?

Mr. Rendel: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has paid so little attention to the alternatives that he does not know that we propose to introduce site value rating.

Mr. Peter Luff (Worcester): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rendel: No, I have dealt with the point.

One of the ways in which the Government are failing to treat subsidiarity with the respect that it deserves—

Mr. Gummer: I am sorry to trouble the hon. Gentleman, but is he really proposing that a small business performing an essential service on a site that happens to be expensive will be driven out of business, whereas a large one on a small site will be privileged? Surely he realises that site value rating would be a disaster for the countryside. He ought to know that.

It is the oldest trick in the book. The hon. Gentleman talks about site value rating, thinks that no one understands and hopes that he can get away with it. The only party in the known world that thinks that site value rating is a good idea, particularly in the countryside, is the Liberal party. I thought that it had given that up when it changed its name.

Mr. Rendel: It is clear from his comments that the Secretary of State himself does not understand site value rating. If he examined it in more detail, he would understand its benefits.

Mr. Luff: Explain them to us.

Mr. Rendel: We are here to discuss the Bill, not site value rating. If hon. Members do not know about it, they should examine it. Perhaps that is why they have not accepted it as their policy.

We should consider whether the scheme should be mandatory or discretionary, because there is some illogicality there. The Government propose that part of the scheme should be mandatory and part discretionary. If they really wanted subsidiarity and to devolve power, they could afford to say that the whole scheme should be discretionary, which would be better. For example, under a mandatory scheme, it would be difficult to decide which businesses should get the mandatory benefit.

What about a village with two shops where one is part general store, part post office, and the other only a general store? As I understand it, in such a village, the shop that was part post office would get the mandatory benefit because it was the only post office in the area, while the other shop would not. That creates unfairness. Of course, if it has any sense, the local authority may use its discretionary powers to help the second shop, but there does not seem to be any logic behind making one part mandatory and the other discretionary.

Perhaps it is simply that the Government are looking for a way of bribing some small business men in some of their more marginal rural constituencies, but it may also be that they are worried about whether local authorities would use the discretionary power as they think appropriate. As the Liberal Democrats are now the leading party in the local authorities of rural areas—across the south of England and elsewhere—I can assure the Government that we do see the value of using rating relief, and would certainly use it in the sort of cases that they are examining. We understand the value of helping village centres to thrive.

Mr. Barry Field (Isle of Wight): Despite what the hon. Gentleman says, does he accept that, in the nine years that I have been in the House, the Liberal Democrats have always controlled local government on the Isle of Wight, yet despite my many urgings to use the existing relief, they have never done so once?

Mr. Rendel: I cannot speak for the Isle of Wight, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that many Liberal Democrat authorities use the relief. My authority in Newbury was one of the first to do so successfully.

There is also some difficulty in determining which communities will qualify for the rate relief. The difficulty is in deciding on the boundaries. Given the phrasing in the Bill, there will be a temptation for some local authorities to exclude certain surrounding areas so as to bring the population below the 3,000 threshold and ensure that the mandatory part of the relief is given. In that way they would hope to get more money out of the Government for their areas.

One can imagine considerable difficulties in calculating whether the threshold is met. While I am all in favour of the Government's plan to create a list of communities that meet the requirements—chopping and changing from year to year poses all sorts of difficulties for businesses trying to plan ahead—the Bill will still create certain definitional problems in this respect.

It is also important to specify in the Bill whether we are talking about communities that have only one shop and have only ever had one or communities that may have two shops, of which only one is currently functioning. The difficulties may arise if a second shop comes into being during a given year.

Another difficulty concerns how widely discretion is given to local authorities. I hope that the Minister will make the Government's real intentions somewhat clearer on that. The Bill allows a great deal of discretion to local authorities to give relief to local businesses of all sorts

[Mr. Rendel]

which are of benefit to the local community. If the Government intend to restrict the discretionary relief to shops, pubs, garages and post offices, the Bill will have to make that clear—because as it stands, it goes a lot wider. I want it to go wider, but I do not think that the Government really have that in mind.

I want to make two important points about the financing of the new relief. The discretionary power envisaged by the Government will be useless unless the additional financial burden on local authorities is taken into account in determining standard spending assessments and capping limits. If the Government do not give way on this point, they will in practice be asking local authorities to cut other vital services—schoolteachers, home helps or other social services—in order to pay for the discretionary rate relief being offered.

On 30 November last year, the Secretary of State made it clear that it was his intention to remove discretionary relief given on hardship grounds from the scope of capping. That was encouraging, but we need a clear commitment from the Secretary of State that this new relief will be exempted from capping in exactly the same way.

Mr. Gummer: Seventy-five per cent. of the discretionary relief will be paid by the central Exchequer—that is quite clear.

I have taken some trouble to check that I was right about site value rating. It means that the village shop would be taxed on the basis of what its site might be worth if it were not a village shop. So if it had a high value as something else, the village shop would be crushed by the rating burden. That is why the last known person to be enthusiastic about the system was the founder of the Social Credit Union.

Mr. Rendel: I do not know where the Secretary of State gets his information. The whole point about our system is that the site would be valued for the purpose for which it was intended, so a village shop would be valued as such. The right hon. Gentleman's point is therefore irrelevant.

Mr. Dobson: If it is of any help to the hon. Gentleman, I might point out in fairness that, at the time Henry George was advocating the system, Winston Churchill supported it.

Mr. Rendel: In practice I believe that we have now finished the point about site valuation; we are not debating it today, and it is a pity to waste the House's time any further on it. We need to discuss the Bill.

I should welcome an intervention from the Minister of State or the Secretary of State to answer my last important point—that, last year, the Secretary of State said that the amount of discretionary relief that local authorities would have to pay would not be included in the current capping limits. Is that true of this new relief as well?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman will be happy to know that it is true. I might add that the Liberal Democrat policy on site valuation rating is whatever a particular Liberal Democrat's constituent wants to hear. That is how all Liberal Democrat policies are put across to the public.

Mr. Rendel: That was not worth responding to.

I am glad to have the Secretary of State's commitment on my point about capping; he did not give it in his initial remarks, and it has been worrying some local authorities.

How will the changes be paid for? The Government estimate that the changes under the Bill will cost about £22 million across the three countries. Where will that money come from? It presumably means that the amount collected in the form of the UBR will fall; hence the amount passed to local authorities from the UBR will fall to the same extent. Will the Government therefore increase the revenue support grant by £22 million to make up the difference? That will be critical to local authorities. I should like a ministerial assurance on that point, because it is important to know where the money is to come from.

The Government have said that they want to offer relief to rural communities without penalising local authorities in general, but until we have an assurance that the money will not come from local authorities' own resources, we cannot make a serious judgment whether the Government's commitment not to penalise them holds true.

As for parish reviews, dealt with in part II, I want to make a quick point about clause 20, which deals with unitary counties and which I assume was introduced chiefly for the sake of the Isle of Wight.

Mr. Barry Field: Hear, hear.

Mr. Rendel: I am glad to see the hon. Gentleman in his place; I expect he will have more to say later.

Mr. Field: Sit down and shut up, then.

Mr. Rendel: Perhaps, if the hon. Gentleman stops intervening, he will get a chance to speak.

Although the provision seems to answer the problem with differing timings of parish and other elections in the English counties, it does not meet the point about unitary districts, which face a similar problem. I hope that the Secretary of State will use the powers given him in the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to end the problem of parish and unitary district elections that are not synchronised, thereby saving possible expense.

The trouble with the way parishing is carried out is that it takes far too long, and that the system itself includes a presumption against parishing.

The Government now seem to recognise the important role of community councils, which is good news, but the Bill does not go far enough. There should be a presumption in the Bill in favour of parishing. District councils should be under a duty to review parish council arrangements cyclically, perhaps every four years. There has been a resistance to parishing by some councillors and officers.

Perhaps they are concerned to retain their own power. The Secretary of State referred to subsidiarity, so I hope that he agrees that it is important to try to ensure that parishing takes place wherever possible, and that we should devolve power downwards to the parishes that are then created. The Liberal Democrats have frequently made proposals to that effect, only to find ourselves firmly opposed, often by Labour and Conservative councillors.

There is a question about whether the Secretary of State should be the final authority, and he will know that the Lords have recently recommended that there should be

some type of Standing Committee of the House to deal with such issues of local affairs. The Secretary of State should certainly review that recommendation as a serious possibility.

Perhaps the most important criticism of this part of the Bill is what it leaves out—all those living in metropolitan areas and London boroughs, who do not currently benefit from the decentralisation of power. Those living in the cities have just as much need of community leadership as those living in rural areas. It seems that the Government have left them out and are unconcerned about local democracy in urban Britain. Although I welcome the increase in consultation between the layers of local government that the Secretary of State has promised us, it would also be welcome to see some increase in consultation between central Government and local authorities.

In part III, the Government refer to what powers local authorities should exercise—always a difficult subject. To allow parishes simply to set the time on the public clocks is obviously not sufficient, and does not amount to democratic responsiveness. The Bill is a classic example of legislation from a party that has a centralising tendency and is desperately struggling with the need to find out how it can devolve some powers under the principles of subsidiarity. I welcome, however, the signs of positive thinking. The proposed role of parish councils in relation to transport, traffic calming and particularly crime prevention is welcome.

The real question about part III is why the Government need to give parishes such powers now. It is, of course, because of the legal position of local authorities. Councils have to seek out the right to carry out duties of that sort each time that they come up with a good idea as to what they should be able to handle. My party believes that local councils should be accountable simply to their local population, not to the Secretary of State and not at all, except in the most exceptional circumstances, to Parliament.

In order to overcome the problem about what powers should be devolved downwards we need a proper Bill that gives back to local government the power of general competence, which it badly needs and deserves. If we were to replace this half-hearted effort at subsidiarity with a Bill that went full-heartedly for subsidiarity and gave local authorities the power of general competence, it would be a great improvement. I am happy to note that the Government are now thinking about a possible power of general competence and are willing to consult about it. They should, however, be moving much faster, and it is a great pity that they have missed their opportunity today.

6.32 pm

Mr. Michael Alison (Selby): It is one of the unexpected charms of our debates that occasionally they offer an opportunity to stray from the often rather boring highways of principle and generality, and suddenly focus on a good old solid object, something readily identifiable, something even photogenic. Such is the case in our debate for there has swum into our ken a magical piece of woodland in my constituency known as Hagg Wood, near the village of Dunnington, which is close to York.

Hagg Wood has acquired even greater significance, even notoriety, from the revelation by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) that not only was he born and bred in the village of Dunnington, which is close to Hagg Wood, but that, since an early age, he has often wandered freely up and down its charming highways and byways, its footpaths and bridleways.

It is greatly to the credit of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras that he was born and bred in that delightful village of Dunnington. In the spirit of bipartisan good will, it is very much to the credit of the village of Dunnington, which is very small, that it should have borne and bred a well-known national public figure. I hope that honours are even, in that context at any rate.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras and the hon. Member for York (Mr. Bayley) are deeply concerned that the rights of access enjoyed by them, myself and many others in the locality are about to be disallowed or overridden. Let me try to reassure them and my hon. Friends about that.

I should make it clear that the Church Commission should never be thought of as an object of suspicion or derision in the House, because it is a creature of Parliament. It is the repository of the charitable funds of the Church of England. It was set up by Parliament, and Madam Speaker is a prominent Church Commissioner. The Church Commission, with its distinguished basis and pedigree, is the owner of the freehold of the woodland, which is let on a 999-year lease to the Forestry Commission.

I hasten to reassure the hon. Members for Holborn and St. Pancras and for York, although that reassurance may be only temporary, that the woodland is not on the market, although the Forestry Commission had earlier considered the sale of its lease, and may do so again in the future. Even if the lease was sold—the Church Commissioners would derive no profit or advantage from that, because it would merely mean a transfer of the leaseholder—the public footpaths and bridleways that go through Hagg Wood would be fully protected. I can identify at least three of them on the map of it that I have before me. The hon. Members for Holborn and St. Pancras and for York would be able, whatever the sale and to whomever it was made, to exercise their right to walk on that land.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras asked a specific question about the benefit that the Church Commissioners might derive from the remission of rent and rate liabilities, which is a feature of the Bill. The Church Commissioners invariably require the licensee or leaseholder to meet the usual outgoings, including rates, rents and so on, as part of the licence or lease they offer. We therefore do not stand to be in prospect of any particular advantage. It would accrue to a licence holder, who would have to pay those rents and rates normally.

Having sketched in the background, and attempted to reassure the hon. Members for York and for Holborn and St. Pancras, I must point out that Hagg Wood is not and never has been subject to a so-called open access agreement under the terms of the leasehold held by the Forestry Commission. In principle, such an agreement means the complete and unregulated freedom to roam and ramble over field and forest, anywhere and everywhere, whenever and wherever any individual might choose so to ramble or roam.

Open access is not an appropriate form of freedom where productive enterprises—whether agriculture and farming or cultivating and growing timber—are carried on. Many of the Church Commissioners' woodlands are

[Mr. Michael Alison]

located in the middle of agricultural holdings, and access to those woods has to be gained across tenanted productive farm land. The reasonable interests, both agricultural and sporting, of our tenants must be protected and we have some weighty allies in our approach to that issue.

For example, the Council for the Protection of Rural England writes:

"We do not support the principle of unqualified right to roam ...We recognise the value of securing provision for access and recreation through voluntary agreements where appropriate."

The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors goes even further, saying:

"Many areas of the countryside are too sensitive to allow 'right to roam' to operate unconstrained. Reasons why public access is inappropriate include: crop damage, livestock disturbance, sporting activities, health and safety, protection of wildlife and landscape features."

I believe that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, thinking back on his experiences in Hagg wood, would understand the reasonableness of the provisos and caveats that people familiar with the countryside would want to make so as to protect many countryside features.

Mr. Dobson: Generally speaking, I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about the need to protect crops, livestock, areas of particular interest and sporting interests, and that there have to be constraints. However, in more than 50 years of going to the wood, I have never heard of any constraint on anyone going anywhere. I remember someone posing as a gamekeeper once, but I think that that was just to cover up poaching activities.

No restriction has ever been placed on anyone going anywhere in Hagg wood, except when planting has taken place. In that case, the area would have fencing around it, and, anyway, no one in their right mind would try to walk between trees that were planted only two or three years previously, because the area is all grown over. However, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that, apart from such areas, there has always been free, untrammelled access throughout the wood.

Mr. Alison: I am well aware of that, and I do not want to dodge the implications of the hon. Gentleman's experience of this charming wood, but I feel bound not to surrender the fact that Hagg wood is not strictly subject to an open access agreement. The hon. Gentleman has described a practice that has grown up by custom. That is a grey area—what the legal rights might be of those who have established a customary use has yet to be tested.

I have a further point—one that the hon. Gentleman might understand and appreciate. I shall quote a member of the Country Landowners Association:

"Wildlife in woods is not disturbed by regular and consistent use of a particular route as animals get used to people and even machinery. Disturbance results from occasional straying off regularly used routes, thus the need for management."

The sort of wandering and rambling in Hagg wood that the hon. Gentleman describes probably does not harm wildlife—its very regularity is part of the protection required by animals. However, if we are talking about throwing open places like Hagg wood and the surrounding countryside to a much more specifically authorised freedom to roam, real harm is in prospect.

The customary use of the highways and byways of Hagg wood is not damaging the wildlife there, and it certainly does not interrupt the enjoyment of proper sporting rights. I see no likelihood that anything that now obtains will change, but I do not know who the purchaser—if any—might be. If it is someone who proposes to seed and plant a lot of new woodland, the hon. Gentleman's point will come into force—the area would have be fenced and protected. Similarly, if the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds decided to buy a piece of Hagg wood in order to breed rare species of birds, access would have to be limited.

I cannot absolutely guarantee that there will be no changes in future, but I can assure the hon. Members for Holborn and St. Pancras and for York that the Church Commissioners have no intention, and, indeed, no power, to vary the existing rights of access via established footpaths and bridleways, so the customary use is likely to persist, even though it might not be strictly within the terms of the lease.

Mr. Bayley: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's close interest in this issue, both in his role as the constituency Member of Parliament and as the spokesman in the House for the Church Commissioners.

He mentioned that, when the Church Commissioners own some land surrounded by farmland that is also held under their freehold, the commissioners are often unable to provide formal open access or allow public use through a voluntary agreement, because of the damage that access might cause to the farmland. However, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, access to Hagg wood is obtained via a road to the wood, so that impediment is not relevant in that case.

I was extremely pleased to hear that the Forestry Commission has, for the time being, suspended its negotiations for the sale of the land. In his role as the spokesman for the Church Commissioners, can the right hon. Gentleman give an undertaking that, during this period, the commissioners will discuss with the local authority and the Forestry Commission the circumstances in which it might be possible to agree a voluntary access agreement with a specified new owner, were the sale to go ahead?

Mr. Alison: I shall consider the hon. Gentleman's request, but I have a feeling—I suspect that I might be able to carry the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras with me on this—that something that is well known and familiarly used is, in some ways, best left alone, without too much probing to establish precise legal, statutory or other agreed rights. It might be better to leave customary and statutory rights operating and not to consider how those might be changed, until a specific purchaser emerges and the nature and trade of the purchaser is established. Meanwhile, I do not reject the hon. Gentleman's proposal, and I shall think constructively about it.

I hope that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras does not feel that we have ridden roughshod over his heritage and the experiences and pleasures of his youth, which others will continue to enjoy long after both he and I are treading happier and brighter shores.

6.48 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I agree with the hon. Members who have cautiously welcomed the proposals in the Bill. In that context, it was a pity that the Secretary of State, introducing those proposals, continually implied that, if an hon. Member did not represent a rural area, he or she had no interest, or, by some formula, was debarred from saying anything.

That implication was patronising, and reflected dual standards. I wonder how far we would get if we were to apply the Secretary of State's continual implication in that regard to the present Secretary of State for Wales, who I understand represents a seat in Yorkshire. What would happen if we took that logic to its conclusion? I well remember the day when Conservative Members went into the Lobby to vote to close the last pit in my constituency; many of them had not been near a pit in their lives. By that patronising and duplicitous implication, the Secretary of State demeaned the arguments that he advanced on very serious issues.

I have cautiously welcomed the proposals. I shall place them in context, and raise one or two important issues that emanate from them.

I would describe the proposals, albeit welcome, as a reaction, not a strategy. I believe that they are a reaction to the very serious situation affecting rural areas, but I do not detect an embryonic strategy behind those proposals, let alone a comprehensive one, which is what is needed. The cynics may say that we are following a well-worn Government track. One creates the problems, presides over them, makes proposals such as those we are considering, and claims that one is tackling the issues, when in fact the proposals, albeit welcome, are a limited response to fundamental problems.

I shall put the proposals in context by describing the scale of the problems as they affect a county that I know extremely well—my home county of Staffordshire. The proposals are designed to improve the position in rural areas, and I repeat that, to that extent, they are welcome. The cost is about £20 million, according to the Bill. About £15 million of that is attributed to mandatory and discretionary business rate relief; that is welcome.

However, as I understand it, that £15 million will come from the national non-domestic rate pool. As that is the very pool of money that is redistributed back to local authorities, is there not a danger that the £15 million that comes out of that pool will reduce the pool and so reduce the amount to be distributed, so that local authorities will indirectly find themselves funding that welcome business rate relief—not the Exchequer, as we have been led to believe? That must be qualified.

I wish to illustrate the seriousness of the problems in two rural areas in Staffordshire. One is north-east Staffordshire, Staffordshire Moorlands, an area of wonderful beauty. My family, including myself and my grandchildren, visit it often. It has the Peak park within its boundaries, and we are extremely lucky in Stoke-on-Trent to have such a wonderful facility nearby.

That area is suffering badly. Extremely important facilities in that rural area have been closed. British Gas closed its facility. The former Midlands Electricity Board, now Midlands Electricity plc, closed its facility after privatisation. There have been closures of the driving test centre, the Benefits Agency office, the ambulance station, rural post offices in Calton and Rushton and the Biddulph and Cheadle court—as my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said.

There are further closures in the pipeline—the tax office at Leek, the Staffordshire Moorlands office of Crossroads Care and Cheadle health centre, all very near where I live.

If the Government were serious about stopping the haemorrhage taking place in our rural communities, they would not only take the action proposed in the Bill but multiply the beneficial effects of those measures by intervening to prevent such proposed closures. I suspect that the closures that I have mentioned are being multiplied the length and breadth of the rural areas of England and Wales. Further facilities, such as the fire station, are under threat.

The Secretary of State rightly spoke about the seriousness of crime and the failure of the Government's law and order policies. Cheadle police station is under threat. He might want to do something to remove that threat. If the Government are serious about rural crime, and about helping parish and rural councils and councils in rural areas to tackle it, it beggars belief that they would sit back and allow an extremely important police presence in a rural area to be threatened with closure. That threat is mirrored throughout the country.

The BSE crisis was mentioned. In north-east Staffordshire, a large area heavily dependent on agriculture, in which there are 75,000 animals, there are serious problems because of the Government's inability to come to grips effectively with the BSE problem. Not only primary producers but many in ancillary industries are hit. There is justified fear about the future of those businesses and people who work in them.

I have seen at first hand the reduction in general stores and post offices in those rural areas. I need not travel too far to be in those areas. I am very fortunate in where I live. I am a few hundred yards from the boundary of Staffordshire, Moorlands, and my family, my friends and I are grateful for the opportunity to enjoy the countryside. We have a deep interest in these rural areas.

I have noticed that, in some villages that I visit, post offices and village shops have disappeared—a very important factor in the general decline of rural areas, as of urban areas. I shall have an interesting time explaining to proprietors of small businesses in my urban constituency why they cannot obtain any mandatory relief, whereas it will be made available to businesses elsewhere.

I am not saying that such relief is bad or should be stopped, but it will be interesting to discuss the issue with proprietors of small businesses that are clinging on to their lifeline by their fingertips and cannot obtain relief because they happen to be based in a specific area.

I welcome the Government's business rate proposals, but I have serious doubts whether they will have more than a marginal effect on the viability of rural areas and villages.

I said that I would refer to two areas of Staffordshire that I know especially well, and discuss the proposals in that context. Rural east Staffordshire is heavily dependent on various industries, one of which is gypsum mining. Gypsum is used particularly in the production of plaster and cement. Need I tell hon. Members what has happened

[Mr. George Stevenson]

to the construction industry over the past 10 years or so? It has been decimated, and industries situated in rural areas have suffered from the continuing slump in the industry. If the Government are serious about revitalising rural areas, I suggest that they address those issues, too.

Between 1991 and 1995, the number of VAT-registered businesses in rural east Staffordshire fell by almost 500. Before any hon. Member rises to intervene, I accept that some of those would be accounted for by the increase in the threshold, but my researchers suggest that the vast majority of those businesses went under before the threshold was increased. The area experienced an employment loss of 6 per cent. between 1991 and 1993, largely in villages such as Tutbury, Hanbury, Branston and Churnet. I know those villages well, and have seen the effects.

It is true that the registered claimant unemployment count has improved slightly since, but any improvement is relative. The employment guts were ripped out of those village areas over those years. Such figures put into context the serious problems that rural areas are facing and the effect that the Government's proposals are likely to have. Welcome though they are, they will have a marginal effect at best.

The transport proposals are also welcome. If parish councils can raise more money to stimulate transport provision, all well and good. The danger, however, is that, although parish councils may have the power to do that in whatever way they consider appropriate, the grant to county councils such as Staffordshire is being cut year on year, and its ability to maintain vital passenger services in rural areas is being reduced significantly year on year.

Unless the Government are prepared to grasp the nettle, we face the prospect that, when parish councils have the power, they may decide to spend more money on providing transport facilities for their area, but, because of Government cuts, county councils may be forced to remove their support for public transport. Although there may be a transfer of responsibility, the net effect could be no improvement whatever. We shall have spent another £15 million on trying to achieve that. That is not just carping criticism. Local authorities and parish councils will face difficulties, which the Government must address with greater clarity.

People in rural areas will no doubt greet the proposals with one and a bit cheers. If the Government are expecting three cheers, they have a long way to go yet. There will be a cautious welcome, but people in rural areas who have suffered over the past 15 years from Government complacency and ruinous policies will see the proposals, as I do, not as a strategy but as a reaction—a welcome reaction, but one that is likely to be short-lived.

7.5 pm

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on bringing the Bill before the House. The Government outlined their commitment to rural communities in the White Paper, and the Bill is the first tangible measure resulting from it.

I shall deal first with the rural ride on which we were taken by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). He presented a view of rural England that I do not recognise. Many people in the village of Dunnington, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, would be rather puzzled by it as well. He took us on a tour of England, stopping off at several Labour target seats—the Forest of Dean and other places—and spoke of rural England as being drug-ridden and suffering from despair, homelessness, joblessness and all the evils of society. That is not a picture of rural England that I know or that most of my hon. Friends who represent rural seats would know.

The problem of rural England—I accept that it is not all rosy—is largely a question of prosperity, not poverty. One of the reasons why rural shops and businesses suffer is the changing nature of rural communities. People are not put off from going to rural communities. They want to live there—the quality of life is high, not as the hon. Gentleman suggests—they want to retire there and they want to work from home there.

The problems of rural communities stem from increased demand as a result of rising house prices and the fact that car ownership has increased enormously in villages. As a consequence, people often prefer to do their shopping in supermarkets, which are cheaper, and not in the rural shops. That is what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State seeks to address.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras spoke about the closure of rural schools. The only body in my constituency in Northumberland that wanted to close down rural schools was the Labour county council. It targeted 15 schools on the ground that there were too many surplus places. The surplus places were not in rural schools, but in schools in urban areas. Instead of dealing with that, the county council forced rural children to move into towns for their education.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned closed surgeries. Most of us who represent rural constituencies see new surgeries and medical facilities being developed all the time. I have some splendid facilities in my constituency. We do not have problems with ambulances: we have a new air ambulance, and four-wheel-drive ambulances are being introduced by the Northumbria ambulance service.

We do not have a closed countryside, with closed footpaths and no access. We have increasing access to the countryside through various Government schemes, such as the countryside stewardship scheme.

The hon. Gentleman painted an entirely false picture of rural life. In many respects, rural life is prospering. Energy prices are falling and the availability of the Internet and cheaper telephones makes it possible for people to set up businesses and run them in the country.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health intends to introduce measures to boost rural medicine and to reintroduce a service similar to that provided by the old cottage hospitals. I believe that the false picture of rural England and Wales painted by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was totally misleading. Of course there are problems in former coal mining villages, but the Government are seeking to address those problems.

The real importance of the Bill lies behind its clauses and schedules; it is the return of power to small towns and villages by strengthening the role of parishes and by giving district councils a bigger say in shaping the economy of their areas through the rate relief scheme.

In my Northumbrian constituency, which is one of the largest in England, rural shops are vital. In Northumberland, one cannot simply jump into a car and

drive to a local supermarket to shop. For many of my constituents, that would mean a journey of more than 50 miles, and many more than that in some cases. Such journeys would require not only time, but two or three gallons of petrol. We need our local shops; fortunately, in most of the larger rural villages covered by the scheme, our shops remain. However, some of them are in a parlous state, and the Bill will be of great benefit to them.

Bellingham, for example, in the north Tyne valley, with a population of more than 800 people, still has two banks and a number of shops, including two butchers. It is a valuable local facility for shopping. Allendale Town in Allendale also supports a good shopping centre, which includes the Allendale Co-operative Society. It is the only one-branch co-operative society in the country. It is very well regarded by the local people. Allendale has a population of 740.

However, an air of uncertainty hangs over the shops because of the problems to which I referred. Rural newsagents, who often double up as the general store and post office, have particular problems. They have seen diminishing sales of newspapers, and they face increased charges from wholesalers while trying to keep in touch with the prices charged in supermarkets. They have a struggle.

If some of the sterling people who work in rural shops worked out what they earned per hour for all the hours they worked, they would find that it was very little. The people who run the shops deserve our congratulations because they do, thank goodness, provide a valued service. Reducing the burden of business rates will be a small but useful contribution to cutting the shopkeepers' overheads, and I believe that the community as a whole will appreciate that.

We have heard about pubs. It is important that local authorities like the two in my constituency, Tynedale and Castle Morpeth, use the discretionary scheme to the maximum. Naturally, they will have to draw up criteria about who should benefit, but they should not concentrate purely on the rural post office and the rural general store. They should look further afield. The village in which I live, with a population of 64, still boasts a pub and a post office. I am glad to say that the pub is extremely well used. It would be a tragic loss to the village and the community if that pub had to close.

Mr. Rendel: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm my assumption that, if the standard spending assessment is not increased in line with the amount of discretionary relief granted by the local authorities, his proposal that the local authorities should all use their discretionary relief to the greatest extent is guaranteed to lead to considerable increases in council tax next year?

Mr. Atkinson: I cannot confirm that point, because it is a detail of which I am not aware at this stage. Clearly, those are issues that we shall examine in Committee. As I understand the Bill, the larger portion of the discretionary relief will still be met out of Exchequer funds. The value that district councils put on local facilities, such as pubs and post offices, will help them to decide whether they enter the scheme. I am encouraging my local authority to do so, and I am also encouraging it to include pubs. No doubt someone will accuse me of supporting boozing on the rates.

Local garages are also important. In many respects, they serve petrol almost as a favour for their customers these days. The price that they have to charge is the price at which they have to buy their petrol, which makes them extremely uncompetitive. However, in the rural areas of Northumberland, it is impossible for many people to go to a supermarket to fill up their car. They have to have petrol on the doorstep, and the garages provide an extremely valuable service. Most of them also make money by running a garage with car mechanics, or with a general store attached to it. They should also be very much considered by the local authorities when they are deciding whom they should use their discretionary powers to help.

Part II, which proposes the revival of the parish council, is extremely welcome. The parish council has been a vital part of rural life for many years. It is sad that since the war, its powers have been slowly transferred upwards, leaving it with little to look after bar the odd war memorial and one or two other things. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's proposals are extremely good and will help to reinvigorate parish councils. That will then solve the other problem of persuading people to serve on parish councils. If we give parish councils a better and more important role, people will wish to serve on them.

At the moment, parish councils sit at the bottom of a heap. In my constituency, where we have a national park, the parish council sits below a national park authority, which has many planning powers, the district council and the county council. If the Opposition get their way, those councils will no doubt sit under a Labour assembly for the north of England, which would be yet another administrative burden. I hope that that will not come about.

Parish councils, as we have heard, are regularly consulted by district councils. They make their views known, but too often they feel that those views are totally ignored. It is important that district councils are sensitive about parish councils' views on matters, especially planning matters. Local people are, for example, more likely to be sympathetic to somebody who wants to build a property for somebody in the locality to live in than they are to be to a developer who comes in to build a number of houses. That difference should be reflected by district councils when they decide whether to grant planning permission.

The extra powers will be welcome, and I have no doubt that parish councils will make use of them, especially for transport. The post bus service, which was mentioned by one of my hon. Friends, has been extremely successful. However, the problem of buses in rural areas is the one that I mentioned earlier. There is a problem because more and more rural people have motor cars, so fewer and fewer people use buses. We cannot turn the clock back; that is the situation with which we have to live.

I am glad that parish councils are to have powers over traffic and traffic-calming measures. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest concerns of people living in villages is the speed of the traffic going through their village. If, as I believe, they have an opportunity of making a contribution towards slowing that traffic down, that is another good reason why somebody would want to serve on a parish council for the benefit of his or her community.

[Mr. Atkinson]

Northumberland is well served by its parishes, but, as I said earlier, it is increasingly difficult to find people to serve on the parish councils. Now that the district council has so many powers, one of the dangers that some parishes face is that they might be amalgamated. One parish in my constituency, Hartleyburn, does not have a single parish councillor because no one has volunteered to serve on the council in recent times. I fear that under the Government's proposals, unless the parishioners of Hartleyburn take a greater interest in their parish council, they will be at risk of a shotgun marriage to their neighbours.

I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's decision to abolish sporting rates. In my constituency, field sports and shooting are enormously important. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said that abolishing sporting rates would mean giving money to the rich. I point out to him that grouse shooting and pheasant shooting provide an enormous amount of work in my constituency and I suspect that that is true for the constituents of the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong). I am sure that many of her constituents earn money on the grouse moors from the shooting parties and that the additional help for that important rural activity will be much welcomed.

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the point that we sought to make. That rural activity provides work for those involved in beating, raising the pheasants and related activities. However, it is the landowner and not those people who will benefit from the rate relief. We want to encourage the creation of more jobs in those areas, and ensure that everyone who is able to makes a contribution to that.

Mr. Atkinson: I appreciate the hon. Lady's knowledge of grouse shooting, because many of her hon. Friends are utterly ignorant of that activity. But sadly her knowledge does not extend to the basic laws of economics. If money is put into a community—whether it is given to a landowner or anyone else—that money trickles down. *[Interruption.]* Of course it does. If the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, who laughs into his beard, were to listen to the shadow spokesman on agriculture, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang), he would realise that I was right.

His hon. Friend and I agree that, if farmers had higher incomes, they would spend more money in their local economy—they would buy things and employ more people. The same applies to the shooting business. If it is more profitable, it spends more money improving the shoot, upgrading its facilities and employing more people. That is one of the basic laws of economics.

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman gives the impression that field sports are on their beam ends. According to the Government, they are worth £2,700 million a year. If my maths is correct, the £5 million contribution is 0.2 per cent. of that. The hon. Gentleman said earlier that that figure was extremely marginal. If it is so marginal, why do the Government choose to give that tax reduction to a small group of, generally speaking, wealthy people, whereas they bunged 22 tax increases on everyone else?

Mr. Atkinson: I do not think that I said that it was marginal. For many people, it will be a significant amount. I reiterate the point that I made earlier. The anomaly of that form of rating—it always was an anomaly—works both ways. An institution—or an individual—may own land and let it to a tenant farmer, but reserve the shooting rights to itself because it does not want them to be used. It may not want its tenant farmers to shoot over the land for particular purposes. It is nevertheless vulnerable and liable to pay rates on the sporting rights that it does not use. The proposal helps people involved in one form of land management, and it helps those involved in running a shooting business.

I welcome the Bill. It has been criticised by hon. Members on both sides of the House for possibly not going far enough, but it has to be limited, and it is right that the Bill is targeted at those providing rural services—rural shops, pubs and post offices—and other important parts of the rural infrastructure. I look forward to the Bill being enacted in time for rebates to be given as from next April.

7.22 pm

Mr. Jamie Cann (Ipswich): I thank the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) for his typical Welsh generosity in allowing me to speak ahead of him.

I do not come from a rural constituency. There is one farmer in my constituency, and for that I endure—that is not the right word; for that I am given—a National Farmers Union briefing once every six months. I know all about his farm, that is for sure. I am a small town boy: I lived in Ipswich for 30 years, but I come from a small town. I love the villages and small towns of Suffolk, as does my neighbour, the Secretary of State. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) was a county councillor in Suffolk before he got his present job.

I know the importance to villagers of their shop, their post office, their church, their school and their pub. However, I represent an urban constituency. I welcome the proposals in part I, clause 1 and schedule 1 to reduce the rates of general stores and post offices in rural communities. I have nothing but praise for the proposals. I do not propose to go into any other part of the Bill.

There are two reasons for the reductions in the rates of general stores and post offices in rural areas. First, superstores have opened across the country, usually centred on trunk routes and junctions of trunk routes. In Ipswich, we have been particularly unlucky. We have four on the western periphery of the town, and two on the east. Permission for almost all those superstores was granted on appeal by the late Lord Ridley against the wishes of the local authorities. They have had a pernicious effect on the town centre of Ipswich, especially on the food trade, and on the small towns and villages that the Secretary of State represents.

Secondly, in 1992 many small shops were uprated for the new business rate. That increased their costs. At the time, the Government rightly introduced transitional arrangements to delay the blow to small businesses, but those arrangements have now worked their way through and out of the system. The pernicious effect of the superstores and of the increase in business rates on historically low-costed properties has resulted in problems for small business men in rural areas, and in areas such as the one that I represent. Butchers, newsagents, bakers and grocers are increasingly going out of business as more and more trade is concentrated in larger and larger shop

units. They may not necessarily be superstore size: Mace shops are putting newsagents out of business. And so it goes on.

We should concentrate on not only helping rural shopkeepers to compete against superstores, but helping small post offices and small shopkeepers in general. It is not the location of the small business that is the problem; it is its size compared with the Sainsburys and Tescos of this world. It is proving increasingly difficult for small shops to cope.

If it is right—I think it is—mandatorily to reduce the rates of small shops in Woodbridge, Framlingham and in other small towns and villages across the county of Suffolk and across the country, it should be right to do the same for small businesses and small shops in my constituency. They are suffering from the same pressures.

In Committee, I should like the categories referred to in clause 1 to be altered to enable all shops of a given size to be viable. Incidentally, I have been unable to find in the Bill a description of a given size of small shop.

I have a few queries. If those shops are charged less in rates, there will be less income. The Bill refers to a figure of approximately £20 million. That does not sound too much, but I should like to know where it will come from. If it will come from a reduction in the pooled national business rates, my people in Ipswich will be paying more so that rural shops of an equivalent size can pay less. That cannot possibly be right. I invite hon. Members to think about that effect on businesses in their own constituencies.

If rates are not the same for shops inside my constituency as they are for businesses just outside it, people will be incensed. I shall use the example of my road. I live within a hundred yards of the Ipswich boundary. Just outside the boundary is a village called Kesgrave, which clearly would come within the limitations set out by the Bill. The Government are seriously mistaken if they think that they would receive popular approval by halving the rates of a little general store that is a hundred yards outside my constituency while leaving unaltered the rates paid by the little general store that is a hundred yards within my constituency. That would be utterly unfair.

Small shops compete against superstores, but they also compete against each other. What is sauce for one should be sauce for the other, but the Bill does not recognise that.

My town has a population of 145,000, whereas there are 120,000 people within the boundary of the billing authority, as described in the Bill. On the east side of the authority, for example, there are 2,500 people who live in Ipswich. They are not in the Ipswich billing authority, however, but in the Suffolk Coastal billing authority—in the area represented by the Secretary of State for the Environment. Do those 2,500 people—who form a group that is below the 3,000-person limit set by the Secretary of State—who live on the edge of town form a rural community or settlement? I argue that they do.

I appreciate what the Secretary of State has proposed, but I urge him to ensure that he is aware of all the anomalies that will arise from that provision. That is a classic example of what will happen. People will come to him and to me to ask, "Why am I not in a rural settlement? I live on the edge of town. There are fewer than 3,000 of us in the billing authority, but we aren't included." Many unresolved issues must be dealt with in the Bill. I hope that it can be amended in Committee, so that it is acceptable to hon. Members who represent constituencies such as mine.

Yesterday, I asked the main spokesman for post office owners in my area about that issue, because post offices are—quite rightly—specifically mentioned in the Bill. He made the point, with which I agree, that the important factor is not so much a post office's location—whether it is in Framlingham, Yoxford or Ipswich—as its size. I am not sure that the Bill states what hon. Members know to be right: that we seek to protect small businesses, not their location.

The Bill is flawed in its drafting, but it could be amended in Committee. If the Bill is to pass through the House without causing antipathy between town and country—I hope that it will not—it is essential not only that my arguments are accepted but that the financial impact is fully considered. If townspeople discover that rural shops are being subsidised at the expense of town shops, there will—quite rightly—be all sorts of trouble.

The hon. Member for Hexham will remember the Ipswich *Evening Star*. It carried a front-page story about 28 headmasters

> "from Ipswich to Felixstowe ... Stowmarket to Woodbridge"

who were complaining about expected education cuts. They will be extremely upset if £20 million leaves local government and is not replaced by the Government.

7.34 pm

Mr. Tim Smith (Beaconsfield): It is extraordinary that the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) should be happy enough to tell us that his party wants to abolish the uniform business rate at a cost of £12,000 million, and also, in response to my intervention, that he wants to introduce site value taxation, but then to decide that he did not wish to discuss the matter. I am not surprised that he did not want to discuss it, as I have obtained a copy of a document published by the Liberal party in 1990 entitled the "Small Business Charter".

It may amuse the House to hear that the third paragraph of the document states:

> "We plan to become Members of the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the European Monetary System."

I do not suppose that that is still their policy, but introducing land value taxation apparently is. The document continues:

> "We propose Land Value Taxation with exemptions for agriculture and domestic properties. With these exemptions Land Value Taxation will be a fairer, more equitable tax, simpler to administrate and decentralist. It will specifically help small businesses because it removes the fear that improving land and property will increase rates."

That means that tax will be based initially on the land's full potential value, which is why no account will be taken of any improvements.

Mr. Rendel: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I have your ruling on the relevance to the Bill of the views of the Liberal Democrats on site valuation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): So far, the speech of the Hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith) is quite in order.

Mr. Smith: I am most grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Smith]

I was about to say that the Liberal party's proposals will hit hardest the very properties mentioned in the Bill, which the Government are seeking to help. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment said in an intervention on the speech of the hon. Member for Newbury, the Liberal Democrat proposals would have precisely that effect. I find it incredible that the hon. Gentleman mentioned those proposals but was then not prepared to defend them.

I believe that the uniform business rate has worked rather well in practice. Of course we would prefer not to have a £12,000 million tax on property, but if we must have a business property tax, it is far better to have one which allows businesses to be sure precisely what they will have to pay in the next year, as any increases are linked to increases in the retail price index. That situation is far better for businesses than the previous situation, in which there were arbitrary increases. I recall that about 10 or 11 years ago the business rate in Buckinghamshire increased by 31 per cent. in one year. Such a situation cannot happen again.

I was very surprised to learn that the Labour party proposes to abolish the uniform business rate and to return to the previous practice, whereby local councils set business rates.

Ms Armstrong: I will explain the position when I reply to the debate.

Mr. Smith: I hope so, because I have documents which suggest that the Labour party wants to do precisely that.

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman is getting rather excited. Perhaps he needs to examine some of the work done by the Minister, and some of the work done by the deregulation group which was headed by a former Minister, Francis Maude, who recommended that the uniform business rate had had its day and that it should go. Our policy is that the uniform business rate has had its day and that it should go, although we shall not return to exactly the same earlier methodology. We shall have a new methodology, but we believe that the uniform business rate should go.

Mr. Smith: That is not good enough. Businesses should be told. It is not good enough simply to say, "We shall abolish the uniform business rate." Businesses need certainty. The advantage of the present system is that they can budget with certainty for the following year.

A Labour party document entitled "Renewing Democracy, Rebuilding Communities" says that the party is

"committed to returning the business rate to local control".

Local control means a return to the position whereby it was possible for high-spending Labour councils to drive businesses that employ many people away from the most deprived areas. That is precisely what happened before, and I cannot believe that the hon. Lady wishes to return to that state of affairs. I hope that she will spell out Labour's proposals with rather more certainty, as I believe that the current system has worked quite well in practice. Of course there is no perfect system of business rates, but the current system has the advantage of certainty for businesses.

I found the speech by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) rather reassuring. It was old Labour with an element of déjà vu, based on the politics of envy, with attacks on wealthy people who happen to own sporting rights in the countryside.

The hon. Gentleman proposed an entire new set of spending commitments. On housing, for example, he complained about the present position and said that more money should be spent on housing. When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State suggested that, if we were to allow more of the surpluses from the sale of council houses to be spent, there might be a quid pro quo in terms of reducing the capital allocation, the hon. Gentleman disagreed, and insisted that more money should be spent on housing.

One can hardly think of a less attractive way of going about the matter. The surpluses are not necessarily located in areas with the highest housing need, yet the hon. Gentleman would not redirect those resources. It is self-evident that the surpluses are in precisely the wrong areas. They are probably in places, such as my constituency, which have the most attractive council property and the largest number of council house sales, but the need is elsewhere. What a crazy proposal it was. If we want to allocate more money to housing, we should do so through the Housing Corporation, which can determine the areas of greatest need.

The hon. Gentleman's attack on deregulation was as surprising as his proposals on housing. Bus services have been in decline for the past 50 years under both systems of support for bus services. The only advantage of bus deregulation is that at least we now have a clear idea where the subsidies are going. The subsidies are focused, and the taxpayer is getting better value for money. The hon. Gentleman's scheme certainly would not succeed. He would not be able to persuade bus operators to take on loss-making routes without provided bigger subsidies. The only way to increase rural bus services is by providing larger subsidies to operators. We need to find a more flexible solution. The post buses have been mentioned. I also welcome the provisions in the Bill to allow parish councils to get involved in rural transport, as they are best equipped and qualified to judge immediate local needs.

I particularly welcome two other elements in the Bill. The first relates to the power of parish councils. When I first became familiar with parish councils, I was a little doubtful of their value: I thought that they were just talking shops and did not perform any useful function. As I have got to know them better, however—because my entire constituency is parished—I have reached the conclusion that they are well placed to identify genuinely local concerns.

Parish councils are the local authorities nearest to the people they serve. They serve a useful purpose as a sounding board, and I welcome the fact that they will be allowed to carry out more functions if they choose to do so and wish to provide the finance. That will be most welcome in respect of transport and crime prevention. For example, they may want to provide closed-circuit television in a small shopping centre.

I was pleased to hear what my right hon. Friend said about planning, which is one of the biggest issues in my constituency. There is widespread misunderstanding of how the planning process works. Many people think that

parish councils make planning decisions, as they often have planning committees which decide whether to support any particular proposal and pass on that view to the district council which makes the final decision. District councils should pay more attention to the views of parish councils on planning matters. Local views on planning decisions are extremely important. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told the House that district councils would be required not only to give their reasons for a planning decision, but to respond specifically to the arguments advanced by the parish council for or against a particular proposal. That is extremely important, as it means that they will engage in constructive debate and there will be more communication between the two tiers of local government. That is an extremely welcome provision.

I also welcome the help to be given to shops in villages. That highly targeted assistance represents £15 million out of a total unified business rate bill of £12,000 million, but it is focused on particular circumstances with which we are all familiar whereby village shops are close to non-viability and many have been lost.

There is a tendency to exaggerate both the extent to which the Government of the day are responsible for the problems that have been caused and the extent to which they can provide a solution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) said, by and large the problems have been created by success and increased prosperity in rural areas. I can identify two factors: the pattern of employment, which has changed hugely over the years, and the huge increase in car ownership. The fact that so many families now have a car is a welcome development. Cars bring people enormous individual freedom, but the car has changed the patterns of retailing and employment.

For example, until recently the school in Little Marlow, a village that will become part of my constituency after the next election, was threatened with closure. That school is now flourishing, not because it is attended by children from Little Marlow but because parents from High Wycombe drive to the village so that their children can take advantage of village education. That is marvellous. The fact that they have that choice has made the school viable. We are discussing the problems of success, not failure, brought about by the increase in car ownership.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North–East): Hon. Members welcome the assistance given to rural shops, and the hon. Gentleman has made a splendid case, but does he accept that urban shopping centres also have considerable problems? The closure of one shop often leads to other closures due to the continual failure of urban renewal policies. Although we welcome the assistance provided to rural shops, does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is also a strong case for reducing the liabilities of small shops and shopping parades in urban areas, as so many of those shops are under great pressure?

Mr. Smith: Of course I accept that there are problems in urban areas. That is undeniable. However, they are the problems of success. We have had huge success in retailing. British retailing is among the best in the world. In food retailing, for example, the consumer has benefited hugely from the quality now available from our superstores. Many retailers, such as Marks and Spencer, which published its results yesterday, are developing outstanding retailing all over the world. The difficulty is that people drive to those shops because they get good value for money. Small shops in urban and rural areas suffer the consequences of that huge change in the pattern of retailing and we must consider the extent to which it is right to ask the taxpayer to support such shops.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) said that, according to the *Local Government Chronicle*, trying to keep the village shop open would somehow be supporting the middle classes. That is clearly not the case. The people who cannot get to other shops are those who do not have cars—the old, the young and the unemployed. They will clearly benefit from the measure. I welcome that, because it is sensible to intervene to help those who have not been able to benefit from the changes that I have described. However, we must limit such help or we shall start to interfere with the operation of the market. We are limiting that help to £15 million of highly targeted relief, which will help people who are greatly in need. That is why I welcome the Bill.

7.51 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I, too, welcome the Bill as far as it goes and to the extent that it is comprehensible. It is supposed to be the fruit of the rural White Papers for England, for Scotland and for Wales. The Bill was trailed in that context in the Queen's Speech. There has been no debate in Parliament on the White Paper for Wales, and we are moving forward to some parts of the legislation without identifying the priorities. Many important provisions in the rural White Papers are not covered by the Bill and need to be addressed.

The White Paper "A Working Countryside for Wales" referred to rural housing, rural schools, rural youth services, the health service in rural areas, employment problems in rural areas, tourism in rural areas and the range of environmental action that is needed. Considerable attention has rightly been paid in response to the White Paper to the need to help small farmers by providing considerable assistance for agriculture in these difficult times. Agriculture is the backbone of rural life. Most of our farmers work on small farms in Wales and are often on the breadline. If they collapse under the strains they currently face, the whole rural fabric will go down with them.

We need a new all-Wales agri-environmental scheme, but there is no provision for that in the Bill. I hope that other Bills will be introduced to deal with the other aspects of the White Papers that are not covered by this Bill.

The Bill's scope is restricted. It deals with village shops and post offices, which are certainly important. There are 93 villages in my constituency and, goodness only knows, I understand the importance of sustaining the village shop and post office.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can settle a point which is worrying me. I have read the Bill carefully, particularly schedule 1, which refers to "settlements". What is a settlement? Is it a village? Is it a street of houses? Is it a groupage?

Mr. Wigley: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have been

[Mr. Wigley]

probing for an answer. Clearly a settlement does not refer just to a community council or parish area. In my community of Llanwnda, there are the discrete villages of Rhosgadfan, Rhostryfan, Dinas and Llanwnda. There are shops in those different areas. One would not expect villagers from Rhosgadfan, up the hillside, to have to come down to Llanwnda every time that they want a stamp or their pension. One imagines that the community will have to be split into discrete areas; otherwise, the rule that only one post office or general store will be sustained in any community will cause immense difficulties. We shall undoubtedly return to that problem in Committee.

The Bill also deals with the strengthening of community councils, which we definitely support. It provides for car-sharing schemes, bus services for elderly and disabled people, concessionary transport schemes and traffic-calming schemes—an issue on which my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion and Pembroke, North (Mr. Dafis) has been pressing hard for a long time.

All those provisions are worth while, as are the much-needed provisions on crime prevention, but they are only a small part of the rural agenda. I regret that the long title of the Bill is restrictive. We shall not be able to move amendments in Committee to address the many matters that have been left out.

I welcome the Bill as a small step in the right direction and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for responding positively to my representations on the application of the Bill to my constituency, but I am a little disturbed that there are no Welsh Office Ministers present today. We have not seen one, apart from for a brief period during the opening speech. When I raise technical questions about Wales, I hope that the Ministers present can respond in detail, because the House has a right to such answers.

The problem with the Bill is that the devil is in the detail. Numerous difficulties arise in implementation. The first problem, which I raised with the Secretary of State earlier, concerns the applicability of the Bill, particularly part II—clauses 9 to 25. Clause 35(2) says:

"Sections 1 to 4, 9 to 31 and Schedule 1 extend to England and Wales."

That must be a misprint. I should be glad of some clarification. Clause 25 says that part II applies to England only. Presumably something has gone wrong.

I imagine that some of part II must be already applicable in Wales through the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994. Clause 21 seems to reflect a considerable amount of section 14 of the 1994 Act, but the words are different, so it is questionable whether some of the provisions in part II will apply to Wales.

I suspect that the provisions in clauses 9 to 25 not covered by the 1994 Act will not apply to Wales. What is the Government's rationale in establishing those measures for England but not necessarily for Wales? We have a right to an answer. I do not know whether the Minister wants to intervene now. I suspect that he would rather a colleague came back to it in the closing speech—I understand that, in the circumstances. I hope that they can dig out a Welsh Office Minister in the meantime to give them a lead. The issues of applicability are vital. We need to know which provisions in the Bill apply to Wales. We should be glad of an answer.

I welcome the measures on the relief of business rates for rural shops and post offices in Wales. There is immense pressure on rural shops in Wales, as in other parts of these islands. We have seen closure after closure over the past few years as patterns change and the viability of businesses is hit by falling demand. Obviously, that has a bad effect on those members of the community who cannot drive to supermarkets. The elderly, those who do not drive and disabled people will be harmed, as will the tourism industry. The base population of a village may not be able to sustain a shop in winter, although it may be necessary in summer to provide for tourists.

The burden of the uniform business rate falls not just on general stores and post offices, but on other rural businesses, such as village butcher's shops, hairdressing salons, cafes, chip shops, pharmacies and garages. It is not good enough to give discretionary powers to local government when we know full well that the squeeze on the financial resources of local government in the coming year means that local authorities will not have a brass farthing to spend in this way. As a result, many businesses that should receive assistance will not get it.

Secondly, in recent years, shops and small businesses have gone under not only in rural areas but in small towns and, as has been said, in urban areas. In the three towns in my constituency—Caernarfon, Pwllheli and Porthmadog—there are numerous empty shops and, to a significant extent, that is a direct result of the impact of the uniform business rate.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ceredigion and Pembroke, North and for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) have pointed out in the Chamber that our policy as a party is that we want to do away with the UBR. Conservative Members have challenged the Liberal Democrats on this matter, but we have gone into it in some detail and we want to see a local income tax. That was the evidence that we gave to the Layfield commission in 1976 and, incidentally, was recommended by the commission. Even then, it was thought possible and practical to have a local income tax system.

I believe that, if businesses had to pay a local income tax—or, if they were incorporated, an added element to their corporation tax—as the means of funding local government, it would not become a burden or an overhead that might pull them down when their turnover was falling. It is variable—if a business is doing well, it pays more; but if it is doing poorly, it pays less. That makes it easier for businesses to survive when there are factors undermining their viability.

The existing provisions in law for relief for businesses going through difficult periods are applied so unevenly that it is difficult to see the basis on which they are applied. A couple of years ago, some £2 million of relief was given in England but only £900 in Wales. I have no doubt that there are many deserving businesses in Wales, and I know that some Welsh councils, such as Taff Ely—which no longer exists—applied the relief, while others will not contemplate it, and that causes a problem. There must be a rethink on local government finance, particularly on the uniform business rate.

There are real problems of definition which must be addressed in Committee, and I wish to flag up some so that we start to think about them. First, what is a rural area? We are told that it is a settlement with fewer than

3,000 people, but that is an inadequate definition, as it does not relate to density. The Minister of State told us that he recognised that a different formula applied in Wales, but nothing in the Bill refers to that formula. Apparently there are two ways of defining a rural area, neither of which is mentioned in detail in the Bill. We will have to deal with that in Committee, or the Bill will be open to challenges in the courts and elsewhere. There is also the question of one community covering more than one settlement, which I have raised.

Secondly, what is a business? The Bill allows the Secretary of State to include any shop or business by order, but how will the order be used? We must discuss whether there should be a limiting factor with regard to the size of a business. During the consultation in Wales, such a limiting figure was given—£5,000 of rateable value—but that seems to have dropped out of the Bill. Or has it? Perhaps we do not know it yet, and it will be covered by orders which have not yet been clarified.

What is the definition of a general store? For example, does a cafe that sells soap qualify as a general store, as it sells food as well as household items? I do not believe that the definition we have is watertight, and it will be inoperable. What is the qualification for a post office? Would a post office counter in an out-of-town supermarket—more and more supermarkets are trying to get such counters—qualify automatically for relief from the rates for the entire business? These matters have not been thought through, and more thought is needed.

I wish to refer to the powers of community councils, which are vital. I have 28 community councils in my constituency, and I try to visit them all on a rota basis. I have never been to a single community council meeting where I have not learnt something. These councils are valuable, but they have precious few powers and it is right to give them more. I am not satisfied that the powers to strengthen community councils in the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 are adequate. My hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy tabled amendments to that legislation in Committee, but we did not get the result we wanted. Commitments were given that guidelines would be issued by the Welsh Office, but they have not been adequate. The Government may be relying on the effectiveness of the words in the 1994 Act as a basis for the application of the scheme in England, but that has not happened in Wales as yet. I want more powers to go down to community councils than do currently.

Several aspects of the Bill need to be clarified. For example, does any legal liability fall on community councils for car-sharing schemes or traffic-calming works? Frankly, community councils do not have the expertise to be handling questions if there is legal liability. Are community councils to be allowed to build bus shelters, given that the Bill restricts them from doing anything of a capital nature with regard to bus services?

The Bill states that community councils

"may, for the detection or prevention of crime in their area—

(a) install . . . any equipment."

What does that mean? Will community councils be allowed to put the stocks on the village greens? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hear "Hear, hear" from Conservative Members. That may well be what the Government have in mind, and I would be interested to hear that spelled out. My local authority has considered installing closed circuit television. Although it can face the capital costs, there will be immense revenue implications if it is to monitor everything on the CCTV systems.

On taxi fares, clause 28 allows community councils to enter arrangements for fare concessions for

"some or all of the persons"

in the council's area. That sounds discriminatory—councils can choose who to help, and may not do so on an objective basis. There are specific provisions in legislation on water rates to prevent discrimination, but it appears that we are deliberately providing for it in the Bill. That needs clarification.

I should like to touch on omissions relating to the working of town and country planning law, particularly in rural areas. I have plenty of examples of nonsense in town and county planning law and how they impact on communities. My area has an old planning permission that dates back to 1965. It has been kept alive by way of a few yards of tarmac that were put down for betterment levy purposes in the late 1960s, but that has meant that the planning permission is alive in perpetuity for 800 holiday homes in the village of Morfa Bychan. It is a site of special scientific interest and needs protection. Planning law should be changed to deal with such nonsense. We have heard of opencast schemes that would desecrate rural areas, but existing provisions to cope with such problems are inadequate.

I should be glad if the Government would clarify whether a new rural business class use will be added to the planning process, as was mentioned on page 35 of the English White Paper. Consultation is proceeding on this matter and we need to know whether it will move forward, because it is important for the operation of our community councils and for planning to protect our rural areas. Small developments can proliferate, because the size threshold enables them to avoid the development control procedures.

As other hon. Members have said, we give two cheers for the Bill. We need to strengthen and clarify it in Committee and we need other Bills to cover the rural matters that have not been covered. More than anything, we need a coherent strategy towards rural Wales and that has not, as yet, been developed. The White Paper tried to move in that direction, but it was not adequate. Financing and the way in which grant formulae for local government deal with the sparsity of population and the additional costs that it causes have not yet been addressed. I hope that the Government are aware that rural areas have many needs and that they will be willing to accept amendments tabled in Committee. I also hope that we will hear more in the winding-up speeches. It is vital to get such legislation right and to make it applicable to, and effective for, our rural areas.

8.12 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Worcester): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) who made a characteristically constructive speech. Some of the matters that he raised are already addressed satisfactorily in the Bill. For example, schedule 1 will provide billing authorities with much flexibility to interpret what is meant by "a rural settlement". I understood what the hon. Member was talking about, because I spent my summer holiday this year in his constituency and that of his hon. Friend the

[Mr. Peter Luff]

Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). I thought that he talked down Porthmadog a little, because it is a vibrant shopping centre and my wife and daughter greatly enjoyed our shopping trips there, although I could see the damage that has been done to areas of his constituency by the attractions of Safeway in Caernarfon and the new Tesco store further along the coast at Bangor. They have had an impact on village shops.

The two cheers from the Welsh nationalists must be encouraging for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister who will reply to the debate tonight. The Opposition parties seem to agree that the Bill is at least a small step forward, so we are entitled to believe that it is a big one indeed.

As we have heard in the debate, the Bill is about rural communities, and it is good to have an opportunity to debate that subject. I think back to the fuss that arose when the Church of England published its report, "Faith in the City", and the huge row that erupted. Someone even used the word "Marxist" to describe the report. A few years later, the Church of England produced a parallel report called "Faith in the Countryside" which, I am sad to say, sank without trace. It was a fine report and an example of the Church making a useful contribution to the debate about rural communities.

We are debating today the very institutions that bind together those rural communities. Many of them are important—the church, the shop, the pub, the parish council, the school and so on. Those are the "little platoons" of village life. That phrase was used by Edmund Burke in 1790, when he said:

> "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of our country and to mankind."

So our debate tonight has a long and honourable tradition.

Those institutions, those little platoons, empower people—they help people make a difference to the community in which they live—and they do not just include the formal institutions, because the family is a little platoon, as are sports clubs, hunts and voluntary groups. All those little platoons bind together the fabric of rural life. Some, such as the Church, do so by providing spiritual help; the shop provides practical help, as a centre of information for the village; the pub provides a social opportunity; the parish council provides a democratic one; and the school provides an educational one. They are the foundations on which our rural communities are built, and I congratulate the Government on the Bill, which will deal with many aspects of rural institutional life—those little platoons.

There is little for schools in the Bill, but it is not an education Bill and is not the place for that. There is little for the Church, but it has something to tell us about the importance of little platoons and subsidiarity. I mean, in this case, the Church of which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is a member, rather than my Church. Subsidiarity lies at the heart of what we are debating tonight because giving power to parish councils, as the Bill will, is what subsidiarity is all about. It was defined by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical "Quadrigesimo Anno" in the following terms:

> "Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater or higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do."

He continued:

"those in power"—

he must have been thinking of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—

> "should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of subsidiary function, the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be, the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State".

That definition was quoted in the document "The Common Good", which was produced by the Catholic bishops recently and widely, and I think wrongly, interpreted as an incentive to vote Labour. That interpretation was sadly misguided on the part of mischievous media.

In the document, the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church stated:

> "It will be seen that the principle of subsidiarity is no ally of those who favour the maximisation of State power, or centralisation of the State at the expense of more local institutions. It supports a dispersal of authority as close to the grass roots as good government allows, and it prefers local over central decision-making."

That is what the Bill sets out to do and that is why we should give it three not two cheers.

The principle of empowering parish councils must be right and we will give them powers that they may choose to exercise or not, depending on local circumstances. Conservatives are frequently criticised for seeking to centralise power, but I cannot understand that criticism. Our proposals for grant-maintained schools involve a decentralisation of power. They give power back to local communities and I am delighted that, in Flyford Flavell first school, I have the first grant-maintained primary school in a rural area in my constituency. That is empowering for the local community. We see decentralisation in health authorities, because we are giving power to general practitioners to take decisions.

We oppose Labour plans to create regional assemblies which would undermine the role of all local authorities, especially parish councils. We want to take power out to the people and that is what the Bill sets out to do.

Parish councils are, as everybody in the House agrees, crucial local institutions. I seek invitations to go to them as regularly as I can and a summons to one is a three-line whip to me. On the Bill's proposals for parish councils, I have two questions, two welcomes and two caveats to enter. I am delighted that the Bill will make it easier to establish parish councils, and that it will give local communities the power to petition for their creation. I am also delighted by the new powers the Bill will provide on community transport and crime prevention, but I wish to ask my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary a question about clause 16. As I read it, the clause seems to create a presumption in favour of parishing. It seems to oblige district councils to parish where appropriate.

I think that I know the answer to the question, but does the clause also apply to parishes in urban areas, for example in Worcester city? I ask because my city council fought the creation of parish councils. The Labour party, which controls Worcester city, did not welcome rival centres of power in the city. They were wrong to fight

them and it was undemocratic and unduly centralising of them. I am glad to say that the parish councils now exist and are making a valid contribution to the life of my city. In other cities, where Labour administrations might take a similarly unenlightened attitude, will they find it more difficult to resist the creation of parish councils?

I have a second question, about clause 21 and consultation with parish councils, which may already have been answered when I was temporarily out of the Chamber. I understand that it is primarily intended to deal with planning matters, about which several hon. Members have already spoken in detail.

Many parish councils in Worcestershire feel that they are not taken sufficiently seriously on planning matters. Only yesterday a parish council chairman told me that they feel that they are regularly presented with a series of faits accomplis. For exactly the reasons that many hon. Members have explained, I would like parish councils to be fundamentally involved in the planning process. They are in touch with grass-roots local opinion, and they know, often better than district or county councils, what is good for their communities.

Parish councils could also be given a role in the enforcement process. Often, when planning permissions have been granted, they are not properly followed, and sometimes the parish is better placed to judge whether a planning permission has been properly adhered to.

Frequently parish councils are not adequately informed during the local plan process. That has been an issue in the village of Tibberton, Worcestershire, which is currently suffering the imposition of an unwelcome housing development because the parish council was not properly informed about it. No one broke the rules, but there are no rules obliging anyone to inform the parish about a change in the application of the plan to its village. As a result, Tibberton is finding it difficult to resist the imposition of that unwelcome housing.

In the early stages of the local plan, the parish council thought that it had made its representations effectively, but then found that it was not required to be informed of a change. I do not think that at this stage the village can avoid the building of the unwelcome houses.

Parish councils have a crucial role to play in the planning process, and we should seek to reinforce that role wherever we can. The 1972 legislation simply required all planning applications to be notified to parish councils. I believe that that those councils' views should carry much more weight, and I hope that that is what the relevant clause seeks to achieve.

I extend two specific welcomes, one of which is for the wide range of powers on community transport and on traffic measures such as traffic calming. I especially welcome the emphasis on imaginative, innovative, creative use of existing facilities, such as sharing cars and taxi arrangements. Sadly, the days of the village bus cannot come back for most rural communities. Too many people own cars, which traps the poorest and most underprivileged members of our society in the villages, unable to leave them to work, to shop or for recreational purposes. The new proposals are welcome, as they seek to correct a trend that cannot otherwise be addressed.

I welcome the powers on crime prevention. Several parishes in my area are already adopting certain measures, such as giving remuneration to neighbourhood watch co-ordinators, which may or may not be legal at present. I am sure that they will welcome the provisions in the Bill. The installation of closed circuit television cameras may be a bit much to ask in small village communities, considering not only the capital costs but the running costs. But larger town councils will welcome the powers that the Bill will enable them to take.

I have two caveats. First, not all parish councils will take up the new powers. It is not the Government's intention that they should. The powers are discretionary, and councils can decide whether to use them. However, if a significant number of parishes decided to use the powers, parish council expenditure would increase sharply.

Wychavon district council area, which covers the rural parts of my constituency, is fully parished. We have three significant town councils, and the total budget of the parish councils there is about £750,000. I therefore repeat what some Opposition Members have said about not bringing parish precepts within district and county capping arrangements. That would be a harmful development, and I hope that the Minister will assure me that the Government do not intend it to happen.

My second caveat concerns the new responsibilities of parish councils. They will require a great deal more skill and expertise than some councils now have. Many parishes may be reluctant to take up the powers because they feel that they lack the necessary expertise.

Let us consider some of the issues that my local parish councils are confronting now. Whittington is fighting a battle with the Highways Agency about noise, and a great deal of expertise has been built up there. People in Bishampton and Throckmorton have fought an entirely inappropriate planning permission for a chicken farm, and have had to deal with complex laws on environmental impact assessments, as well as European Union involvement in such matters.

I have already talked about Tibberton, and the detailed work that has been done there on the planning process covering housing. Inkberrow fought the Boundary Commission in an attempt to prevent its transfer to the new Redditch parliamentary constituency. In Wyre Piddle, people need to know the details of transport policy, as they fight for their bypass.

Those matters are all time-consuming for parish councils, and if they are to take advantage of the new powers in the Bill the clerks, especially, would benefit from further training. Perhaps the Rural Development Commission could consider the idea; indeed, I believe that it is already doing so. Overall, I welcome what the Bill will do for parish councils. It recognises subsidiarity, decentralisation and the strength of the little platoons.

That thought leads me to that other little platoon dealt with by the Bill—the village shop. Many such shops in and near my constituency are struggling against all the odds. In my eyes, the proprietors of village shops are the real heroes of rural life, providing a crucial service and a social facility that we cannot afford to lose.

Several Opposition Members have said that the relief that we propose for village shops should go to urban shops too. I understand that wish, because there are struggling urban shops in my constituency, too. However, the point is that the rate relief will be a subsidy not to the village shop proprietor but to the community, to keep that crucial community facility alive. That is the distinction.

[Mr. Peter Luff]

Ultimately, the Government have to draw the line somewhere. There are all kinds of things that we would like to do if resources were unlimited, but as they are not, I believe that the Government are striking the right balance. The rate relief proposal will often make a real difference to village shops.

Some people have underplayed the significance of rate relief to those shops. The Association of Metropolitan Authorities, for example, seems to think that it does not matter. I disagree. Some shops in my constituency are still awaiting the phasing out of transitional UBR relief, and at present the prospect for them is one of increasing business rates. The Bill will wipe out that prospect, which will be greatly welcomed by the shops.

Figures are missing from the Bill, but I understand that the Government intend to set the rateable value limit below £5,000 and to provide for mandatory 50 per cent. relief for such businesses. The discretionary scheme for a 50 per cent. top-up for local authorities must be welcome. I also notice that, whichever way we put it, only 25 per cent. of the 50 per cent.—that is, 12.5 per cent. of the total—will fall to local authorities, the rest being borne by the rate fund or by the Exchequer, depending on which interpretation one prefers.

I welcome all that, and I sincerely hope that the village shops in my constituency will benefit from both halves of the equation, the mandatory and the discretionary. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on such matters, praised the record of councils run by his party in that regard. The Lib-Lab pact that runs Wychavon council does not have an especially good record on hardship relief. Only a tiny handful of shops get help.

Wychavon is a cash-rich district, because of the wise policies of the Government, especially the policy for the transfer of council housing to local housing associations, which were pursued by the previous Conservative Administration. The council has enough money to give the relief, so I sincerely hope that, when the Bill becomes an Act, it will make a rapid commitment to use its resources to provide the tiny additional sum to increase the limit to 100 per cent.

Despite my welcome for the Bill, I accept what many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Caernarfon, have said: it is not a panacea, and does not solve all the problems of village shops.

I am a great admirer of Tesco, Sainsbury and Safeway. As one of my hon. Friends said, those companies have transformed British retailing; they are among the finest retailers in the world. But at the end of the day they are the enemies of the village shop. We cannot duck that fact.

For example, I wrote to Tesco when the company started running a bus service from a village in my constituency to its new store at Evesham. That stuck a dagger in the heart of the village shop in Peopleton. Tesco found it incomprehensible that I could be worried about the village shop, but I was, because the bus service was limited and inadequate, yet it would take away that extra bit of turnover from the village shop, thus endangering its future.

I opposed Sunday opening for similar reasons. I am sure that that, too, has damaged village shops and small urban shops. I am also concerned about the policy of some of the big supermarkets on "known value items". For a village shop it is difficult to buy many branded goods even as cheaply as the price at which they are sold off the supermarket shelves. The supermarkets stop the manufacturers and wholesalers selling goods at a price that would enable the village shop to compete with them.

That is a scandal, and I hope that the Minister can have a word with the Office of Fair Trading to see whether that body could have a little look at the problem.

Another matter that hon. Members could have mentioned is the new business improvement grant scheme for village shops. Taken together with the relief on business rates, it is a very important development. In fact, the chairman of the Rural Development Commission said in a press release last week:

> "The village shop provides an essential service, particularly for those without ready access to transport, but is under threat . . . This new scheme will complement both our existing advisory service for village shops and the proposed rate relief scheme for which the Government has just introduced a Bill. We believe that the combined effect of these measures will provide the best chance of halting the decline in the number of village shops which we have had for many years."

Combined with the measures in the Bill, the new business improvement grant scheme, which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 28 October, offers more than a ray of hope for many struggling village shops.

Of course, village shops face other threats, too. If, Heaven forfend, there were to be a Labour Administration sometime in the future which proposed the introduction of a minimum wage, what effect it would have on many marginal shops that can at present afford to employ one assistant at a relatively low rate of pay I shudder to think. The implications of a minimum wage for village shops could be very serious.

The National Farmers Union wants clarification on some issues. It has asked how my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State proposes to designate areas as rural for the purposes of the scheme. I am sure that we shall explore that in Committee, although I think that schedule 1 provides the flexibility that those rural communities need. It also asked what might be the position of some farm shops, which act as general stores but are not necessarily located within the boundaries of a designated rural settlement. That is an interesting point.

There is another point on which I would be interested in hearing my hon. Friend the Minister comment. Some of the shops have to pay not only business rates but large sums to have rubbish taken away by district councils. The cost of collecting cardboard cartons has an additional charge over and above the business rate. Perhaps that is another matter to be considered.

Finally, and briefly, I turn to pubs. It is right that we should emphasise them as a crucial component of village life. I attended a reception yesterday that was organised by CAMRA at which that point was made to me very forcibly. It is looking for a mandatory 100 per cent. relief scheme for village pubs, which is a trifle ambitious, to say the least. Pubs play a crucial social and economic role in villages. They provide a cheap and self-financing meeting place for many local groups where, for example, a village hall does not exist, and they are vital to social cohesion. I am told that, at present, business rates account for 6p per pint sold in the average village pub, and that the

total tax per pint is around 54p when one takes account of excise duty, VAT and business rates. Perhaps that is another little platoon that demands a little more support in the Bill.

Nevertheless, the Bill is a good one, it has been introduced by a good Secretary of State and it deserves to make good progress. I certainly have no hesitation in recommending it to the House.

8.32 pm

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): I shall address clauses 5 to 8 and schedule 2, which deal with the rate relief scheme for village shops, and are the only parts that affect Scotland. Like most hon. Members, I give the scheme a cautious welcome. It is, of course, but a drop in the ocean in terms of the community, economic and development needs of rural Scotland, but it is very welcome. I know that it will be welcomed by many of the small shops and post offices that will benefit from it.

The local authority in my constituency estimates that about 75 shops and post offices and another 50 sub-post offices in the Western Isles will be eligible for rate relief under this scheme. That gives the House some impression of the nature of the constituency and the importance of the scheme to helping those shops. They are essential to maintaining community life in what are very remote villages and districts by any standard—even European standards. Any moves that help to prop up the existence of such shops is to be welcomed.

I hope that the scheme will also be of assistance to mobile shops. They are not referred to in the Bill, and I am not quite sure how the scheme would apply to them, since by their very nature they travel from village to village and district to district, but they are just as essential to the lifeblood of remote and rural communities as resident shops. They not only supply produce of various kinds to the different villages they visit, but act as bearers of news, gossip and information from village to village, and help to tie many villages and districts together.

I know that, to people who find it difficult to move out of their villages, because they are elderly, on particularly low incomes or disabled, or face some other difficulty, mobile shops are a welcome sight when they come over the hill. If the Bill can help mobile shops as well, it would be very worth while. I hope that that is a point that we can explore in Committee.

I should like to make a couple of suggestions about how the rate relief scheme might be further improved. Like many others, I believe that the scheme ought to be extended beyond simply ordinary shops or general stores. Pubs have been mentioned. Petrol retail outlets in rural areas also need to be assisted by the scheme.

There is no doubt whatever that local petrol outlets are hugely important in rural areas because, by their nature, such areas do not have a developed public transport network. People rely more heavily on their cars to get around for essential day-to-day living than they do in urban areas, where there is access to tubes, buses, trains and other kinds of public transport. In rural areas, the car is essential to get about, which is why it is important that there is access to petrol—and nearby, so that they do not have to drive large distances to fill their tanks with petrol.

Rural petrol retail outlets are under increasing pressure. The Minister will know that the Trade and Industry Committee studied petrol retailing in its sixth report in the previous Session. One of the issues on which it focused was that great pressure, which is due to rural outlets having to bear increasing costs as a result of new environmental standards and the need to introduce new equipment. That is particularly onerous for people who have a very low turnover.

There is also the problem that the outlets usually have to pay a higher price for wholesale petrol. Those two things together mean that the consumer has to pay a much greater price than that paid in urban areas. I know that that is true throughout the country and not only in Scotland, but it is perhaps particularly true in the highlands and islands.

The gap between rural and urban prices in the highlands and islands is staggering. Last year, for example, the average gap between the price of petrol in the Western Isles and the price on the mainland of Scotland was about 8p per litre—about 36p per gallon. People in rural areas have to pay a great deal more for their petrol. In the Western isles, for example, people have to pay £1 million more a year than they would have to pay for the equivalent amount of petrol in urban areas.

Great pressures and problems bear down on retail petrol outlets in rural areas, especially in the highlands and islands, but to a greater or lesser degree throughout the country. We need to offer those outlets some support, and I hope that that can be done through the Bill.

Recommendation No. 9 in the Trade and Industry Select Committee report suggests that the Government should consider ways in which the taxation levied on petrol could be adjusted to ensure that petrol retailers in rural areas were not disadvantaged. That could be done in different ways: a rebate on the value added tax or duty that the retailers pay would be one method, and giving them access to the rate relief scheme would be another. I hope that we can consider that carefully in Committee, and extend the scope of the scheme in what I believe would be a sensible way.

The balance of the way in which local authorities and central Government pay for the scheme could be adjusted. If the scheme is taken up and both the mandatory and the discretionary elements are employed to the full, the balance would be about 75 per cent. from central Government and 25 per cent. from local authorities. For charities, the balance is slightly better—80 per cent. and 20 per cent. It would make sense to have a similar split in the scheme for rural businesses.

Clause 2 is not a Scottish clause, but I must make some comment on it. It concerns the abolition of sporting rates in England and Wales, and I was baffled by the Government's explanation that it was needed to bring England into line with Scotland. I well remember the Government arguing that the equivalent measure in the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994, which abolished sporting rates in Scotland, was needed to bring the Scottish position in line with the English, so their justification for the current measure seems bizarre.

It is a gross waste of money to provide a blanket exemption for sporting estates, and I warn English and Welsh hon. Members against going down that route. The exemption would account for a quarter of the total cost of the scheme—£5 million out of £20 million—and there is no justification for it on economic, social or community grounds.

[Mr. Calum Macdonald]

Since sporting rates were abolished in Scotland, there has been no evidence whatever of any benefit to rural communities, or that it has helped, as was argued during the passage of the 1994 Act, in the management of the estates. All that has happened is that money has disappeared into the pockets of those who own and control sporting estates—by definition, extremely wealthy people. I hope that the Committee will consider that carefully, and reject the provision.

Clauses 6 to 8, which contain provisions dealing with Crown property, affect Scotland and appear to be sensible in principle, but we shall have to look at the detail and to consider how they bear upon the operations of the Crown Estates Commissioners. I look forward to hearing more about that in Committee.

The Bill represents a small drop in the ocean in terms of the support that rural communities need, but it is a welcome drop.

8.45 pm

Mr. Barry Field (Isle of Wight): My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mrs. Lait), the first lady member of the Government Whips Office, asked me whether I would speak in tonight's debate. No lady is ever to be denied in my life, but one who has such an interesting array of Whips at her disposal certainly commands my riveted attention.

I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to colleagues on both Front Benches, for the fact that I was not here for the opening speeches. I was attending upon one of Her Majesty's Treasury Ministers with the leader and two officers of the Isle of Wight council to discuss the minting of the Isle of Wight ecu, for the illegal sale of which the council is facing prosecution.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned, the Bill is all about subsidiarity. The Isle of Wight council recently spent nearly £15,000 on a MORI poll asking people on the island whether they would like a referendum on independence and how they would vote in such a referendum. On the first question, 71 per cent. said yes; on the second, 44 per cent. said that they would be against the independence of the Isle of Wight, 33 per cent. said that they would be in favour, 17 per cent. said that they did not know enough about it and 1 per cent. said that they would not vote.

It seems not untypical of the Liberal Democrats that the council now wishes to have an Act of Parliament allowing a referendum on independence, which would cost about £120,000, in order to pose a question to which it already has the answer, because a large majority have already said that they do not want independence. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats' prospective parliamentary candidate accused the leader and deputy leader of the council of forming a breakaway party that had not been authorised by Cowley street. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will therefore realise that subsidiarity is high on the agenda on the Isle of Wight at the moment.

Rating is at the heart of the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith) gave an excellent exposition of the merits of the business rate as it stands. He left out only one important point, a point that, if I may say so, is often missed by the Government. The fashion of the day when I came into the House—it was parroted throughout the country and not only in political circles—was to ask what the Government were doing for our manufacturing industry, yet so many people forget that the legislation setting up the business rate favoured, and still favours, manufacturing premises. I have not found a single manufacturer on the Isle of Wight who wants to do away with the business rate.

I can explain that to the House and give ample illustrations: the rates on the Isle of Wight were uncompetitive, we could not get people to invest in the island and set up factories there, and many of the large multiples and international companies were considering moving away to their spare capacity in other parts of the country.

Today, the Isle of Wight's business rates are pari passu—four square—with those of the rest of the nation, which is very helpful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield also said, that gives businesses the opportunity to plan their budgets in advance. That is to say nothing of the extraordinary increases in the old business rate when the Liberal Democrat council had the matter all to itself.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel)—or is it Papworth, I can never remember which it is, but I know that it is something to do with bypasses—mentioned that Liberal Democrat councils were used to giving rate relief. When he generously gave way, I pointed out that I had never known the Isle of Wight council to use that facility.

When I was elected to the House, the Liberal Democrats suddenly started asking about the village shops that were shutting, and asked why I was not doing something about it. I pointed out to my local councillors that they already had the power to do something if they wished. There is nothing Liberal Democrats hate more than being given a solution that bursts the balloon of their protest and takes away the oxygen they need to shout about such matters. They have never used that facility to assist village shops. I have been able on rare occasions to negotiate with the council on behalf of businesses for time for them to pay in exceptional circumstances.

As of tonight, I have a new policy for winning the next general election. It is to be nice to Department of the Environment Ministers. There is no Department I have spent more time kicking, screaming and shouting at since I came into the House. If there is one outstanding reform that the nation needs, it is an end to the annual junket that runs from local authorities to Marsham street and back. Year in, year out it costs the nation millions of pounds and is ineffective.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) put through the House the order that created the Isle of Wight unitary council, he ran from the Chamber with my protestations about the problems of the electoral cycle of the unitary council and the parish councils ringing in his ears. Such was my angst, I even offered him a free demonstration of one of my company's products. I should at this point declare my interest in both beer and burials.

Parish councils bring Government nearer to the people. They have never been capped, because they act responsibly. In many parts of the country, they are unpolitical. In my constituency, there is a strong tradition of not standing for parish and town councils on a political ticket, even when candidates are already elected party

political representatives of local councils. It gives a much better standard of decision-making at the grass roots when people hang their political hats up outside the door on parish councils. My constituency much appreciates that.

Clause 20 more or less restores the position that existed before we passed the legislation that created the Local Government Commission and the unitary authorities. I welcome that. It is rare for a Member to have a Government Bill that is almost entirely and exclusively dedicated to his constituency, but that is the case with the alignment of the electoral cycle in the Bill.

Clause 11 allows a petition by the community to set up a parish council. It is unclear whether a time scale is involved, though some of the wording suggests that, where a community has already made a petition, it will suffice. Is a time scale involved? My hon. Friend the Minister knows, because of my representations, that East Cowes has made a petition. We all support its having a parish or town council. Will it have to go through the exercise afresh?

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Luff) talked about planning and parish councils. When I was elected for the Isle of Wight, I met our chief planning officer and pointed out that, if he required people seeking planning permission to bring an extra set of plans when they made their applications, it could be distributed to parish councils, which would involve them much more in the process. He said that he did not believe that it could be done, because it was ultra vires and outside the law. I pointed out that, when I had been a district councillor, we had required it.

Most people who wanted planning permission would not baulk at the legality of what was involved and would provide the extra set. Since we adopted that on the Isle of Wight at my suggestion, I have not heard of any developer or architect who has baulked at supplying additional plans for the parish council, so that it can be fully consulted in the planning process.

Clause 20, as the hon. Member for Newbury said, exclusively affects the Isle of Wight. It might be thought that there would be other cases, but we are the only unitary authority where the electoral cycles do not match. I welcome the fact that the Bill deals with that. On the Isle of Wight, we have many tiny parish councils whose precept comes to less than would their election costs if they had to have stand-alone elections. That is nonsense.

I should have been on the island tonight with the deputy chief constable for a first meeting about some neighbourhood watch arrangements. I know how much the Bill's anti-crime measures, such as closed circuit television and the appointment of parish constables, will be welcomed. Hon. Members with mixed rural and urban constituencies such as mine will have had representations from the community, generally speaking, about anti-social behaviour and vandalism rather than serious crime. The parish council can play a useful role in that respect.

We must guard against the district councils walking away from their responsibilities, and leaving it by default to the parish councils to get on with some of these duties. That would be wrong.

Rating relief for shops is welcome. Several hon. Members have asked about the pubs. In some cases, the pub has a dual role as village shop. I hope that that will not preclude them from this welcome rate relief.

Finally, clause 3 activates the Government's long-standing policy of abolishing Crown immunity and Crown exemption. I welcome that, for a number of reasons. On the Isle of Wight, the Home Office owns the Albany, Camp Hill and Parkhurst residential estates, including roads and street lighting. Now the Home Office is trying to hand over the ownership to local residents.

I welcome the abolition of Crown exemption because of the major problem that arose when I entered the House in 1987, when I was landed with the difficulty that rating valuation officers had misjudged the rates on what were in the main residential properties for prison officers. The mistake amounted to several pounds per head of the population of the Isle of Wight.

I went to see Nick Ridley, who told me that the problem had nothing to do with him: I should go and see the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I went to see Nigel Lawson, who told me that it was nothing to do with him: I should go and see Nick Ridley. I am sometimes asked why I still languish on the Back Benches. It is because I shuttled endlessly between those two gentlemen and made myself extremely unpopular with them, which killed my prospects of advancement.

Eventually I was told that there was no legislative mechanism to put this major problem right. What was more, it had never occurred before. In desperation, I got in touch with the Cabinet Secretary. I felt that my constituents were getting a raw deal, and that no one wanted to help me out with it. In the end a solution was found; I was never allowed to be privy to what it was, but the debt was written off. That explains why I welcome the abolition of Crown exemption.

No speech of mine mentioning parish councils would be complete without paying tribute to Lord Mottistone, who has been an ardent champion of the cause of parish councils. He was chairman of the Parish and Town Council Association of the Isle of Wight, and his family enjoyed a long association with the councils as well. He tried to promote a private Member's Bill in the other place with the intention of marrying up these election dates. In no small measure, clause 20 is a tribute to his efforts.

This Bill is about a way of life and a form of government which are for ever England. It will ensure the continuation of that way of life on the Isle of Wight and in the other English shire counties.

9.1 pm

Mr. Nick Ainger (Pembroke): I do not know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you were in the Chamber earlier this afternoon when I raised a point of order about the closure of the Gulf refinery in my constituency, which was announced this morning. It is planned to close it by the summer of 1997, with the loss of 350 direct jobs and a similar number of indirect jobs.

My constituency, a peripheral part of the United Kingdom, has over the past five years suffered defence cuts that have meant 1,050 job losses in defence establishments both in the constituency and in neighbouring ones. There have also been job losses in the energy sector, another pillar of the local economy, totalling 400 over the past five years. In the food production and processing sector, the third pillar of our local economy, we suffered the closure of the Whitland creamery, in 1994, and we are now suffering the effects of the BSE crisis.

[Mr. Nick Ainger]

The fourth pillar is tourism, which this year was hit by the Sea Empress spillage. Cardiff business school calculates that that resulted in a loss to the local economy of between £21 million and £30 million this year, with the consequential loss of between 1,100 and 1,400 jobs in the holiday season.

The cumulative effects of all that have been catastrophic, particularly for unemployment. In September this year, male unemployment in Milford Haven on a narrow base rate was 26 per cent., in Fishguard it was 20 per cent., in Pembroke Dock it was 20 per cent., and in Tenby, 22 per cent. The report produced by Cardiff business school and the Institute of Rural Studies in Aberystwyth also shows that, before the Sea Empress disaster, average income per head in rural west Wales was 72 per cent. of the European average, making it as poor as many parts of Portugal—which, along with Greece, is the poorest country in the European Union.

I represent a rural seat, because all the jobcentres that I have quoted in my constituency cover rural areas as well as the urban areas of particular towns, so I welcome anything that could alleviate some of the problems that my constituents face.

I am disappointed with the Bill, not precisely because of what it does, but because of what it does not do. It does not take on any of the major issues identified by the Government in their rural White Paper, nor in the responses from various rural organisations in England and those received in response to the Welsh Office rural White Paper. The scope of the Bill is extremely limited, and it does not get to grips with some of the fundamental problems that Wales in particular faces.

I was somewhat amused by the comments of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith), who said that the problems faced by those in the rural areas of his constituency were caused by success. He said that, because people could afford a car, they could travel to the supermarket 10 miles away, thus depriving the local community shop of income. That is certainly not the case in my constituency.

The sad fact is that, two years ago, the Employment Service conducted a survey on behalf of the local leading pressure group, South Pembrokeshire Action for Rural Communities, in which it identified the fact that lack of transport was one of the main reasons why people remained unemployed or were unable to upgrade their skills on training schemes. It discovered that people could not get to a job even if one was available, and that they could not attend a training scheme even if one was offered to them, because of the Government's failure to ensure that we have reasonable transport services throughout our rural communities.

A survey carried out by Cardiff business school discovered that those on low incomes remained so poor because, even though they had a job, they had to pay car insurance, car tax and the high price of petrol for a car that they could not really afford, but which they kept because, without it, they could not get to work. Many of those people were going without to keep their car on the road. That is the reality for many in rural areas, particularly in Wales.

I welcome the limited proposals in the Bill, although I have certain concerns about some of the details. Bearing in mind the limited amount of cash that will be available under the mandatory scheme, it is surprising that it will not be more closely targeted. It is quite possible that a successful shop in a village, which makes a reasonable turnover, will receive rate relief under the mandatory scheme because it is the only shopping outlet in that village. Unless we start targeting that limited resource, I am afraid that other, perhaps more deserving, shops and garages might go without. In Committee, we shall have to examine closely whether it is right to offer relief according to a blanket definition which means that, if a shop is the sole outlet in a community with a population of less than 3,000, it is automatically entitled to that rate relief.

As many hon. Members said, there are serious problems in areas that people from a city would regard as rural, but which the relevant local authority might regard as urban. Today, I asked my staff to carry out a small survey in two towns in my constituency, Pembroke Dock and Milford Haven. I asked them to count how many shops were boarded up, how many had "To Let" signs up and how many were unoccupied.

In Pembroke Dock this afternoon, 39 shops were either to let, boarded up or unoccupied and a further 16 units in a small shopping mall were also vacant. In Milford Haven, 15 shops were unoccupied or boarded up. That shows that we are examining the problems not only of purely rural areas, but of those not especially large towns where people from rural areas shop. The Government should address the crisis in the retail sector in many of our small towns. It is rather unfair that successful shops outside so-called urban areas will receive rate relief, whereas those suffering real problems in small towns will get no help at all.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) has returned, because my next point relates to what he said about garages. If certain bypass schemes go ahead, some villages in my constituency in which the village garage is also the village shop will face problems, because their garage-cum-shop will be bypassed along with the rest of the village. Obviously, a significant part of such outlets' income derives from passing trade, and when that traffic has gone, because the trunk road will go round and not through the village, they will face real difficulties. The Committee should examine that issue because there is a deliberate policy on trunk roads that affects such village shops, especially those that also serve as garages.

As I explained, Whitland was a thriving town until November 1994. It had a large creamery that employed 156 people, and most of those people lived in the town. As a result of the deregulation of the milk market, that creamery was closed by Dairy Crest, and 156 people lost their jobs. Earlier this year, the town was bypassed and now, instead of going through the centre of the town, the A14 passes to the north. From an environmental point of view, that is undoubtedly a benefit; it is also an economic benefit, because it speeds up traffic between the far west of Pembrokeshire and the M4 corridor. However, the impact on the town centre—its shops, pubs, takeaways and garages—has been catastrophic.

The irony is that, under the present arrangements, the creamery, which is still owned by Dairy Crest and which the company refuses to sell, lease or otherwise put on the

market, has received rate relief; whereas the poor shops, garages, takeaways and other outlets have received no help whatever. That is another matter which the Committee should seriously examine.

I recently asked the Post Office how many post offices had closed in rural west Wales, and I was told that six had closed this year alone—in Rhyd Lewis, Aberaeron, Freshwater East, Tufton, Bosherston and Fron Deg Terrace. I do not think that anything in the Bill will encourage anyone to take on those franchises, reopen those post offices and provide a vital service to people in those villages. Another opportunity has been missed to establish essential services. Elderly people and those on benefit need a local post office that is operational.

I shall now discuss community councils, as we call them in Wales. Wales is completely covered by community and town councils. I served on the Committee on the Local Government (Wales) Bill, which addressed many of the issues that are addressed in, I think, part III of the Bill, which relates purely to England. I am a great supporter of community councils, and I welcome some of the moves in the Bill towards increased responsibilities and powers for community councils, but we must be realistic.

Many of the new powers relate to improving transport facilities. Castlemartin community council in my constituency has 121 electors. It has serious transport problems; almost its only remaining public transport is a post bus. Those 121 electors would not be too happy with their community council if it suddenly started levying a rate to provide a vital service. They would appreciate that service, but those 121 people would not like the bill that they would have to pick up.

In that case, the issue is too great for a community council, and can be tackled only by the county council, but its hands are tied because it is in effect capped by the Welsh Office. It cannot expend the money necessary to provide that community with a reasonable transport service.

Mr. Rendel: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the worries about the extra powers that the Bill would give to parish councils is that, although parish councils are not capped, the money that they spend counts against the capping limit for the higher-level council, so any money that those poor 121 electors might be asked to spend will have to be deducted from the spending of the higher-level council?

Mr. Ainger: I was going to make that point, and I can illustrate it. In 1994, Pembroke Dock town council was levying a rate that was higher than the district council rate for various purposes. As the hon. Gentleman says, we run the risk that, although the Bill would give those extra powers and allow community councils to levy a rate, it would have a knock-on effect on the upper tier of the local authority.

In Committee on the Local Government (Wales) Bill, I was worried—I still am—about the cost of democracy in community councils and town councils. If a member resigns or dies and there is a contest, the election can cost about £1,000. In Castlemartin, with 121 electors, if people decide that they want to hold an election, because everyone is concerned about a local issue and there are two points of view, that election almost bankrupts the community council. People are therefore reluctant to engage in local democracy because they are advised, "Do you realise that, if you do contest this seat and we hold an election, it will cost £1,000?" That problem must be tackled if we are to have vital local government at all levels.

The Bill presented a great opportunity—which has been lost—to tackle many of the profound problems that directly affect rural areas, especially in relation to economic activity. Why is there no rate relief for small business units, which would be a way to create and sustain jobs in rural communities? Why is there no rate relief for conversion of redundant farm buildings? Why has the Welsh Office systematically cut grants to village halls, which are often the only place where young people, the elderly, toddler groups and so on can meet? Although there is a token gesture towards education in rural areas through our small rural schools, why are local authorities constantly told that they must cut surplus places? That is the biggest threat of all to the small rural schools.

There have been cuts in support for the Leader groups, which are doing excellent work throughout rural England and Wales and addressing issues at the grass roots. In many cases, they are creating excellent training opportunities and in some cases good jobs as well. In 1995-96, £4 million was cut from support for rural initiatives in Wales. As a direct result, European money could not come into rural Wales. That is a travesty.

Although I welcome some of the measures in the Bill, I feel that an enormous opportunity has been lost.

9.20 pm

Ms Hilary Armstrong (North–West Durham): We have had an interesting debate. I originally thought that the Committee stage would be short, but as almost all Members who have spoken, on both sides of the House, have said that there are serious problems of definition in the Bill and flaws that will have to be worked out in Committee, I am beginning to wonder whether the short time between now and the election will be sufficient to sort it all out. Some of us hope that the Government will see sense and call an early election. It is interesting that all hon. Members who have spoken referred to the shortcomings of the Bill. They recognised that, although it is acceptable to Members in all parts of the House, it is a narrow measure.

I do not have a pecuniary interest, but I always like to make it clear to the House where I am coming from, so to speak, so I should state that I am vice-president of the National Association of Local Councils and president of the Durham branch of the Association of Parish and Town Councils.

Mr. Curry: Where is the hon. Lady's chain of office?

Ms Armstrong: We do not go in for that sort of thing in Durham, but I hope that I have made clear my commitment to local and parish councils.

The Secretary of State was mistaken when he said that some people did not understand rural areas and were not concerned. He almost implied that only Conservative Members were competent to speak about rural areas. The debate has shown that there is considerable knowledge, experience and commitment to a living, thriving rural environment. That is evident on both sides of the House.

[Ms Armstrong]

Members from Scotland and Wales as well as from England have stated their determination that rural life in their constituencies should thrive and develop, but they recognised that the measures in the Bill were minuscule relative to the needs of rural areas in the 21st century.

Interestingly, the debate has highlighted the differences in our experience of rural life. That inevitably means that we have different ideas of what needs to be done to enable the community to flourish in the next century. I was particularly struck by the comments by the hon. Members for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) and for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith), who described a type of rural life which certainly exists but which is not the only form of rural life and which in my experience is not the predominant form of rural life for many people living in villages. If it were, we would face a difficult future, because both hon. Members described many people who lived in rural areas but who were making their living outside those areas and commuted to work.

The very high use of cars is leading to problems in rural areas. In the Weardale area of my constituency, there is one road. There is a railway line, but it is now unused; that is another story and another tragedy. There is one road, and the increased use of that road is leading to enormous difficulties, both for the industries in the dale and for the people living there. If we have the idea that rural life in Britain can prosper only by people making their living and doing the main things that sustain their lives, such as shopping, outside the rural area, we shall make rural areas intolerable places in which to live. The people who live there now will move back to the towns because they do not want such a quality of life. My belief, and that of many hon. Members on both sides of the House, is that that is far too simplistic a view of what is going on in rural Britain today.

The Rural Development Commission carried out a survey in 1994 which cautioned all of us not to be glib about the nature of rural life. The survey shows that it is much more complex, that different patterns are emerging and that we as decision-makers need to think about the kind of communities that we shall encourage by the measures that we take. The Bill should have been approached in that way, but I am not sure that that has been the major motivation behind it.

The Rural Development Commission's survey makes it clear that many of the new incomers to rural areas are people on low incomes. That suggests that many of them are elderly people on fixed incomes who are moving back to their home areas or to the area where they have had a caravan. That is the common theme in Weardale. Sometimes they come to the area with an over-rosy picture of what life will be like there in their declining years. As they have low incomes, they desperately need resources and services in their locality. Many of them do not have cars or, if they do, the cars are on their last legs—or wheels. As those people get older, they are less capable of maintaining the car and they get to the stage when they cannot use it.

I was horrified to hear the hon. Member for Hexham say that the lack of a car did not matter in his constituency, because his constituents now had the air ambulance. The head of the Northumberland ambulance service tried to endear a public meeting in my constituency to the idea that his ambulance service would do a much better job if it took over Durham's ambulance service. He talked about the air ambulance, and one person in the audience said that the only reason people would need an air ambulance would be if all the amenities were closed and they were not able to get to them.

The closure of the local accident and emergency unit at Shotley Bridge hospital has led to many problems and the people in the top end of the Tyne valley whom I represent have enormous difficulties because of it. If they are taken by ambulance to the accident and emergency service, they are then left to find their own way home. I have a letter from one constituent who was charged £14 to travel 15 miles in the middle of the night because he had ended up in hospital after an accident and there was no ambulance to take him home.

It is not true to say that people in my region do not face problems because of the distances involved and do not feel isolated. Those problems exist. What is happening in the health service in my region is no different from what is happening in other regions. The closure of health care units adds to the difficulties of local people, but health is not the only issue to which those problems relate.

My experience of living in a rural area is different from the picture painted by Conservative Members, but it is not all bleak: many people enjoy living in rural areas and want to be able to continue to do so. We should address the issues dealt with by the Bill on that basis.

If we are to have a rural life that is sustainable, and if we are to manage the environment and the land effectively, we must have a working life. The number of small businesses and village shops that have had to close in recent years is staggering. The measures to save small village shops are welcome but, my goodness, we have had to wait until so many of them have closed. We must now consider not only how to save those village shops, but how to make them viable and able to meet the needs of rural communities in the next century. I am disappointed by the approach taken in the Bill. It does not look forward and consider how most effectively to support village shops and businesses to ensure that they can play their role not only for the present generation but for the next.

The Government should have thought more about a partnership approach, and should have developed their proposals in that context. In some areas of the country, local authorities together with local people are already working hard on imaginative and innovative schemes, especially schemes involving small businesses. Measures are being taken to encourage young people to get jobs. If we cannot create opportunities for young people, our rural areas will become the preserve of older people and those who are getting older. If young people are unable to find work and opportunities, they will leave. I know how many people have left my area in the relatively short time that I have been in the House. I know how many young people have been driven out of my constituency because of the decline of industrial development in the dales, in the rural areas around Consett and in Consett itself.

We have heard far too little from the Government about the work of local authorities in finding ways to encourage new industry and small businesses. Given the importance of small businesses, and given the critical importance of economic regeneration to small businesses, I am amazed that the Government have come forward with so little. Small businesses in rural areas will be encouraged not only by the presence of village shops but by the overall rural environment.

However, as I have said, village shops can develop to meet the challenges of the future. In Hertfordshire, for example, centres have been established in village shops and in "telecottages" through the collaborative initiative of all local government tiers—district, county and parish—showing what can be accomplished by adapting a village shop or community facility to the changing needs and demands of a new century. Such initiatives prove that rural businesses can thrive. Perhaps there will be information centres and other facilities in village shops that will involve not only village shop owners but others in offering new opportunities in rural areas.

The Government have taken so many actions that have frustrated the efforts of so many people. Many of my constituents have been unable to pursue training or other schemes to get them back into work because of the Government's benefits rules, which have proved a major disincentive, especially for those who wish to undertake part-time training.

The Government have failed to tackle other issues in reducing unemployment. They have made it increasingly difficult for farmers' wives in my constituency, for example, who have come to see me anxious about whether their children of school-leaving age will have any work opportunities in the dale. Those women know that there must be support for initiatives to ensure that the dales and other rural areas can survive and grow.

I am also very disappointed about the Government's work on parish councils—which I support, as I have already made clear. I find it incredible that it is necessary for the Bill to state that Parliament will allow parish councils to organise car-sharing schemes or to take initiatives to tackle rural crime. Rural crime is a desperately important issue. In my area, we have worked with the police and with parish and district councils to establish a rural crime watch.

In Burnhope—I assume that this is one of the examples used by Ministers—we have a parish bobby who is paid by the parish council. Burnhope is an old, very isolated mining village, with incredibly high levels of poverty and deprivation. The situation is much worse there than in many other villages in my constituency, which itself has the lowest income per household of any constituency in England.

There is poverty and deprivation in rural areas, but people want to live and work in the areas in which they grew up. Our job is to provide the framework so that they can do that. Only when we deliver that framework will we be able to ensure that we look after the land—the green and pleasant land in which we live—so that it is maintained for future generations. The Government have missed many opportunities in the Bill, but the Opposition will table amendments in Committee to ensure that the Government consider those opportunities.

I hope that the Government will also examine other proposals affecting rural areas, such as the nursery voucher scheme, which is creating havoc in the rural areas of Norfolk and will create havoc across the country. There are enormous opportunities to make child care available, which will greatly assist rural women who want to end their children's isolation so that they can have a proper start in life.

The Government must examine their policies so that they encourage a thriving existence for everyone in rural areas, not just those with cars. Many rural areas have low car ownership and people living in those areas have as much right to our attention as anyone else. If we are to provide them with real opportunities, we need a Government who will take a more serious approach to those difficulties than that taken in the Bill. I suspect that the present Government will not do that, and I look forward to being a member of a Government who will find a solution.

9.39 pm

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration (Mr. David Curry): It may assist the House if I begin by trying to answer some of the questions of fact and interpretation that have been raised in the debate.

The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) asked why the measure did not embrace Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland does not have a system of parishes analogous to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is currently undergoing a rating revaluation, so it would not be easy to graft such a Bill on to the existing structure of legislation in Northern Ireland. No doubt the hon. Gentleman may wish to discuss with my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland his interest in measures that would have a similar effect to the Bill.

The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) asked which parts of England, Scotland and Wales were covered by the Bill. The complicated answer involves the way in which Bills are drafted in order to observe legal technicalities. I could give him a detailed explanation which would leave him better informed, but possibly none the wiser. Perhaps it would be easier for me simply to list the parts of the Bill and the areas to which they apply. I can do that with certainty.

The village shop rate relief applies to England, Wales and Scotland. The abolition of duty on sporting rights applies to England and Wales, as there is already a similar measure for Scotland. The abolition of Crown exemption applies to England, Wales and Scotland, as does the retention of the exemption for visiting forces. The creation and review of parish arrangements is confined to England, as is the consultation framework for parishes, but the transport and crime prevention powers for parishes apply to England and Wales.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman is satisfied with an exhaustive topographical explanation of the Bill. I counsel him not to seek a detailed explanation. He can have one if he wants, but he will find it truly helpful only if he is deeply insomniac.

It may also be helpful if I cover some of the basic elements of the Bill, as I can provide clarifications and explanations that may save us time elsewhere. The village shop relief applies to the only shop that is a general store, selling food, hardware and household goods, or a post office. It will get a 50 per cent. mandatory relief. If there is a post office that is a general store and there is another general store in the village, the relief will apply to the post office, although the local authority will have the discretion to apply it to the second store as well.

Discretionary relief can be used to increase the 50 per cent. mandatory relief to the designated store.

Mr. Rendel: I seek clarification on that point. If a joint village store and post office is the only post office in the village, is the rate relief given only on the post office element of the store or on the total value of the property?

Mr. Curry: Rate relief is given on the total value of the property, as I shall explain in more detail.

Mr. Dobson: I am genuinely trying to be helpful. Will the Minister consider a problem that may arise when the proposals in the Bill are put through by local councils? At the moment, auditors interpret any advocacy by a councillor of action to be taken in the ward or district that they represent as disqualifiable interest. Councillors from particular villages may well wish to advocate some of the proposals that have been put forward today. Under current auditor's rulings, they would not be allowed to advocate them or be present at a meeting at which they were discussed, still less vote on them.

Mr. Curry: The hon. Gentleman has raised a serious point. As he knows, the Nolan committee is considering local government issues. The Government's submission to that committee will be published shortly. I shall undertake to consider what the hon. Gentleman has said—his point covers many issues—in the light of the discussions that are taking place.

Other stores can qualify for discretionary relief, not just the pub, the garage or the pharmacist. The power is deliberately widely drawn to give the local authority discretion. Any business can be included if it is important to the local community—the butcher, the baker or, for the sake of argument, the sawmill rather than the candlestick maker.

In our consultation, we suggested a ceiling of £5,000 in rateable value for the mandatory element and £10,000 for discretionary relief. The consultation showed a general agreement with those figures. In the light of the broad consensus that they achieved, I suspect that my right hon. Friend will probably settle on them.

The hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) asked about mobile shops. They are almost certainly not rated at the moment, although a central storage element, if they have one, may be. I am happy to consider that more closely and write to the hon. Gentleman if I need to qualify what I have said.

We think that some 30,000 businesses will benefit from the two schemes.

Mr. Wigley: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because I have been persistent on some points today. Will he confirm that it is possible to have several settlements—the term used in schedule 1—in one parish or community? If there are post offices in several villages in one community, will they all qualify?

Mr. Curry: I shall come to that. We have defined a rural area. It will be for the local authority to identify the settlements lying within that area. There may be more than one settlement in a defined rural area. The answer is therefore yes.

A local authority can already grant charitable relief, discretionary relief and hardship relief. None of those powers is affected by the new powers.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson), who is not in her place, asked about settlements in metropolitan areas. Nothing in the Bill prevents a village in a metropolitan area from being deemed eligible. We will follow the definitions produced as a result of consultation under the Housing Act 1996, which lists 30 or so areas in South Yorkshire, for example, designated as rural areas.

Any settlement of no more than 3,000 people within one of those parishes is eligible, each one being eligible separately. I know that that will also interest many of my hon. Friends. I understand that the hon. Member for Hillsborough has explained that she cannot be present now because she is in a Select Committee. It is for the local authority to define the curtilage of a settlement.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) asked where the money comes from. I suppose that I had better answer.

The money comes from the pool, which is redistributed. Under the local government financial system—with which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South will be intimately familiar—any cut in the amount available for distribution under the business rates is compensated for under the revenue support grant. The money comes from the Exchequer, and is not a charge upon what is distributed in the pool.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon (Mr. Coombs) asked about a lower limit, a part-time post office in a garage, and a newly provided store. The answers are no, yes and yes. He will forgive my shorthand, but I think the answers are satisfactory.

A number of questions were raised on parishing. There are essentially three routes into parishing. First, a district council can undertake a review and make a recommendation to the Secretary of State, who then makes the necessary orders to create the parish. The district council then makes the orders to create the parish council. Secondly, a petition, by either a minimum of 250 electors or 10 per cent. of the electors in the area of the proposed parish, that defines where they want the boundaries to lie, goes to the district council, which can comment. These comments are then sent to the Secretary of State for a decision.

Sir Donald Thompson (Calder Valley): Will my right hon. Friend include metropolitan councils in what he is saying?

Mr. Curry: Not in all of what I am saying, but I shall refer to metropolitan councils in a moment, when my hon. Friend will be as satisfied with what I have to say as he was with what I have just said.

The third route is for the Secretary of State to direct the Local Government Commission to carry out a parish review from scratch, or where there is some dispute about the need for a parish. In that case, the Local Government Commission can investigate and make a recommendation.

Mr. Barry Field: My right hon. Friend has referred to petitions. If a community has already petitioned before the passing of this legislation, will that stand good, or will it have to do it all again?

Mr. Curry: We would expect a new petition if one had been rejected, and there must be a two-year interval between petitions. Parishes in metropolitan areas are exactly the same as those I have described in the countryside, because, in law, a metropolitan council is a district council. There will be no upper limit to population size, except where the creation of a parish would dominate an entire district.

The parish council can currently precept £3.50 per elector for general purposes, such as recreation or the upkeep of the village hall. It will now be able to precept above that for the reasons specified by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today. There was a question about traffic calming and the relationship between parish councils and the Highways Authority. The parish council will be able to support traffic calming projects, provided it has the consent of the Highways Authority, which will carry out the work. Other than the parish council opting to lie in the middle of the road, as it were, it will be able to contribute to the work.

It is worth remembering that, in trying to enhance the roles of parish councils, the recent national parks legislation created a route by which people from the national parks and local parish councils could serve on the national park authority. In my local national park in the Yorkshire dales, the new authority that will come into being next spring contains people who have come through a sort of parish electoral college to enhance the views of local people in the national park.

In areas such as that—where planning issues are particularly sensitive—there is great resentment at the feeling that decisions are too often made by people who do not live in the park and who are not closely in touch with people who know the real problems, including the need to earn a livelihood in the park as well as to provide a refuge for visitors.

Mr. Simon Coombs: Is it the Government's intention that planning site visits should be open to parish councillors to put their points of view while district councillors are visiting particular areas within the parish?

Mr. Curry: Under the consultation proposals, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State intends that parishes should participate fully in planning procedures by means of a voluntary arrangement with the planning authorities. We will consider guidance that will help that process, and if the voluntary system were to fail and people did not apply it with good will, my right hon. Friend would necessarily have to consider using his powers to move towards a more mandatory system. Our intention is that people make a habit of working sensibly together on planning, which is likely to be the most sensitive issue.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State observed earlier—I was not able to intervene in his speech—the problem is that councils such as Lancashire county council totally ignore parish councils. They consult, but they write the parishes' opinions off. Councils in Garstang and Catterall, which have strong views, are totally disregarded by Lancashire county council.

Mr. Curry: The Bill contains powers to formalise, if necessary, the consultations that are required. We hope that that will not be necessary, and that the Bill will be sufficient to make it clear to local authorities that we expect pragmatic action.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: The councils will ignore it.

Mr. Curry: If they choose to ignore the Bill, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have the remedies to ensure that it does not continue to be ignored. I am sure that he would not hesitate to use those powers.

The electoral cycle for parishes—the unitary districts—will fall into place once the unitary councils have been established. The normal electoral cycles will come into sync, and I will give the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) details in due course.

Mr. Rendel: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Curry: I will send details to the hon. Gentleman. I have allowed many interventions, and I have four minutes left to get through three quarters of the Bill, so I hope he will excuse me.

I do not wish to return to site value rating. We mentioned it last week, and the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friend the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) cringed visibly. That system considers the development potential and values a site at that potential. It does mean that a village bank and Dorothy's olde tea shoppe next door would pay the same rates and that the latter would suffer as a consequence. The system that the hon. Member for Newbury described is the existing rating system, and he should consider what he means by the policy that his party is supposed to endorse.

There are real dilemmas in the countryside, which none of us can avoid. Planning is difficult, because the countryside is under pressure. People want to preserve it as it is, but the household growth figures will cause real, unavoidable dilemmas. Education will also produce dilemmas. We must not assume that a village school is excellent merely because it is a village school. Many are, but there is a trade-off between the intimacy and community of a village school and the facilities of a slightly larger school. That is self-evident. Access is also not an obvious issue.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Curry: If my hon. Friend will permit me to say so, she has had one bite at the cherry already.

In my constituency, in the three peaks area, access is wearing the footpaths away, and hardcore has to be helicoptered in to reinforce them. The situation with the use of green lanes by four-wheel drive vehicles is even worse. The green lanes spread and death traps are created, in winter conditions, for livestock.

It is true to say that there is not a single countryside—there are hundreds of countrysides in the United Kingdom; there are half a dozen in my constituency. The difference between the vale of York and Upper Wharfedale is enormous. The Pennine dales, the constituency of the hon. Member for North-West Durham (Ms Armstrong), the maritime constituencies of the south-west and the home county constituencies are different in their working patterns, the social mix, the relationship between rural areas and the towns, and transport characteristics.

It is important to observe that diversity. We must not fall into the trap of talking about diversity between urban and rural areas as if there were no diversity within each or, indeed, within shorter distances.

I sometimes felt that the countryside that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras described was a sort of Tolkienesque fairy story peopled with demons of his own creation. The real countryside is not uniformly rich

[Mr. Curry]

and lush, either socially or economically. It does not mean a "Miss Marple" village, but nor does it mean the hon. Gentleman's demon landscape of oppressive landlords, cringing peasantry and exploited youngsters.

We must create a living countryside in which people want to live, where they can earn a decent livelihood and take part in decent recreation. The Bill is designed to deliver that. The need is there, the Government have addressed it, and we shall deliver the results. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND RATING BILL
[MONEY]

Queen's Recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 50A(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Government and Rating Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenses of the Secretary of State incurred in consequence of that Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—*Mr. Anthony Coombs.*]

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND RATING BILL
[WAYS AND MEANS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 50A(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Government and Rating Bill, it is expedient to authorise any increase in the sums payable into the Consolidated Fund resulting from the imposition of liability for non-domestic rates on the Crown.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Special Grant Report

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

That the Special Grant Report (No. 22) (House of Commons Paper No. 16), a copy of which was laid before this House on 23rd October, be approved.

Question agreed to.

Investment Companies

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

That the draft Open-Ended Investment Companies (Investment Companies with Variable Capital) Regulations 1996, which were laid before this House on 17th July, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

Question agreed to.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet at half-past Ten o'clock:

1 in the County Buildings, Cupar, on Monday 25th November to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee;

2 in Scotland on Monday 9th December to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee;

3 at Westminster on Wednesday 11th December;

4 in the City Chambers, Edinburgh, on Monday 13th January to take Questions for oral answer and to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee;

5 in Scotland on Monday 3rd February to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee; and

6 in Scotland on Monday 17th February to take Questions for oral answer and to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombes.]*

PETITION

Arbroath Infirmary

10 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus, East): I fully support the petition on the future of services at Arbroath infirmary in the names of Neil Thomson, Yvonne Cargill and Des Nicoll on behalf of the 8,500 citizens of Arbroath and district who signed their names in support, who demand a better deal for the hospital, and improvements across the range of service provision for the largest population centre in Angus:

To the House of Commons the Petition of residents of Arbroath declares that the maximum level of hospital services for Angus should be provided locally.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Scotland to ensure that an end is brought to the cutbacks and downgrading of services at Arbroath Infirmary so that Arbroath Infirmary and Stracathro can jointly provide major hospital services for Angus until the new Angus District General Hospital is built as a matter of urgency.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

I wish to submit the petition for the people of Arbroath.

To lie upon the Table.

Care of the Elderly (Hillingdon)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Anthony Coombs.]*

10.1 pm

Sir Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): For me, the care of the elderly in Uxbridge and in the borough of Hillingdon as a whole is one of the most important parts of public policy. As president of the Uxbridge Abbeyfield Society, which provides care for many of our senior citizens, I have been able to learn at first hand, and gain valuable insight into, the way in which places are funded and provided in the community.

The recent media coverage of Hillingdon hospital's patient admissions policy has caused unnecessary alarm and distress to my elderly constituents and to the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. Dicks) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Hughes), whose constituencies, with mine, share the hospital's catchment area.

A headline in *The Guardian* at the beginning of October, "Hospitals in cash crisis bar many elderly", triggered a mass of reports in the press and on the radio and television to the effect that Hillingdon hospital was no longer admitting people over 75. The facts behind that health scare are very different. That is why I am raising the matter this evening, and why I invite the comments of my hon. Friend the Minister.

It is also why I want the Government to make it clear beyond any shadow of a doubt, first, that there is no cash crisis at Hillingdon hospital; secondly, that at no time were people over 75 who came from the hospital's catchment area refused admission on the ground of their age; and, thirdly, that the responsibility for funding and providing beds for elderly patients is the responsibility of the local agencies concerned—the hospitals, the local health authority, the local social services department and the local medical committee. It is for them to co-operate and co-ordinate the necessary arrangements to ensure that the necessary accommodation is always available to everyone, irrespective of age.

I was first made aware of the pressure on Hillingdon hospital at a meeting that I had with the chairman of the Hillingdon Hospital NHS trust, Mr. William Glyn-Williams, and the chief executive, Mr. Philip Brown, on 1 October. I was told that the hospital faced the possibility of having to refuse accident and emergency admissions for a short period because the number of elderly patients referred by general practitioners, especially from the north of the borough, was resulting in more than 30 additional admissions each day.

There are 600 beds in Hillingdon hospital and I am told that about 300 of them are occupied by elderly patients. The 30 referrals a day, multiplied by the number of days in the month, was equivalent to 900 bed days a month. That was the scale of the problem that Hillingdon hospital was facing.

I was also told that Mount Vernon hospital in Northwood, in the constituency of Ruislip–Northwood, was not admitting as many patients as it might have done because of the case mix in the hospital, and that it would greatly assist if Hillingdon council's social services department could receive into community care as quickly as possible patients who no longer required hospital treatment and needed to be cared for in community homes or, if insufficient places were available, in independent residential care.

I was very concerned to learn of the situation. I advised the chairman to discuss the matter urgently with the chairman of Mount Vernon and Watford Hospitals NHS trust—a former chairman of Hillingdon health authority—the officers of the authority and the social services department and to sort out the problem. I also offered to arrange a meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister if it was thought that that would help to find a quick solution to the problem.

I heard no more until 8 October, when the chief executive of Hillingdon hospital wrote a letter to general medical practitioners in the north of the borough—areas such as Ruislip, Eastcote, Northwood, Harefield and elsewhere on the borders of the north of the borough—advising them that elderly patients over 75 years old should be referred to the most appropriate local hospital, Mount Vernon.

There is great concern in Ruislip and Northwood at the moment because many elderly people do not like the prospect of being referred to Watford general hospital, which principally admits accident and emergency patients, because they feel that Watford is a long way from Northwood and is not easy for people to visit. There is considerable pressure when a patient cannot be admitted to Mount Vernon to send that patient to Hillingdon, to which, of course, the doctors have to respond.

The letter sent by the chief executive of Hillingdon health authority to doctors was leaked to *The Guardian* and resulted in the highly misleading headlines that I have mentioned and the subsequent alarm that spread throughout my constituency. I have been assured by my hon. Friend the Minister that Hillingdon hospital was not seeking to discriminate on the basis of age but wished to ensure that all patients received safe and effective NHS treatment in the most appropriate location in accordance with their clinical need.

In a programme of public information designed to correct the misleading information that had been given, Hillingdon hospital went to very considerable lengths to reassure the public whom it serves by means of an advertorial in the local press, which appeared for two consecutive weeks. I welcome that initiative, which I hope will go a long way towards dispelling any remaining doubts that elderly people might have about their right to treatment in hospital when they need it, at any time, irrespective of age.

As I have said, I undertook to raise the matter of more community care with the acting director of social services of the borough of Hillingdon and to find out what could be done to place patients in the council's homes and independent homes as quickly as possible. I have done that. The acting director tells me that Hillingdon council has 330 beds in eight homes; in addition, it currently funds 219 permanent residential and nursing placements, has 172 permanent complex home care packages and approximately 100 short-stay residential nursing home care packages. About 70 permanent residential or nursing home care packages are to be made available between the beginning of this month and 31 March next year.

The current community care budget for the elderly is £5 million, and the council intends to allocate another £1.3 million to its community care budget next April.

[Sir Michael Shersby]

I put on record the accommodation that is available, because it was suggested to me that one of the problems facing Hillingdon hospital in discharging elderly patients into the community was Hillingdon social services' slowness to take some patients. Following my discussions with the acting director of social services only today, I am assured that Social Services will take all necessary steps to speed up admissions and to increase the availability of beds.

I am glad to report that, as a result of all that activity, Hillingdon health authority has taken immediate action to reduce significantly the number of Hillingdon residents—56 at the end of September—waiting in hospitals solely for residential and nursing home placement. It will use six of the 12 care beds that it currently funds at Hayes Cottage nursing home, will agree with Hillingdon council how it can assist with the temporary funding of 30 additional nursing and residential home places at a cost of £90,000 this year, and will continue to work with the council to ensure the effective use of all the in-house residential beds and services that provide care in the community.

For 1997-98, there will be further costs to be met by the council, which will be expected to accept the responsibility for funding. I understand that Hillingdon council estimates that it will have to provide £100,000 to fund 30 beds. It is expected that those proposals will allow 30 people currently waiting for a nursing or residential home to be placed by Christmas.

Another six beds are to be made available immediately at Mount Vernon hospital by reopening beds in existing medical wards, which will make possible about 18 additional admissions a month. There will be joint monitoring to ensure the effective implementation of the health authority's short and medium-term plans.

I greatly welcome the fact that it has been agreed that the chief executives of the health authority and of the two trusts and the director of social services will in future meet on a fortnightly basis to keep the situation under review.

Taken over two years, the proposals will represent a cost to the health authority of £283,000 and will better enable the two local hospitals safely to meet this winter's demand for emergency admissions. That point was raised by the chairman of the Hillingdon medical committee, and I hope that he and his colleagues will be reassured that all the necessary steps have been taken.

As president of the Abbeyfield Society, I declare an interest in asking my hon. Friend the Minister why better use cannot be made of Abbeyfield places to provide additional beds for people being discharged from hospital. I tabled some parliamentary questions on that topic that were answered by my hon. Friend's Department as long ago as July, and I was advised that the elderly people who were in Abbeyfield homes before a certain date were protected there but that, for some reason that I cannot quite follow, they could not go into Abbeyfield places after that date.

It is extraordinary that we are in such a situation when a national charity that is well represented locally has some extra places and could take additional patients discharged from hospital. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be kind enough to look into the matter and find whether further steps can be taken to fund places in Abbeyfield homes for patients who are discharged from hospital.

In passing, because it is too good an opportunity to miss, I mention that the Uxbridge Abbeyfield Society has acquired a site in the Greenway, Uxbridge on which it could build a home for about 35 elderly people to live in very good conditions. It is unable to build the home because it cannot get its bid high enough up in the local authority's bidding list, because the local authority has responsibility for families with children, who come ahead of the elderly in budgetary terms and in bidding generally. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will consider that matter, because Uxbridge cannot be alone; there must be other towns and cities where people have voluntarily raised considerable sums to buy land and which are ready to build but are unable to do so because of the way in which the system works.

Finally, 36 extra beds have been provided in the borough of Hillingdon. The pressure on Hillingdon hospital has been relieved. The problem has been solved. The headlines in *The Guardian* and other papers were unjustified. I hope that my elderly constituents and those of my hon. Friends—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West is in his place tonight—will be greatly reassured. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister because I hope that he will be able to give further assurance on these matters.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby). I congratulate him on securing a debate on the important topic of care for the elderly in Hillingdon and on the part that he has played in explaining some of the issues more sensibly than would otherwise have been the case. I know that he speaks on behalf of several colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Hughes).

He is also to be congratulated on securing a debate on health care 50 years to the day after Royal Assent to the Act that established the national health service. We shall see in considering health care in Hillingdon that the founding principles of the NHS are very much alive and well there as they are throughout the country.

It is a pity that the letter written by the chief executive of Hillingdon hospital has been taken out of context and used to generate unnecessary concern about hospital care for local elderly residents. I will put the letter into its proper context later, but first I want to make it absolutely clear—this is the most important point for my hon. Friend's constituents—that there was no question at any time of any Hillingdon resident of whatever age not getting from the NHS the care and treatment demanded by that resident's clinical condition. The health authority and local hospital trusts acted promptly to reassure local people of that.

Hillingdon hospital made it clear that it would under no circumstances decline to treat any patient, elderly or otherwise, and that no patient requiring emergency treatment would be turned away from accident and emergency untreated. Those reassurances have been fulfilled. In the four weeks since the chief executive's letter, no patient has been disadvantaged, and everyone who has needed a bed at Hillingdon has got one.

Before discussing the Hillingdon situation in more detail, I should like to reassure the House on the treatment of elderly people generally. It is not and never has been Government policy for NHS treatment to be withheld from anyone on the ground of age. We have always made it clear that, whatever the age of a patient, there are no exceptions to the fundamental principle that the NHS is there to provide services for everybody on the basis of clinical need.

Let me turn to the recent circumstances at Hillingdon. The letter from the chief executive was not a panic measure in the face of a crisis but one part of a complex issue that local health and social services agencies had been working on constructively for some time. As my hon. Friend knows, two excellent hospitals serve Hillingdon residents: Mount Vernon hospital to the north, and Hillingdon hospital to the south. They are run by Mount Vernon and Watford Hospitals NHS trust, and Hillingdon Hospital NHS trust respectively.

Both are extremely good hospitals with good reputations and devoted and caring staff. More particularly, both hospitals provide comprehensive and excellent services for elderly people. The record speaks for itself. Hillingdon hospital provided 34,800 ordinary and day case treatments in 1995-96, and Mount Vernon provided 61,295 treatments—in both cases, some 4 per cent. more than in the previous year. That is a considerable tribute to the doctors, nurses and other staff at both hospitals. Both trusts have been in discussion with Hillingdon health authority about how services can best be provided to meet the needs of residents.

Back in the spring, Hillingdon hospital became concerned about the pressure on beds at the hospital. It already had an acclaimed bed management system which enabled it to use the 630 beds that it has as efficiently as possible. The reasons for the pressure appeared to be twofold. First, the hospital was seeing an increasing number of patients, particularly elderly patients, requiring hospital admission. Secondly, elderly patients were staying in hospital for longer.

The hospital explained its concerns to the health authority and the social services department and in June a working party was set up to examine the issues. Immediate action was also taken, including the provision of additional social work posts in the hospital to ensure prompt assessments of patients' continuing care needs and to assist in the hospital discharge process. Since then, hospital discharge has been kept under close review, and early last month the social services department made additional facilities available to take elderly patients discharged from hospital by re-opening 10 places in a refurbished residential care home, and by the approval of seven extra nursing home places.

It is clearly in everyone's interest to ensure that GPs refer patients to the most appropriate local hospital. It appeared, however, as my hon. Friend says, that in a few situations GPs in the vicinity of Mount Vernon hospital were referring elderly patients to Hillingdon hospital although Mount Vernon was the closest local hospital and could provide the service required.

This was the background to the Hillingdon hospital chief executive's letter to GPs of 3 October. It did not seek to deny treatment to anyone; rather it sought to ensure that patients were treated in the most suitable NHS hospital, and the one most conveniently situated for the patients themselves. The intention behind the letter was to ensure that NHS resources were used to best effect, for the benefit of all patients, whether young or old and wherever they lived in the Hillingdon borough.

When it became clear that the letter had generated anxiety, albeit misplaced, among the elderly of Hillingdon, the hospital promptly explained that under no circumstances did this mean that patients would be turned away. Mount Vernon and Watford Hospital NHS trust also acted to reassure residents, pointing out that, since the merger of Mount Vernon and Watford General hospitals under single trust management, the trust now guarantees admission for the elderly patients of local GPs and has some 90 beds for the elderly across the two sites.

I have already mentioned the working party set up in June to examine the pressures on Hillingdon hospital and to develop an action plan to address these concerns. The working party consisted of representatives from the two hospital trusts, Hillingdon health authority, social services, and Age Concern. The group was tasked with producing an action plan for the health authority meeting of 31 October. I stress that local co-operation between local agencies—health agencies, social services and the voluntary organisations—is essential. I am pleased to say that the group's action plan was duly prepared and endorsed at the health authority meeting last Thursday.

The action plan provides immediately 30 additional places in the community, including six in the independently run Hayes cottage hospital. Those 30 places include the 17 that I mentioned earlier. It also provides six new medical beds at Mount Vernon hospital to provide enhanced services to GPs' patients in the north of the borough. These steps should relieve the pressure on Hillingdon hospital now and into the future.

The health authority has also agreed in principle to provide further investment next year to support hospital discharge procedures at Hillingdon hospital, and to look at innovative approaches to patient care as an alternative to hospital admissions. All parties will be looking to improve working practices to ensure the timely discharge of patients from both trusts.

I should of course also point out that this action is complementary to the plans that Hillingdon and all other health authorities have prepared with trusts during the summer to ensure that the service is best placed to respond to any surges in emergency demand in the coming winter.

My hon. Friend also made the point that the problems in Hillingdon were not due to a lack of funds. That is true. I can tell him that the total personal social services resources available to Hillingdon stand at almost £35 million a year, 8.5 per cent. more in cash terms than last year and more than double the resources available six years ago.

Hillingdon health authority has more resources than ever before. Its revenue allocation for this year is £106.4 million, £3.3 million more in cash terms and more than £500,000 more in real terms than it was the previous year. I therefore agree with my hon. Friend that it is not a problem of lack of resources locally.

[Mr. John Horam]

My hon. Friend also spoke about Abbeyfield homes. That serious issue needs to be investigated, and I undertake to reflect upon it and correspond with him about it.

As my hon. Friend was pleased to note, Hillingdon hospital is now reporting that although it is busy, the pressure on beds has eased, and it is managing its work load satisfactorily. My hon. Friend will also be pleased to note, as I am, that the founding principle of the national health service to provide health care to all, on the basis of need, regardless of ability to pay, is alive and well in Hillingdon, as it is throughout the country on this day, the 50th anniversary of the Act that established the NHS.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 7 November 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

QUEEN'S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported Her Majesty's Answer to the Address, as follows:

I have received with great satisfaction the loyal and dutiful expression of your thanks for the Speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Convictions

1. **Mr. Robert Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each of the last three years the proportion of criminal offences that ended in a court conviction. [914]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): About 6 per cent., but the percentage for more serious offences was very much higher and many of those convicted will have committed other crimes of which they have not been convicted.

Mr. Ainsworth: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that that figure is a percentage of recorded crime only, that the level of convictions is a disgrace and that the biggest deterrent to crime is the fear of getting caught? Will he accept that it is now three times more likely that a burglar or rapist will escape punishment than when Labour was in power? Will he do something to address that problem, instead of giving us this continual rhetoric?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman's comments would carry some conviction if he and his hon. Friends had been prepared to support the measures that we have taken to increase the likelihood of convictions taking place. Let me give an example: if the rate of suspects refusing to answer questions has fallen by half—as it has since we reformed the right to silence—that reform is likely to increase the proportion of convictions, yet the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, including the Leader of the Opposition, steadfastly opposed it, root and branch.

Sir Irvine Patnick: Some of those offences will be knife offences. As my right hon. and learned Friend is aware, I contacted the umbrella organisations for the industry in Sheffield to ensure that none of the manufacturers were disadvantaged. I sent him some of the work done by the Cutlery and Allied Trades Research Association. Has that been taken into consideration when framing any proposed legislation?

Mr. Howard: I can assure my hon. Friend that we shall take into account all representations, including those to which he referred, when considering proposals for further legislation on this matter.

Mr. Riddick: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, when someone is convicted of a criminal offence, it is important that he receives an appropriate sentence? Will he assure the House that he will continue to work towards his objective of imposing longer sentences on burglars, rapists and other people who commit violent crimes, and that he will not be deflected from that objective by the views of former Ministers, liberal judges and penal reformers? The British public are entirely behind his efforts on this front.

Mr. Howard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I can certainly give him the assurance that he requests. If we are to fight crime effectively, we need both to convict the criminals and to ensure that they are properly dealt with—and properly punished—when they have been convicted. That is one of the purposes of the proposals set out in the Crime (Sentences) Bill—a Bill to which the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) referred on the radio this week, saying that he was leading the opposition to it.

Mr. Beggs: When criminal offences involving the illegal smuggling of tobacco products into the United Kingdom occur, such as the recent large haul impounded in Belfast in Northern Ireland, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman seek to ensure that the level of fine imposed on conviction matches the value of the impounded cargo and thereby protect our local newsagents and, indeed, the Treasury, which is losing valuable revenue?

Mr. Howard: I understand and sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's argument. I am not sure that we are yet ready to introduce a series of minimum mandatory fines and, in the absence of such fines, the matter is for the discretion of the court concerned, but I have great sympathy with the argument that the hon. Gentleman makes.

Mr. Michael: As the Home Secretary issues his soundbite attacks on the Opposition, he knows in his heart of hearts that Labour has worked hard in opposition to be tough on crime, to be tough on the causes of crime and to support the Government when they make constructive proposals. In contrast, would not a little more humility be appropriate when the Home Secretary considers the facts: that recorded crime is double the level it was when the Conservative party came to power, that fewer than one in 50 crimes end up in a punishment by a court, and that, in his county of Kent, violent crime has gone up by 300 per cent.—and robbery by 600 per cent.—since the Conservative party came to power?

Mr. Howard: We hear these inane generalities from the Labour party, but Labour Members refuse to deal with

the specific points such as the example that I put to them a few minutes ago. The number of suspects refusing to answer questions has nearly halved since we reformed the right to silence. When we reformed the right to silence, the Labour party—whose shadow Home Secretary at the time is now the Leader of the Opposition—opposed that reform root and branch. What we have done—not uttering inane generalities across the Floor of the House—is the way to get criminals convicted and to reduce crime.

Handguns

2. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's latest proposals on handguns. [915]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Miss Ann Widdecombe): The Government have introduced legislation that will stop all handguns being kept at home—.22 rimfire handguns will have to be kept in licensed, secure pistol clubs. All higher calibre handguns will be prohibited. I believe that those provisions will give the public the protection that they need.

Mr. Winnick: Is there not overwhelming public support for a ban on handguns? Is it not a pity that the Government are not going even further, as requested by the police and as would certainly be supported by the public—although Ministers are shaking their heads? Is it not disgraceful—almost obscene—that some members of the gun lobby are reported to be urging a dirty tricks campaign against the organisers of Snowdrop? How low and deplorable can one get?

Miss Widdecombe: I naturally deplore all dirty tricks campaigns and all low and deplorable levels to which people sink when opposing perfectly sensible legislation. I believe that the measures that we are introducing produce the right balance between protecting the public, ensuring that handguns will not be in circulation outside secure clubs and preserving what has been a perfectly legitimate sport in this country for more than 100 years.

Mr. John Carlisle: Does my hon. Friend accept my total opposition, of which she knows, to this intended Bill? The Government intend to confiscate the personal property of innocent individuals. The Bill will have an enormous effect, not only on those individuals but on numerous businesses and very many others attached to the industry. The proposed compensation is totally inadequate. In a sense of fairness, will the Government accept that they are wrong? Will my hon. Friend ensure that compensation is much fairer and wider than is presently proposed, especially in the money resolution associated with the Bill?

Miss Widdecombe: Our current proposal is to compensate people for the loss of their guns at the market value of those guns on the day before the Secretary of State's statement. We shall compensate dealers for their stocks of guns on the same basis. I am always prepared to consider any sensible and reasonable suggestion that any hon. Member on either side of the House may wish to make during the Bill's passage, but I have explained our present thinking to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Henderson: The Minister will be aware that, arising out of the gun Bill, there has been wide public debate not just about pistols, but about other forms of firearms currently used in the United Kingdom. Has consideration been given to airguns, which are commonly in use in many parts of the country? They are often used by young people to intimidate and harass others in the community, and can be purchased by a 17-year-old and used by a person aged 14. Does the Minister believe that there is a case for reviewing the law on airguns, considering a system of licensing, and changing the age at which people can buy or use such potentially lethal weapons?

Miss Widdecombe: Licensing is important. That is why, although the Bill is largely geared to handguns, it includes proposals that cover rifles as well. The proposals that we have produced are in response to the independent report by Lord Cullen. It is in the public interest to get legislation on the statute book quickly. We therefore thought that we should tackle the particular problem in hand.

Mr. Peter Griffiths: Can my hon. Friend say when she may be able to offer a considered response to the genuine concerns of those who shoot with muzzle-loading, flintlock or matchlock pistols, which could not by any remote stretch of the imagination be connected with contemporary crime?

Miss Widdecombe: My hon. Friend will be aware that we have made a number of exceptions—for example, for antique guns and trophies of war. We are giving careful consideration to the definitions that we have used. We will take into account the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend, and consider our response as soon as possible.

Ms Eagle: Will the Minister comment on the availability of extremely dangerous shotgun cartridges, which often do greater damage than smaller bullets in handguns? Although everyone in the House accepts the argument that handguns should be banned because they can be more easily concealed, does the Minister agree that we should consider stricter licensing measures for rifles and shotguns as well, and the possibility of including such measures in the Bill?

Miss Widdecombe: I have already said that we have tightened up the conditions for issuing certificates, especially with regard to the referees required and the proof of fitness. That applies not only to handguns, but to rifles as well. I also said, in response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), that many issues might have been considered, but, in the interests of getting legislation quickly on to the statute book to protect the general public, we have addressed principally the concerns raised by Lord Cullen.

Schengen Treaty

3. **Mr. Michael Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the Government's policy with regard to United Kingdom accession to the Schengen treaty. [916]

Mr. Howard: The Government have no intention of seeking accession to the Schengen treaty.

Mr. Brown: I am delighted to hear that answer. Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that border

controls are essential in our aim to defeat drug trafficking and all other forms of crime? May I appeal to my right hon. and learned Friend to have a word with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that there are sufficient customs officers at ports such as Immingham in my constituency, and at Humberside airport in my constituency, which are vulnerable to drug trafficking and the importing of illegal goods?

Mr. Howard: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of maintaining our frontier controls. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have made it clear on more than one occasion that we have no intention of doing anything to dismantle or weaken them. With reference to customs and immigration officers, my hon. Friend will be aware that we are making greater use of intelligence-led action to deal with the importation of drugs and other forbidden substances and articles into the United Kingdom. Those methods are having considerable success.

Mr. Beith: Does the Home Secretary's opposition to the Schengen agreement extend to the work of Europol, which is essential in tackling international drug trafficking and in which British police officers play an important role? Why has the British Government resisted the development of Europol, on occasion blocking its essential provisions? Is that part of the Schengen argument?

Mr. Howard: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman has completely the wrong end of the stick. In fact, the United Kingdom Government were at the forefront of progress in establishing Europol. We continue to make progress in advancing it, and we expect to be one of the first countries to ratify the Europol convention.

Handgun Control

4. **Mr. Dykes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the public representations he has received since 16 October on handgun control proposals. [917]

Miss Widdecombe: Since 16 October, we have received upwards of 250 letters on this subject from right hon. and hon. Members. The Department has received more than 700 telephone calls and more than 1,200 letters from the public. The great majority of letters have been from individual shooters.

Mr. Dykes: As to the idea of a total ban on handguns or one so close to being a total ban that it renders unnecessary the creation of new loopholes in the future, does my hon. Friend agree that the overwhelming views of about 56 million people are much more important than those of 56,000 shooters?

Miss Widdecombe: As I said in response to a previous question, we are trying to strike a balance between protecting legitimate sporting rights and protecting the public. Lord Cullen produced an independent report with 24 recommendations, 23 of which we have accepted. I assure my hon. Friend that we are trying to get the balance right.

Mr. Ainger: Will the Minister confirm that, under the proposed legislation, individuals who currently own high calibre weapons will receive compensation, and, there is nothing to stop them buying .22 calibre weapons, so the estimated figure of some 40,000 .22 calibre weapons in circulation after the legislation is enacted is likely to fall far short of the mark, and people may use many more such weapons than they do at present?

Miss Widdecombe: That is an impossible prophecy. Perhaps some people who currently own .22 calibre weapons will decide, because of the restrictions on other weapons or the inconvenience caused to some—but not all—clubs, to cease to use .22 calibre weapons. It is quite impossible to make that sort of behavioural prediction.

Mr. Budgen: Will my hon. Friend concede that there is a serious possibility that the judges of the European Court of Human Rights may oblige the British taxpayer to provide compensation on a much wider basis—to those who manufacture pistols, to gun clubs owners, professional shooters and those who supply the ancillary trades? As the object of the exercise is to preserve human life, does my hon. Friend agree that, if the level of compensation were to rise to between £0.5 billion and £1 billion as some suggest, taxpayers might consider that the money would be better spent elsewhere?

Miss Widdecombe: Our estimates are nowhere near the figures mentioned by my hon. Friend. We shall take full account of all our legal obligations in deciding how we should compensate and what compensation is proper. There are plenty of precedents for providing compensation following changes in the law. We shall do what we believe is right, and we shall put our proposals before the House.

Dr. Godman: May I point out to the Minister that, a few years ago, two Glasgow police officers were shot dead by an assassin armed with a .22 calibre pistol. Does she realise that the overwhelming majority of people in Scotland demand that any ban on pistols should include .22 calibre weapons?

Miss Widdecombe: The statistics for homicides between 1992 and 1994 show clearly that only about 5 per cent. involved .22 calibre weapons. I agree that 5 per cent. is too much, but it puts the problem into context. I sympathise with the relatives of the policemen to whom the hon. Gentleman referred, but I believe that, by confining guns to clubs, we are tackling the problem of guns in circulation and held perfectly legally by the general public.

Short-term Remand

5. **Sir Michael Shersby:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce short–term remands to allow fast tracking of cases; and if he will make a statement. [918]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. David Maclean): We want to ensure that cases come to trial as soon as possible. All the criminal justice agencies are committed to this end and much is being done. We have also recently set up a review to identify urgently what more can be done to reduce delays, including the possibility of shorter-term remands.

Sir Michael Shersby: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as there are only 349 secure places available in

England and Wales, a new sort of secure facility is needed in which juveniles can be held in secure conditions while their needs are assessed by a multi-agency group? The problem that is being experienced quite widely is that juveniles abscond from normal community homes, or sometimes abscond from a car on their way to such a home. We need short-term secure remand facilities.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend will be aware that, in conjunction with the Department of Health, we have been investing sums to ensure that more remand spaces are available, but we must be interested in speeding up the process of bringing all cases to trial, whether in the Crown courts or magistrates courts, whether for adults or for juveniles. A range of studies is under way, which is being supervised by the pre-trial issues steering group. The group is endeavouring to ensure that all parts of the criminal justice system move as quickly as possible in future.

Criminal Cases (Review)

6. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the criminal cases review authority to be established; and if he will make a statement. [919]

8. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimated date by which the body set up for the review of criminal cases will begin its operation; and what criteria will be used to determine the order of review of disputed convictions. [921]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Timothy Kirkhope): We expect the Criminal Cases Review Commission to be established around the turn of the year. It will be for the commission to determine its own criteria for the order in which it considers the cases that come before it.

Mr. Mullin: Was the Home Secretary aware when he appointed Sir Frederick Crawford as chairman of the commission that Sir Frederick was a freemason—and not just any old freemason, but one of the leading freemasons in the land? May I say to the Minister that those of us who take an interest in miscarriages of justice have always been a wee bit cynical about the role of the Home Office, but even I was somewhat taken aback to find that the Home Secretary was so daft as to appoint a leading freemason to such a sensitive post?

Mr. Kirkhope: The post was openly advertised. There were 124 applicants, and consideration of them was conducted in a proper manner in accordance with the Nolan procedures, which the House approved recently. Indeed, the appointment was one of the earliest to go through the Nolan procedures. I have no doubt that the appointee, Sir Frederick Crawford, will act with complete integrity and impartiality.

Mr. Gunnell: Is the Minister able to say that the appointment was considered by the officer who has been given responsibility to review public appointments—Sir Len Peach? Is he able to give us Sir Len's view of the appointment? Is the Minister aware that many prisoners, including the sons of some of my constituents, are held without time limit because they have not agreed that they committed the crimes of which they have been convicted? In many instances they have served a longer term than they would have served if they had pleaded guilty. Will the Minister ensure that the authorities are aware of such cases and that they take into account the time that prisoners, who may be innocent, have spent in gaol?

Mr. Kirkhope: The guidelines of the commission for public appointments were followed. Once the commission is working, I am sure that it will want to set its own timetable for the cases that it will have to consider. Slightly more than 200 cases are awaiting final consideration, and will go to the commission. It is expected that there will be an increase in the number of applications during the commission's first year of operation. Nevertheless, I am sure that it will review the nature of the cases and will have its timetable fixed accordingly.

Dame Jill Knight: May I tell my hon. Friend that many Birmingham Members will strongly resent the slur against Sir Frederick Crawford, who did an excellent job as vice-chancellor of Aston university for many years? Does my hon. Friend accept that what a person chooses to do in his spare time should not be a bar if his abilities are such that he will fulfil correctly a job that is offered to him?

Mr. Kirkhope: I am sure that my hon. Friend is quite right about that. As long as the proper criteria are met in appointments, and they are in accordance with the Nolan procedures, I have no reason to doubt that the chairman will do an excellent job.

Mr. Nicholls: As one who is not a freemason and never intends to be, I find it rather distasteful that the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) conducts this campaign against freemasons when, to my certain knowledge—and perhaps that of my hon. Friend as well—many of them are among the most upright people in the community and do a great deal of work for charity as well. It is rather unpleasant that hon. Members should use their position in the House to attack people of that quality and calibre.

Mr. Kirkhope: Our major concern in relation to the commission is to have the best people doing the job. Many hon. Members have called for us to set up a commission. They expect us to set it up in such a way that it will be effective. For it to be effective, we need to ensure that the best people are involved in chairing it and in membership of it. I believe that that will occur.

Queen's Speech

9. **Mr. Thurnham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the measures announced in the Queen's Speech. [922]

Mr. Maclean: The Home Office measures announced in the Gracious Speech have one simple aim—to protect the public. As my right hon. and learned Friend told the

House last week, they represent the most radical attack on crime this century. They have won wide support from the police and the public.

Mr. Thurnham: Will the Minister join me in congratulating Bolton's police force on achieving, against the national trend, a 10 per cent. reduction in crime over the past five months? Should not those figures be published quarterly, as they always used to be?

Mr. Maclean: Greater Manchester police have been successful in reducing crime, as have many other forces, leading in the past three years to the largest fall in crime for 40 years.

If the hon. Gentleman is interested in the success of the Greater Manchester police in reducing crime and in more bobbies on the beat, I am very surprised at his new choice of party. I must give him the Liberal party policy document that I have here, which says:

"Putting more police officers on the beat will ... have little effect in reducing levels of crime".

If he wants crime in Manchester to keep falling, I hope that he will change his new party's policies.

Mr. Alexander: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the law and order measures announced in the Queen's Speech, particularly those that will ensure that sentences mean what they say, have been widely welcomed in the constituencies? Is he further aware that, even in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Thurnham), that is certainly the case? Sentences must mean what they say, and that is clearly provided for in the Gracious Speech.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The key measures in the Crime (Sentencing) Bill—of honesty in sentencing and of minimum mandatory sentences for burglars, drug dealers and serious violent and sexual offenders—have been welcomed and are widely supported by everyone except the Labour party, which dithered and sat on its hands on Monday night, was afraid to vote for them and faced the shame of some of its own members voting against them on Monday night.

Mr. Flynn: Did not the Minister of State expose the absurdity of the Government's attempt to reduce the number of guns when she confessed this afternoon that she did not know how many people who, deprived of their high calibre guns, would transfer to .22 weapons? Does not that mean that, if all of them do that, there will be no reduction whatever in the number of guns in people's homes? Has she not exposed this afternoon the fact that the Bill is entirely futile unless it is improved by the Labour party's amendment?

Mr. Maclean: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman. He is wrong on many counts. He misquoted my hon. Friend, and handguns will not be held in people's homes. It is clearly our intention that the lesser calibre .22 rimfire handguns will be held in secure gun clubs. It is right to say that it is impossible to forecast whether some people may wish to acquire .22 handguns in future or whether even more .22 handgun owners will decide that it is not worth the hassle of complying with the tough new rules and give up their .22 handguns as well. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong to jump to the conclusions that he does.

Rugby Matches (Twickenham)

10. **Mr. Jessel:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis as to the policing of big match days at the Rugby Football Union ground, Twickenham. [923]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Tom Sackville): I am assured by the commissioner that extra officers for the policing of match days at Twickenham will be deployed as and when needed.

Mr. Jessel: I am grateful for that. Rugby football is a sport of great national importance, but is my hon. Friend aware that the combination of the increase in the number of big match days and the growing number of people who arrive by car has inflicted on my constituents who live nearby almost impossible conditions? Will he please ask the commissioner to ensure that the increase in the number of police is as large as possible so that my constituents can get in and out of their homes?

Mr. Sackville: I very much sympathise with my hon. Friend's constituents, who are, after all, victims of rugby's success. I have sat in a huge traffic jam on the A316 more than once, having the misfortune to arrive at the same time as a match is exiting, and I am aware of the effects of that and of the parking problem to which he referred. I am assured that the police will continue to take what measures they can in order to obviate that distressing problem.

Youth Justice

11. **Mrs. Bridget Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to speed up the system of youth justice. [924]

Mr. Kirkhope: We welcome the action being taken by all criminal justice agencies to speed up the process of bringing young offenders to justice—for example avoiding unnecessary adjournments, co-ordinating their approach and sentencing persistent offenders promptly without waiting for other changes to be heard. The review on expediting justice, which my right hon. Friend the Minister of State mentioned earlier, is also examining this specific issue.

Mrs. Prentice: Is the Minister aware that, despite the painstaking work of the local police, it took more than six months to bring to trial some young hooligans who were terrorising the residents of the Downham estate in my constituency, and that, once tried and convicted, two of them were fined a pathetic £7 and £15 respectively? Does that not send out all the wrong messages to victims and offenders, and is not justice delayed, justice denied?

Mr. Kirkhope: I am sure that the hon. Lady, herself a justice of the peace and a former teacher, will be well aware of the need for us to have a co-ordinated approach to the way in which we deal with young people. Therefore, I hope that she will support the Government's proposals to speed up such matters and bring criminals to justice.

I am pleased to be able to announce to the House that the Magistrates Association and the Justices' Clerks Society have agreed to give guidance that, in future, instead of charges against young people being deferred pending the consideration of other charges that are still being investigated, they will be dealt with there and then in order to ensure that young people understand that they should be dealt with as close to the committal of the crime as possible.

Mr. John Greenway: How soon will the first new secure training unit come on stream? Those units will do a great deal to improve the behaviour of young people convicted of offences. Is it not odd that one of the Opposition's five core pledges is to speed up youth justice, yet they have obstructed the development and construction of secure training units at every turn?

Mr. Kirkhope: The Conservative party has decided to follow that course and I am glad that my hon. Friend is so supportive. I only wish that all Labour-controlled local authorities were doing their best to assist us in opening such centres. Bassetlaw council has decided to block a planning application for such a unit, when it well knows that such a move can only have an adverse impact on our ability to get such units in place and operational as quickly as possible.

Mr. Straw: Is the Minister not aware that there is no better, or worse, example of the failure of this Government after 17 years to deal with law and order than the decay and negligence now apparent in the youth justice system? The case that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) cited, in which after six months those young hooligans were fined a derisory £7 and £15 for terrorising a neighbourhood, is all too typical of the current chaos in the youth justice system. Instead of initiating studies, why does the Minister not impose clear limits on the time that it takes to get such matters to court, and ensure that in no case is the court allowed to issue another warning after previous warnings have been given?

Mr. Kirkhope: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. The weasel words that he is spouting do not fit very neatly into the policies and attitudes of his party. The Labour party has just published another piece of paper on the issue, but what have Labour Members been doing all these years, because they have not supported the Government in their attempts to make the justice system tougher? If the hon. Gentleman wants to help us to deal with such matters, he should support us totally by calling for tougher sentences and by supporting my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary.

Crime Investigation

12. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to improve the investigation of crimes across police force boundaries. [926]

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. and learned Friend's proposals for a national crime squad will significantly enhance the police's ability to investigate organised crime across police force boundaries at home and abroad.

Mr. Spring: Does my right hon. Friend share my view that a national crime squad will build on the already considerable regional success that the police are having in tackling organised drugs crime? Does he agree that that, coupled with my right hon. and learned Friend's tough sentencing proposals, will send a clear message to those who destroy lives by peddling drugs?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The national criminal intelligence service and the regional crime squads are a great British police success story. Last year, the total number of drug-related arrests was about 1,400, the total value of confiscated assets was more than £2 million and the total value of street drugs seized by the regional crime squads was more than £250 million. That was their success last year, and they have had even greater success this year. When the Police Bill is on the statute book, we shall have the new national crime squad, which will build on those outstanding successes.

Mr. Miller: Does the Minister accept that one way of improving cross-border activity among the police is the early development of the database HOLMES 2? Will he ensure that the specification for that project includes the most far-reaching data mining processes, which have been used in experiments in Warwickshire and in his authority and by the FBI? Will he also ensure that that specification is out to tender at the earliest possible opportunity?

Mr. Maclean: I shall ensure that the specifications for HOLMES 2, Phoenix, Quest, the national police information system strategy and the huge automatic fingerprint system are along the lines of what the police want. That is why we are creating PITO, the police information technology organisation, to ensure that the specifications are not drawn up just by politicians, but by the police service according to its needs. With the private finance initiative, we intend to deliver many of those schemes as soon as possible.

Mr. Brazier: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the thinking behind this welcome new national squad is along the lines of intelligence-led policing pioneered by police forces such as Kent? Does he further agree that it will operate most effectively in conjunction with the measures on minimum sentences for persistent drug dealers that the Government are introducing, apparently against the wishes of the principal Opposition?

Mr. Maclean: I congratulate Kent on its initiatives on intelligence-led policing. The success of NCIS and the national crime squads will be obviated if the Labour party do not support measures to ensure that the most dangerous and persistent criminals who are caught by the police are locked up for sufficiently long. We are aware of the two-faced attitude of the Labour party. No doubt, over the next few months, we shall hear Labour Members boasting that they have supported the Police Bill—which sets up NCIS and PITO—whereas on Monday night most of them sat on their hands. Some of them went through the No Lobby to vote against the measures that will ensure that this country's worst drug dealers are locked up for a minimum of seven years. We should not be surprised at that. They voted against every measure like that in the 1980s as well.

Fireworks

13. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents which involved fireworks have been reported to the police in each year since 1992. [927]

Mr. Sackville: The police become involved in a wide variety of incidents involving fireworks, such as illegal sale, misuse and nuisance and serious incidents of fire or injury. The statistics on injuries caused by fireworks are collected from hospitals by the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Heppell: I am sure that the Minister will want to join the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs in expressing his condolences following the death of a constituent of mine, 10-year-old Dale Mitchell, who died because of the misuse of fireworks. Given that a third of firework injuries are not accidents but are caused by illegal misuse, why are there not more prosecutions for illegal misuse, and why are more people not prosecuted for supplying fireworks to under-age children?

Mr. Sackville: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in condoling with all who have been injured. There are restrictions, and there is a wealth of education each year in an attempt to avoid such incidents. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs said yesterday, he is conducting a root-and-branch inquiry into the whole issue. There is a good deal of evidence that changes are needed: every injury is an injury too many.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [944]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Michael Heseltine): I have been asked to reply.

This morning, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. My right hon. Friend has now departed for Bordeaux to attend the Anglo-French summit.

Mr. Garnier: May I commiserate with my right hon. Friend on the damage recently caused to his property by a gang of criminal thugs, which included two Labour councillors? Will he take this opportunity to contrast the Government's record on law and order with the pathetic performance of the smarmy army on the Opposition Benches? That smarmy army has not even criticised, let alone disciplined, those two Labour councillors.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend. I must say that, when I looked out of my window, it seemed like old times—the winter of discontent, with the Labour party on the streets; the mobs of the 1980s, with the Labour party on the streets; and then, in the 1990s, Labour councillors on people's private property, causing damage and disruption: and the characteristic of all three? Not a word of protest from the parliamentary Labour party. Labour Members talk about being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but they do not even have the energy to walk through the Lobbies when we are fighting crime.

Mr. Prescott: Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House why, 50 years ago this week, the Tories voted against the creation of the national health service?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will know that, after 50 years, the health service has been administered and supported by Tory Governments for longer than by Labour Governments. Because of that, we have made it one of the best health services in the world.

Mr. Prescott: Does the Deputy Prime Minister not understand—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Prescott: Does the Deputy Prime Minister not understand that the people simply do not believe the Tories on health? Does he not remember that, before the last election, the Prime Minister promised to cut taxes year on year? They went up year on year. Now the same Prime Minister is promising to increase health spending year on year. Is that not like the tax promise? Should not all Tory pre-election promises carry a Government health warning?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will know that, under this Government, health expenditure has gone up every year. If he really cares about the health service, why will he not, on behalf of his party, now give a commitment to match our pledge to increase, year on year, real-terms expenditure on the health service?

Mr. Prescott: The Deputy Prime Minister fails to understand that our national health service, set up by a Labour Government 50 years ago, was the greatest peacetime achievement of any Government this century. Is not the simple truth this: the British people know that the only way to safeguard our health service for the next 50 years is to elect a Labour Government, and the sooner the better?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The British people know that the Labour party will not give the pledge that the Conservatives have already given. After all, we hear all about windfall taxes. If they are so profitable and so available, why cannot windfall taxes finance the health service? The reason is, of course, that there is not an easy killing of a windfall tax any more than there is a genuine commitment from Labour to the health service.

Mr. Pickles: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in a seminar in my constituency, the chief economist for the National Westminster bank predicted that small businesses would be particularly vulnerable to a minimum wage? He warned that a minimum wage would cost

thousands of jobs in Essex. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that the Government will never introduce a minimum wage?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Any fool knows that a minimum wage costs jobs. After all, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), the shadow leader of the Labour party, has already said so.

Mr. Prescott: Don't get too excited.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am always excited by the right hon. Gentleman. The whole House is excited by him. He is an exciting person. Never has someone been so wrong, so often, on so many subjects.

Q2. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [945]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave some moments ago, before my observations about the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East.

Mr. Gunnell: Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in welcoming the support given by players of Leeds United, of Leeds rugby league club and of Yorkshire county cricket club to the urgent appeal for funds by Leeds general infirmary for essential equipment, which, it says, it cannot afford because of the national health service funding level? Is it not an absolute scandal that, after 17 years of this Government, that hospital, having closed 40 beds only last month, is forced to beg to survive?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I would overwhelmingly support anyone who sought to raise funds for charitable purposes for the health service. One of the most exciting additional supports to health funding in Britain has come from the idea of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to ensure that part of lottery proceeds go to charities in Britain. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Opposition Members are prepared to sneer at charitable giving in Britain. I realise that they would rather tax people into a position where charity was compulsory, as opposed to relying on people's natural instinct to give, but I cannot believe that the purpose of such a generous decision by the various players to whom the hon. Gentleman has referred is designed to turn the health service into a party political matter.

Q3. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [946]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Bruce: Will my right hon. Friend have a chance to speak to the Prime Minister while he is in France preparing for the summit and get him to bring back a few souvenirs for Opposition Members? I have in mind in particular some recent issues of *Le Figaro* newspaper, which extolled the virtues of what had happened to French companies that had come to the United Kingdom to invest in British firms, highlighting particularly the low cost base here and the stable, growing economy.

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to draw to the attention of the House the remarkable article in *Le Figaro*. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister drew my attention to it earlier today. The House will be pleased to know that copies of the article are on their way to this country. For the benefit of many Labour Members, translations will be freely available.

Q4. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [947]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Bayley: Will the right hon. Gentleman remind the House of the new rules that were introduced to curb the abuse by former Conservative Ministers such as Peter Walker and Norman Tebbit, who left the Government and moved to the boardrooms of companies that they privatised while in office? Does he agree that it is an absolute disgrace that the Minister who privatised London's buses—the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mr. Norris)—has moved from his boudoir at the Department of Transport to the profitable and sweet embrace of Capital City Bus?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The House will want to take that question extremely seriously because a most serious allegation has been made against my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mr. Norris). My hon. Friend has not accepted any job with Capital City Bus or any other company. He has consulted the advisory committee on business appointments and, of course, he will follow any advice that that committee gives.

I want to stand back from the regrettable nature of the question asked by the hon. Member for York (Mr. Bayley) and say that the only reason why no Labour ex-Ministers are in a similar position is that there have been no Labour ex-Ministers in recent memory. However, when there were Labour ex-Ministers, what was Lord Marsh doing—[Hon. Members: "He was a Tory."] When he was at the Dispatch Box, he was a Labour Minister. He only became a Tory when he realised that we were right and he was wrong. What have Labour Members to say about Edmund Dell, who became head of Guinness? What do they have to say about Lord Varley, the former Energy Secretary? What about Lord Barnett, who is on the boards of a raft of different companies? It is one rule for them and one rule for everybody else—hypocrisy from start to finish.

Q5. **Mr. Jessel:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [948]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Jessel: As next year will be the 50th anniversary of the independence of India, and as relations between India and Britain have never been better, do the Government intend to supplement the Queen's visit to India, the visit of our Prime Minister to India as guest of honour on Republic Day and my right hon. Friend's visit to India to launch the Indo-British partnership initiative, with events in this country to mark the jubilee? Will he bear in mind that a large proportion of Indian people who are resident in Britain are natural supporters of the enterprise economy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has left out of his list the distinguished role that he has played for 25 years as an officer and chairman of the all-party Indo-British group. He will be pleased to know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has invited my noble Friend Lord Cranborne to chair the group to determine how we can progress with such an important anniversary.

Mr. Janner: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the Government have rejected the recommendation of the Employment Committee that, in the unemployment statistics, the Government should include details of the 12 categories excluded from those figures? In those circumstances, does he recognise that the true number of unemployed is not just over 2 million, but nearer 4 million, and that the Government's present figures are a complete sham and a fiddle?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I seem to remember the hon. and learned Gentleman producing reports saying that 100,000 jobs would go in the aftermath of the closure of the mines. Unemployment has fallen every month since.

Q6. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [949]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Lidington: Has my right hon. Friend seen recent reports that about 40 per cent. of those leaving the jobless register are now setting up as self-employed to provide work not only for themselves but for other people? Does he agree that that augurs well for the present and future competitiveness of the country, enabling us to look forward to levels of unemployment continuing to fall in my constituency and throughout the nation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is, of course, right. We have the highest proportion of our population at work of any major European country. The forecasts are that our position will continue to improve. I am delighted to recognise the announcement this morning by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment of a significant extension of project work to concentrate particularly on those who have been unemployed for more than two years.

Q7. **Mr. Michael:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [950]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Michael: Has the Deputy Prime Minister seen advertisements for articles such as the Vindicator knife and the Rambo short sword? Does he agree that it would be a good idea to make it illegal to advertise or offer for sale such weapons in a manner that appears to condone or encourage violence?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the whole House knows, my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is in discussions with Labour and Liberal Democrat Members, but those discussions have not led to a simplistic definition that would have enabled the law to be changed. In other words, my right hon. and learned Friend was correct to say that this is a complex matter to which a satisfactory legal outcome has not so far been found. The whole House will be glad of my right hon. and learned Friend's announcement yesterday about strengthening police powers of stop and search, particularly of those people who are likely to be carrying knives.

Business of the House

3.31 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): May I ask the Leader of the House for details of future business?

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 11 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Education Bill.

TUESDAY 12 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [1st allotted day]. There will be a debate entitled "The BSE Crisis and the Lack of Progress on Lifting the Export Ban on Beef and Beef Products" on an Opposition motion.

THURSDAY 14 NOVEMBER—Debate on Hong Kong on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 15 NOVEMBER—Debate on rail privatisation on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The House will also wish to know that, on Wednesday 13 November, there will be a debate on the identification of cattle and labelling of beef and beef products in European Standing Committee A, and a debate on cinema and television films in European Standing Committee B.

In the following week, more provisionally, the business will be as follows:

MONDAY 18 NOVEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill.

TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Proceedings on the Welsh Development Agency Bill.

WEDNESDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [2nd allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, of which the subject will, no doubt, be announced in due course.

THURSDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Until 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on the impact of a windfall tax on the privatised utilities on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 22 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The House will also wish to know that it is proposed that, on Wednesday 20 November, there will be a debate on waste management strategy in European Standing Committee A.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report.*

[*Wednesday 13 November:*

European Standing Committee A—European Community Document: 10495/96, Identification of Cattle and Labelling of Beef and Beef Products. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 36-i (1996-97).

European Standing Committee B—European Community Document: 12357/95, Cinema and Television Films. Relevant European Legislation Committee Reports: HC 51-ix (1995-96) and HC 36-ii (1996-97).

Wednesday 20 November:

European Standing Committee A—European Community Document: 9651/96, Strategy for Waste Management. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 36-i (1996-97).]

Mrs. Taylor: I thank the Leader of the House for that information. In view of today's High Court ruling against the Secretary of State for Social Security—which has implications for the benefit entitlement of many thousands of disabled people and many other claimants—will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State to make an urgent statement to the House on that important matter?

Recently, certain Departments have changed the way in which they handle parliamentary questions, with some apparently transferring all key statistical questions to the Treasury. In addition, Ministers' excuses for not answering parliamentary questions are becoming ever more creative, the latest example being an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing), who was told that the answer to his question

"is not suitable for publication".—[*Official Report*, 22 July 1996; Vol. 282, c. *121.*]

Will the Leader of the House initiate discussions on enforcing clearer and consistent guidelines to Departments on the answering of parliamentary questions?

On a totally different matter, the Leader of the House will have seen the extensive list of senior military figures who have expressed concerns about the plight of Hong Kong Gurkhas who are being relocated to Britain and are being forced to leave their wives and children behind. Will Ministers be making statements about a matter which even senior military figures have decided is an inhumane example of defence incompetence?

At this time of year, our attention turns to those who served our country in time of war. Would not it be appropriate for the Leader of the House to find time for a debate on early-day motion 19?

[*That this House, mindful of the increasing needs of the United Kingdom's ageing ex-Service population and the many problems of younger members of the ex-Service community, in direct consequence of 'Options for Change', considers that there is now a pressing need for an Ex-Service Affairs Unit within an existing Ministry and with a designated Minister to be responsible, as the only fundamental and long-term solution for the care and welfare of ex-Service people and their dependants; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government now to respond positively to the Royal British Legion's urgent call for such a unit to be established.*]

In such a debate, the House would have an opportunity to discuss how to improve the care and welfare of ex-service people and their dependants. On a related matter, will the Leader of the House tell us what arrangements have been made by the House authorities to ensure that next Monday's two-minute silence of remembrance is observed by those who work within Parliament?

Mr. Newton: On the first question about the ruling in the High Court this morning, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security is studying the

judgment, and clearly he has not had it very long. In due course, he will no doubt communicate the conclusions that he draws from it.

On parliamentary questions, the hon. Lady may be aware that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is responding this afternoon to a number of Select Committee reports on those and related matters, including the issue to which she referred. New guidance will be issued and made openly available on drafting answers to parliamentary questions, and she might have a look at it. If she has any further comments, she can make them in the light of that consideration.

As far as the Gurkhas are concerned, the forthcoming withdrawal means that a wide range of issues affecting the Gurkhas' terms of service are being reviewed by the Ministry of Defence. That review is nearly complete, and I am confident that it will produce a fair and equitable package of recommendations that fully address the brigade's concerns.

On early-day motion 19, the Government have made it clear on a number of occasions that we believe that the creation of a special unit responsible for former service people would simply add—

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): We should have a debate.

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman did have a debate on the matter.

The Government believe that that would simply add another tier of administration without improving the present arrangements.

On the arrangements for the observance of the two-minute silence on Monday by those working within the House, perhaps that is a matter for you, Madam Speaker, and not for me.

Madam Speaker: I should like to inform the House that my entire staff in the Speaker's Office will observe the two-minute silence, and I hope that others will follow that example.

Sir Terence Higgins (Worthing): As Monday's business on gun control may result in a number of legitimate sporting clubs and other organisations going out of business or finding themselves unable to meet the financial commitments into which they have entered, will my right hon. Friend consider changing the wording of the money resolution, which would seem to rule out not only the possibility of such organisations being paid compensation, but even the possibility of a debate on such a subject?

Mr. Newton: My right hon. Friend might well make that point in the debate on Tuesday. I shall draw it to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): On the point raised by the right hon. Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins), which is important, will the Leader of the House confirm that a money resolution in the name of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is unamendable by the House? It is essential for him to consider broadening the terms of the resolution—only he has the power to do so. Otherwise,

"property the possession of which becomes unlawful",

referred to in the resolution, will restrict the debate and consideration of possible compensation for anything other than the guns.

Mr. Newton: I have already undertaken to draw that matter to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary, and I shall do so.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): May I support the call for a two-minute silence on Monday? It will certainly be observed by my branch of the Royal British Legion.

May we also have a debate on planning procedures, so that I may draw to the attention of the House the great concern of the people of Greenford about an enormous planning application for Greenford green, granted by Ealing council, which will hugely damage the local community by drawing in large amounts of unwanted traffic, as well as destroying jobs in other parts of my constituency?

Mr. Newton: I note what my hon. Friend said about observance of the two-minute silence. I shall certainly be trying to do so. On the latter point, the right course would be for me to bring my hon. Friend's concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Mr. Alfred Morris (Manchester, Wythenshawe): As the Leader of the House will be aware, the Social Security (Claims and Payments Etc.) Amendment Regulations 1996 have reduced or withdrawn the mobility allowance from large numbers of severely disabled people, not least those with severe learning difficulties. Is it not quite wrong that we have had no opportunity to debate those regulations? When shall we be debating them?

Mr. Newton: The right hon. Gentleman has raised such matters several times, as have other hon. Members. I am not in a position to add to what I have said before.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): May I revert to the question about compensation raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins)? The Leader of the House kindly said that he would draw the matter to the attention of the Home Secretary, and for that we are grateful. Could he go a stage further and ensure that a statement clarifying the position is made in the House on Monday, so that we know what that position is?

Mr. Newton: I shall draw that suggestion also to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The Leader of the House made a welcome suggestion, by saying that we shall be able to debate rail privatisation and highlight the many abuses, such as the award of £2.25 million in success payments to two City firms.

Will the right hon. Gentleman urgently consider what is happening to answers to parliamentary questions? Frankly, they are becoming almost farcical. In recent times, I have received one answer saying that it was too

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

soon to say and another that was factually inaccurate, which I drew to the attention of the agency head, but which still has not been corrected in the *Official Report*. Will the Leader of the House take that problem seriously? It is not simply a matter of reminding people that they ought to behave sensibly. The answers are misleading Parliament and it is getting beyond a joke.

Mr. Newton: I think that the hon. Lady knows that that is the sort of matter that I and the Government take seriously, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been working on it in the way that I mentioned. It is difficult for me to go beyond that in my response, as the hon. Lady has not given me details of the questions that concern her. If she will provide me with such details, I shall see whether I can do something to help.

Rev. William McCrea (Mid–Ulster): Can the Leader of the House tell me when he might find time in the programme to discuss the important issue of the underfunding of the health service in Northern Ireland, which has led to the closure of many wards and has meant that many people in the Province have failed to have the major operations that they urgently need?

Mr. Newton: I do not think that I can undertake to find immediate time for a debate on that matter, but I can draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is due to answer questions here this day week.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): With regard to what Madam Speaker and the Leader of the House said about the two-minute silence on Monday, would it be possible for the right hon. Gentleman to have words with the House authorities about the annunciator system, to ensure that people know when it is 11 am, so that tours and other activities could come to a standstill, to enable people to pay appropriate respect at that time?

Mr. Newton: As I have already drawn the matter to the attention of the ultimate House authority, to whom I genuflect once again, I am sure that you will consider that suggestion, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Bob Dunn (Dartford): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent early debate to allow the attention of the House to be drawn to the fact that there are deteriorating road conditions on the A2 trunk road, as it runs through my constituency in north-west Kent, and to enable us to endorse the high-profile campaign being run by the Kentish Times group of newspapers demanding that safety features be incorporated on the road as soon as possible, to minimise accidents and fatalities?

Mr. Newton: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will study my hon. Friend's remarks with great care.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Further to the questions raised by my hon. Friends about the Government answering questions, is the Leader of the House aware of the alarming events of the past few days, when my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) asked for statistics on lottery pay-outs, constituency by constituency? He was refused that information, so he decided to find it out for himself. The cost was not disproportionate: he estimates that it cost £15. It showed that there was a great lottery fiddle, inasmuch as Derbyshire authorities were not getting a fair crack of the whip.

I drew that to the attention of the House at the beginning of the year, but nothing has been done—in fact, the situation has got worse. It is high time that different regions and different constituencies had a fair crack of the whip in the pay-outs.

Mr. Newton: There were two points there—one rather better than the other. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage recognises that the request for information could have been met within the £450 limit, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State is writing to the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) about that today; so the first point was fair. For the rest, frankly, the hon. Gentleman is on rather less safe ground. The plain fact is that lottery awards are made by people independent of Ministers; they are invited to take into account various criteria for determining the pattern of awards, and those criteria, as I understand it, are never geographical but based on quality of project.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Can my right hon. Friend ensure that a Minister of the Crown makes a statement to the House after the European Court gives its judgment on the United Kingdom's appeal against the working time directive next Tuesday? The judgment will have the most profound implications for working practices, for employment law, for competitiveness and for what should be Britain's internal social affairs. Can we have a guarantee that we shall be able to question a Minister of Her Majesty's Government about it?

Mr. Newton: There are two points. First, I share my hon. Friend's view of the importance of the matter, and he will be well aware of the views expressed by the United Kingdom Government. Secondly, I shall bear in mind his request for a statement.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): May I remind the Leader of the House that I raised with him last Thursday the introduction of regulations on the concessionary television licence scheme? I did so after I had extended the normal courtesy of ringing the Department of National Heritage to say that I intended to raise the matter. A week has gone by, and I have heard nothing from the Department. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is now in a position to say whether the regulations will be introduced before Christmas.

Mr. Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in warning me that he intended to raise the matter again. That has enabled me to be in a better position than I was last week, and I can inform him that I understand that the Department of National Heritage intends to lay regulations before the end of the year and is about to write to him about the matter. It may be of interest to the House

to know that the new regulations will not only deal with sheltered housing, which is the hon. Gentleman's focus, but clarify the treatment of caravans.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): My right hon. Friend will recall that last week I asked for an urgent debate on the recent Social Security Committee report on unfunded pensions in Europe. I should again like to call for such a debate, because in *Hansard* of 6 November there is a question headed "Public Pension Liabilities" from my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Mr. Banks). My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has sought to answer some of the points. We seem to be engaged in a debate, because I notice that the Chairman of the Social Security Committee has given notice of a question calling for a response to the report. I urge my right hon. Friend to think carefully about that and urge his right hon. and hon Friends to hold a debate rather than conducting so important a discussion across the pages of *Hansard*.

Mr. Newton: I think that I have demonstrated over the years that I take account of requests for debates, but I am not immediately able to respond this afternoon. I pointed out last week that we are not many weeks away from a substantial debate over several days on the Budget, when such matters would be in order.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 105?

[*That this House notes the continued suffering of the people of the Sudan and the Reverend Dr Dick Rogers' 40 day bread and water sympathy vigil outside the Foreign Office; encourages Her Majesty's Government to become actively committed to the pursuit of a fair settlement of the war in Sudan as part of a multi-national effort to that end, with consideration given to the appointment of a special envoy; and calls on both sides of the conflict to enter into negotiations that embrace all parties in the country, with a view to the acceptance of the subsequent settlement by the said parties.*]

The motion calls for peacekeeping in Sudan and draws attention to the 40-day vigil in Whitehall by the Rev. Dr. Dick Rogers. I urge Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers to keep a closer watch on what is happening in the Sudan and to take a lead in bringing people together towards peace.

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman can be assured that the Government share his concern for the people of Sudan as expressed in the motion. He may know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office explained in answer to questions on 30 October that we do not believe that a British initiative would be fruitful at the moment.

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on firework safety, so that the House can assist my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs in the review of firework regulations to which he referred yesterday? I ask that because of the plea in my local paper, the *Bromley and Hayes News Shopper*, by the brother of Steve Tinker, the man who was tragically killed last Saturday in a firework accident.

Mr. Newton: I am afraid that I cannot promise a debate, although my hon. Friend might like to consider the Wednesday morning possibilities. I assure him that my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs is well aware of the widely expressed concerns about the availability of certain sorts of firework and is reviewing firework controls and the availability of bangers.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I refer the Leader of the House to early-day motion 151, the contents of which have already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner).

[*That this House notes that in response to a parliamentary question for written answer by the honourable Member for North East Derbyshire, the Department of National Heritage has supplied a computer disc to the Library which details, by parliamentary constituency, each National Lottery award made up to 30th September 1996; further notes that a list compiled by the Library from this disc shows the total amounts awarded in each United Kingdom parliamentary constituency listed in descending order with the top award of £201,480,455 and in 651st place the bottom award of only £12,000; is dismayed that there is such a massive maldistribution of awards with the bulk of awards being skewed towards a small group of constituencies and to certain parts of the United Kingdom, as illustrated by the fact that the three constituencies in north eastern Derbyshire all fall within the bottom 10 per cent. of places on the list with North East Derbyshire placed 587th, Bolsover 616th and Chesterfield 628th; further calls upon the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the National Lottery is obliged to correct this disgraceful state of affairs and to operate formulas based on equity and need, subject to regional, county and district democratic input; and regrets that the National Heritage Minister claimed it would be of disproportionate cost—defined as £450—to rank the awards per constituency when this operation only cost the Library £15.*]

The Library now has a list detailing how much lottery money each constituency had received by 30 September. The sums range from £201 million at the top to £12,000 at the bottom. That is a massive maldistribution, whatever considerations are given to the needs of particular areas. Should we not therefore have a full debate about the national lottery and the way in which funds are distributed, so that they can be better related to the people who purchase lottery tickets and so that some areas are not almost excluded by the current provisions?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman might like to consider trying to raise that matter on a Wednesday. I cannot add to what I said before. The lottery money is distributed by independent bodies according to the merits of the proposals that are made and I think that that is right.

Mr. John Carlisle (Luton, North): May I say respectfully to my right hon. Friend that he showed some irritation in answering the questions of my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) on the compensation for those who will suffer through the intended legislation on firearms? Does he accept that that legislation is not worthy of a Conservative Government, and that it will affect thousands of innocent people, cause the loss of jobs and put businesses out of business? The money resolution as

[Mr. John Carlisle]

drafted will not cover that problem. Will he ensure that it is changed before we come to Tuesday's debate, so that the people involved are fully compensated for a loss of business incurred through no fault of their own?

Mr. Newton: I must say that I do not think that I betrayed the slightest sign of irritation when responding to my right hon. Friend the Member for Worthing (Sir T. Higgins) and others. I simply said—as calmly and straightforwardly as I could, given that it is clearly not a matter that I can decide at the Dispatch Box—that I would draw it to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary. I am bound to say, however, that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Carlisle) has irritated me somewhat.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): I hope that I do not irritate the Leader of the House. Will the House, or any of its Committees, be considering the annual report of the prisons ombudsman? He said that the Prison Service withheld vital files and lied in one case, but instead of taking appropriate action, the Home Secretary reduced the prisons ombudsman's powers, so that he can now obtain only the files that the Prison Service wants to give him—indeed, he cannot check on the Home Secretary's and other Ministers' roles, either. Surely, that is not the right way to proceed, and the House should consider the ombudsman's report.

Mr. Newton: I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will himself consider the report very carefully.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will my right hon. Friend find time, as soon as possible, for the House to discuss the impact of the 48-hour directive and the minimum wage on employment and the economy of this country? The 48-hour directive is totally impracticable and a lunatic suggestion to be imposed on this country. On the minimum wage, we are discussing not only a level of pay below which people would not drop, but the massive impact of differentials throughout the economy. Both are job-destroying measures and both are supported by the two Opposition parties, and that will not go unnoticed.

Mr. Newton: I have already indicated in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) that the Government are aware of those concerns. I cannot add to my earlier answer, but I take note of the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans).

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate a matter of great importance that was recently the subject of a lead story in "GP News", in which it was revealed that one in four of all elderly patients who were admitted to a hospital in Gloucester were suffering from the misuse of medicinal drugs? As 40 per cent. of all hospital admissions are elderly patients, does that not show that there is an extraordinary over-prescription of medicinal drugs? Most of those people were taking up to six different drugs for non-life-threatening conditions. If deaths from medicinal drugs continue at the present rate, within four years more people will die from misuse of medicines than die from all road traffic accidents. Is that not a matter of prime concern to the House?

Mr. Newton: The Government have sought to tackle issues of over-prescribing for a long time—certainly going back to my time as Minister for Health. Ministers continue to take such matters very seriously and I shall bring the hon. Gentleman's concerns to their attention.

Mr. Toby Jessel (Twickenham): Can my right hon. Friend find time for the House to debate, or draw to the attention of the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for National Heritage, my early-day motion 154, which was published today?

[*That this House continues to honour, respect and cherish the name of Mahatma Ghandi; takes note that in a will made in 1940 the Mahatma left all his property and the copyright to all his writings, published or unpublished, to the Navajivan Trust, which he had set up in 1929, with absolute rights vested in the Trust, the will being duly probated after his assassination in 1948; that Mr. Kalyanam, an employee in 1948 in the office of the Mahatma, offered some of his papers for sale by Sotheby's who commendably refused to put them on sale; that the papers are now advertised for sale by auction by Phillips on 14th November, which would cause a sense of outrage in India; and calls upon Phillips forthwith to withdraw these papers from sale and to take steps to ensure the safe return of these objects as soon as may be to their rightful owners, the Navajivan Trust in India.*]

Action should be taken to ensure that Mahatma Ghandi's own papers, which appear to have been purloined by a former employee of the Mahatma's, either before his assassination in 1948 or shortly thereafter, and which have been placed on sale to be auctioned by Phillips in London one week from today, on 14 November, can be safely recovered and returned to their rightful owners in India.

Mr. Newton: I should say that, as far as I know, that issue has not been raised with us by the Indian Government, either in London or, to our knowledge, in Delhi. However, I am told that the Indian Government have supported attempts to have the papers withdrawn from auction and that the sale to which my hon. Friend referred may not now take place.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): Has the Leader of the House seen the feature in tonight's *Evening Standard* about poverty in London, which is based on the report produced by the London Research Centre, "The Capital Divided"? The report uses only official Government statistics and, as the *Evening Standard* says, shows that poverty in London is worse than anywhere else in Britain and spreading like a cancer. Is that not an indictment of Government policies as applied to the capital city over the past 17 years? Could we please have a debate on London? There is a Minister responsible for London, and it is about time we held him accountable for what is going on in this city.

Mr. Newton: I have not seen the feature article to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I shall ensure that I look at it, and I am sure that colleagues will do so. I shall keep in mind the idea of a debate on London; I hope that,

in return, the hon. Gentleman will keep in mind the huge amount that the Government have done—not least through the London Docklands development corporation and the huge infrastructure projects that are going on in London—to regenerate the city and provide a firmer basis for employment.

Mr. Max Madden (Bradford, West): With the peace process hanging by a thread, will the Leader of the House persuade the Prime Minister to make a statement to the House next week about two matters—first, about how quickly Sinn Fein would be allowed to enter all-party talks should there be a further cessation of violence by the IRA, and secondly, about confidence-building measures, especially regarding the treatment of prisoners from both communities? Does the Leader of the House agree that it is imperative that that statement is made to the House rather than to any other forum elsewhere?

Mr. Newton: Of course I shall bring the hon. Gentleman's request to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I am bound to say, however, that it seems to me that our position on the talks and a settlement is clear and on the record.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Madden), may I ask that a statement be made to the House about the report by Dr. Brian Caddy on the use of questionable forensic evidence in terrorist cases? May I ask that, in such a statement, there be specific reference to the interviews, which I understand have now been concluded, by Home Office officials with Padraig MacFhloinn in prison? He has accepted responsibility for the Warrington bombings and made a formal statement about the non-involvement of my constituent, John Kinsella.

If, in the absence of any forensic evidence and any other substantive evidence, those interviews confirm statements that John Kinsella knew nothing about the contents of the holdall that he was left, will his sentence and conviction be reviewed immediately?

Mr. Newton: I understand and respect the hon. Gentleman's reasons for raising what is obviously an important constituency case to him. He will understand that I am not in a position to comment from the Dispatch Box this afternoon on the detail, but I shall ensure that the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary is drawn to what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May I take the Lord President back to the request of the shadow Leader of the House for a debate on ex-service men and women's affairs? On 1 July 1994, I instituted a private Member's motion and debate, which was approved unanimously by the House of Commons, calling for a Minister responsible for ex-service people's affairs. Since then, there have been early-day motions signed by 279 Members from all parties in the House of Commons, asking the Government to look at that possibility and to think about it again.

This is not a party matter; hon. Members from all parts of the House want the Government to reconsider it. There are 1.5 million members of the Royal British Legion, and many hundreds of thousands more in the Royal Air Forces Association and the Royal Naval Association, who are bewildered and dismayed by the Prime Minister's belief that, uniquely, the United Kingdom does not need a Minister responsible for veterans, whereas most countries, including our former adversaries, the United States and Commonwealth countries, have one.

Mr. Newton: Of course I accept that that is not a marked party matter. I have not treated it as such, and nor has anyone else, to my knowledge, but it is a matter of judgment to decide the best way of providing the help and support that we all wish to give to our ex-service men. On that front, I cannot add to what I said earlier.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): When my right hon. Friend reads the *Evening Standard* report on poverty, will he note the extraordinary correlation that the worst examples appear to occur, time and again, in boroughs that have been controlled and run by the Labour party? Is that not a reflection on Labour's approach to policies to help business and encourage employment, and is it not a further example of Labour's record in government in the 1990s?

Mr. Newton: Had I wished to be more aggressive than is my wont with the hon. Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks), I might have added to what I said earlier about the London Docklands development corporation by saying that, until we took that out of the hands of the Labour local authorities in the area, nothing happened; had we not done so, docklands would still be derelict.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Was not the question asked by the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold) a gross misrepresentation of the facts? He is playing with statistics, and he knows it. Was the Leader of the House in the Chamber yesterday when I expressed my concerns about the unemployment statistics that have been published in relation to Workington constituency? I do not believe those figures. I know that they are not true; they are false figures. I asked yesterday for a house-to-house survey to be carried out in my constituency, so that the real figures can be produced.

May we have a statement at the Dispatch Box about how the figures are being compiled? If not, may we have a debate in which hon. Members on both sides of the House can press Ministers on the compilation of unemployment statistics?

Mr. Newton: I regret that I was not in the House yesterday when the hon. Gentleman asked his question, and it had not been drawn to my attention. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is due to answer questions on Wednesday next week.

Copyright

4.5 pm

Madam Speaker: We now come to motion No. 1. I call Mr. Secretary Lang—I am so sorry, Mr. Ian Taylor, whom I know very well. He is a most important Minister.

The Minister for Science and Technology (Mr. Ian Taylor): I beg to move,

That the draft Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 1996, which were laid before this House on 11th July, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

Madam Speaker, you quite raised my pulse rate with that instant promotion.

The regulations implement two European Community copyright directives on satellite and cable broadcasting, directive 93/83, and on rental, lending and other rights related to copyright, directive 92/100, and also aspects of directive 93/98.

The directives harmonise rights in areas such as the rental and lending of copyright works, other uses of works, such as broadcasting of sound recordings and cross-frontier satellite broadcasting and cable retransmission. Most of those rights already exist in the United Kingdom, and the directives in many cases raise the standards of protection elsewhere in the European Union to those that exist here. So, although the directives require changes to UK law, they will be of substantial benefit to important UK industries, such as the record industry, by establishing similar and improved rights throughout the European Union.

Many, often complex, changes are nevertheless needed to bring UK law fully into line with the directives. The main changes include, first, the extension of rental and lending rights to all copyright works, whereas at present they apply only to books, computer programmes, films and sound recordings. Secondly, they give authors and performers rental and lending rights in films and sound recordings, which at present only producers have. Thirdly, they give performers rights in relation to broadcasting and public performance of sound recordings.

Extensive consultation with all interested parties—about 200 representative bodies—has been undertaken, and we have tried to find a balance that is fair to them all, which means, inevitably, that not everyone is completely satisfied.

That consultation and the complexity of the provisions has, regrettably, led to delays in implementation of the directives, which is now overdue. Implementation of the rental directive should have taken place by 1 July 1994 and that of the cable and satellite directive by 1 January 1995. We are not alone in the EU in being late. I apologise to the House, but the delay has been due to the complexity of the matter.

As there are many issues on which I could now address the House, which would take considerable time, and as I would be interested to hear which of the many aspects interest Members, I will undertake to respond to all the points raised, if I catch your eye, Madam Speaker, at the end of the debate.

4.8 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Hoon (Ashfield): I thank the Minister for his brief—I am tempted to say terse—outline of a statutory instrument, which, as I understood it, implemented three directives: the rental directive, the cable and satellite directive, and residual parts of the duration directive which were not dealt with when that directive was substantially passed into British law.

I make it clear at the outset that the Opposition do not intend to vote against the regulations. However, it is equally clear that there is profound dissatisfaction with the way in which they have been drafted. That is obvious from the various representations that I have received. It is clear that, in dealing with copyright, the Government have been uniquely successful in once again bringing together different organisations that historically have very different perspectives but are consistently concerned about the way in which the proposals affect both individuals and the industries in which they work.

My first general question to the Minister is whether it is appropriate to deal with three different directives in a single, and inevitably complex, statutory instrument. Why could we not have dealt with the directives separately and had three separate statutory instruments dealing with each aspect at the European level? Alternatively, given the delay that we have faced, why not deal with all outstanding copyright matters in a comprehensive piece of primary legislation?

I am sure that the Minister is aware that the main criticism levelled by the various organisations affected is that they do not have the opportunity to amend the proposals. There are detailed points of criticism that cannot be dealt with in this kind of debate. Given the lack of any substantive legislation from the Department of Trade and Industry, I am sure that the Minister would welcome the opportunity to do something substantial as he whiles away his time before the general election.

My second general concern is with timing. The Minister has already made the point that the legislation is woefully overdue. The statutory instrument was laid on 19 July this year and is therefore more than two years late, as the directives' implementation date was 1 July 1994. What is the reason for the delay? I do not make that point simply to dwell upon the lack of timeliness or competence on the part of the Minister's Department, but it is relevant to the general question of whether the legislation is needed today.

We are debating directives that were agreed in 1992. Therefore, given my understanding of the processes of the European institutions, it seems reasonable to suggest that the directives were drafted in the mid-1980s—probably based on a perceived need in the early 1980s. Given the pace of technological change, the real question for the Minister is whether we should be addressing perceived needs in the early 1990s and those of the next century rather than conducting an historical debate about proposals that were drafted in an earlier age.

As the Minister said, the principal purpose of the rental directive is to provide new rights for creators and performers to earn additional revenue from rentals and lending. My third query is whether the statutory instrument succeeds in translating that aim properly into law. In the explanatory recitals, the directive states:

"Whereas the creative and artistic work of authors and performers necessitates an adequate income as a basis for further creative and artistic work . . . Whereas the equitable remuneration must take account of the importance of the contribution of the authors and performers concerned to the phonogram or film".

The directive's specific purpose is to ensure that the rights of performers are properly recognised in law.

Performers are clearly concerned that, far from generating new income for them, the statutory instrument is likely to place an inappropriate financial burden on the kinds of small businesses operated by many creative individuals who should benefit from the rental directive. There is concern about the expenditure likely to be incurred by authors and performers having to refer constantly to the Copyright Tribunal and to the courts as a result of this statutory instrument.

There is particular anxiety about the requirement for authors and performers to give notice before 1 January 1997—which is not far away—of any intention to exercise their right to remuneration where rental arises from agreements concluded before July 1994. That places an unnecessary burden upon them in terms of time and cost. The Minister might explain how notification will be given. Will it cover all the agreements before July 1994 or only those made between July 1992, when the rental directive was adopted, and July 1994?

Similar anxieties are expressed on behalf of performers about the meaning of equitable remuneration. How is that to be calculated? Would it not be appropriate for authors and performers to have the right to information, to allow them to calculate the basis for that which is meant by equitable remuneration?

The fairness of such payments from users, and broadcasters especially, to performers is generally speaking adjudged by statutory tribunals or courts, which examine the value of the right to the users, the extent and profitability of the use and the economic circumstances and prospects of the user. The formula in the statutory instrument does allow performers, individually or collectively, to take the user to the Copyright Tribunal on these questions, but only the copyright owner of the record.

A clear criticism of the proposals is that United Kingdom performers will be the only performers in the European economic area, not just the European Union, in such a disadvantaged position. Is that consistent with the intention that is behind the rental directive to provide a consistent approach across both the European Union and the European economic area?

It seems clear that article 182 is not properly translated into British law by regulation 20. The statutory instrument provides for the performer to exercise his or her rights to equitable remuneration solely against the record company and not against the user. Now that I have the Minister's full attention, I should be grateful if he takes up that matter. The statutory instrument fails to ensure that it is the user who should pay the equitable remuneration for the use of a record in any communication to the public. That is different from the arrangement in any other European member state.

A practical problem for performers is obtaining appropriate remuneration due to them in other countries. They clearly have a legal right under the directive, but they believe that it will be difficult and expensive to enforce. I would be grateful if the Minister could inform us of any steps that he might be prepared to take to assist United Kingdom-based performers to secure the rights to which they are entitled, given that it is his legislation that is responsible for causing the difficulty that I have outlined.

All other European countries allow the collective administration of performers' rights as against users' collective organisations. In the UK, only record companies and their organisations will be involved. That means that performers will be placed in an inferior position compared with their continental counterparts. It means also that the United Kingdom is out of step with every other system in the European Union. As it is United Kingdom music that is widely played and listened to throughout Europe, it is unfortunate that we are not giving our performers and creators of music in the UK the same rights as are available to performers from other countries.

It is clear that the identification of users and their uses of records is relatively straightforward. Performers, however, will face considerable difficulty in identifying the owners of the copyright in all the records used and in enforcing their rights against dormant or insolvent owners.

A further problem with the translation of article 182 concerns section 72 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Article 182 clearly requires payment of equitable remuneration by the user if a record is used in broadcasting or for any other communication to the public. That is both direct and indirect broadcasting. Section 72 provides that when a broadcast is shown or played in public to an audience that has not paid an admission fee, there is no infringement of copyright in any sound recording which is included in the broadcast. That limitation does not apply to the rights of authors, and it is almost unprecedented in other European countries.

I should be grateful if the Minister would explain why it is possible to introduce the statutory instrument without dealing with section 72 of the 1988 Act, because it is clear that the directive deals with both direct and indirect broadcasting. Indeed, if section 72 were to continue, there would be a continuing cost to performers. To repeat the point, if the purpose of the statutory instrument and the directive on which it is based is to provide greater revenue for performers, it seems unfortunate that that aspect has not been dealt with.

Indeed, if we pursue the statutory instrument without some later amendment, the United Kingdom will be out of step with all other European countries. Only the United Kingdom, Ireland and Greece have a section 72 exemption or its equivalent. It is significant—I hope the Minister will agree—that Denmark used to have a similar exemption but repealed it on the basis that it was necessary to implement the rental directive properly and to meet its Community obligations. There will be important economic consequences—estimated to be in the order of £80 million loss of income to performers and rights holders—as a result of failing to repeal section 72.

There is a further area in which performers' and authors' rights are not protected in the statutory instrument in the way in which the rental directive at least contemplated. Article 5(6) of the rental directive includes an optional provision for member states to provide for a presumption of transfer of authors' rental rights to the film producer. In regulation 12 of the statutory instrument, the Government have chosen to implement this option. I should be grateful if the Minister would explain why it was not possible to leave the assignment of the copyright to be freely negotiated between the two sides. Why is it necessary to rely on the presumption in the statutory instrument? How can that be reconciled with the requirement of the 1988 Act, which says that copyright assignments must be in writing?

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

Regulation 14 establishes the right to equitable remuneration payable by a person to whom the right is transferred or any successor in title. One of the problems for those engaged in the film business is that many film companies are formed simply for the purpose of producing a particular film, after which they have no continuing existence. Moreover, not all of them are successful, and clearly there are difficulties in enforcing rights against bankrupt organisations. Would it not be more sensible—this is the practical suggestion made by those affected—to allow that right to be exercisable against all those who benefit commercially from the rental process, including the rental outlets?

I have a final technical question concerned with satellite broadcasts, in particular the way in which the statutory instrument affects CNN International and other satellite channels that use similar means of distributing their programmes. CNN International is edited in Atlanta. It is then transmitted to British Telecom in the United Kingdom, which simultaneously uplinks the signal to the Astra satellite for pan-European broadcast. Paragraph 6 of the statutory instrument deals with satellite broadcasts made from non-European economic area states that do not provide a specified level of protection.

The concern is that, since the United States would not provide the specified level of protection, this clause would operate in relation to CNN International's broadcasts. That would mean, according to the rules, that BT, which provides CNN International's uplink facility, would be defined as "the person making the CNNI broadcast", pursuant to the proposed section 6(A)2(b) of the statutory instrument. Because of that definition and the rather artificial way in which it is constructed, the anxiety is that the statutory instrument could be interpreted as defining BT not only as the maker of the broadcast for infringement purposes but as the owner of the copyright in the broadcast. That is clearly not the directive's intention, but I, and I am sure CNN, would be grateful if the Minister would clarify that.

I have made a series of technical observations about the statutory instrument's drafting, but it is necessary, in conclusion, to make some more general observations about the way in which the Government have approached the important area of copyright.

The United Kingdom clearly has an opportunity here to make a significant contribution to Europewide and worldwide technological initiatives aimed at establishing secure electronic trading and providing protection for intellectual property of all kinds. As we move into a digital world, copyright protection will be crucial to allowing our industries, based on the development of intellectual property rights, to flourish and to compete around the world.

It is unfortunate that, in drafting the statutory instrument based on the directives, the United Kingdom has not been able to provide an approach consistent with that of our European partners, and we could not blame them if they looked elsewhere when standards were being decided. It will be unfortunate if we have domestic legislation which appears to have been drafted in such a way as to circumvent certainly the spirit of the directives when later we want the co-operation of our European partners in drafting legislation that is to the benefit and protection of performers and creators based in the United Kingdom.

As I have said, it is unfortunate that we are debating matters now which could have been dealt with many years earlier, when the pace of technological change has brought up many different issues. The key issue that we have not yet faced is digital distribution. That should be the underlying issue. Is the Minister confident that the existing copyright legislation will be sufficient to deal with the rather more complicated intellectual property that will arise as a result of the digital distribution of a wide variety of intellectual content?

Those matters will be discussed shortly at a conference in Geneva as part of the World Intellectual Property Organisation's debate. It is trying to establish standards now which will affect the way in which digital distribution develops. It is clear that the content providers, those who are responsible for creation and performing, will not be willing to see their talent exploited unless they are properly protected by the legislation that needs to be brought forward.

I hope that the Minister will tell the House that the Government are actively pursuing the matter, are concerned to see a proper protection for intellectual rights, and are not simply belatedly enforcing legislation agreed at the European level which is looking increasingly out of date.

4.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) made two suggestions to the Minister about potential ways forward. One was to deal separately with the different parts of the statutory instrument stemming from three different directives, and the other was that the Government should bring forward comprehensive primary legislation on the matter. I shall seek to explain why my preference is strongly towards my hon. Friend's second proposal.

During the passage of the Broadcasting Bill in the previous parliamentary Session, I suggested to the Minister, and I think that he agreed with me, that our parliamentary process has a fundamental weakness when it comes to dealing with matters such as this where the technology is moving so incredibly quickly. The context of that remark in relation to intellectual property is obvious. Given the development of digital signals, it is easy to envisage ways in which people will be able to bypass attempts to protect copyright, as readily available technologies are open to misuse.

The Minister will be pleased to hear that in a speech at the opening session of Telework 96 in Vienna on Monday I extended to all Parliaments my criticism of the Government's attempts to deal with this problem. All owners of intellectual property face a major problem in the digital age.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield cited an extremely good example of the problems we face when he referred to the CNN equation. The same applies to all existing broadcasters. One can also envisage the existence of a rogue broadcaster—the next century's version of Radio Caroline. It would be easy to bypass any attempt to regulate copyright on a world basis simply by setting up just offshore and buying a piece of satellite space.

This is a serious issue, and it has enormous implications for musicians, authors and writers of software, and for every other signal that can conceivably be transmitted in a digital form. The important discussions that are taking place in Geneva through WIPO—an appalling acronym—should be uppermost in our minds.

Will the Minister tell us what contribution the Government are making to those important discussions? How will we persuade not only the countries that try to restrict incoming signals, but those that take no notice of existing copyright regulations on hard copy to participate in a regulatory regime that will work? As is often the case, we will end up having a local debate on whether one nation or another in the European Union has failed to address its responsibilities. We will not deal with the underlying problem, which is of enormous proportions: the ability of a nation or a company to bypass any attempts to regulate.

Other matters that are currently subject to directive considerations overlap into this area—some slightly and some significantly. Data protection must be carefully considered. How do we ensure that the two-way trade between ownership and protection of information is properly balanced? In another capacity, I sent a strongly worded recommendation to Members of the European Parliament on the draft directive on telecommunications data protection urging them to slow down or, preferably, to stop that directive. It strikes me as a very uncompetitive approach, which, although it may be to the advantage of Deutsche Telekom, certainly will not benefit companies in this country.

All those aspects are linked. The missing part of the equation is a strategic overview from the Government. I do not claim that the issue is simple, and the Minister will understand that I am not trying to score a cheap political point; but we have a real problem. Although we pick away on a piecemeal basis at the various issues—all of which stem from the power that will rest with the potential abuser of digital information, and all of which are closely linked—there seems to be no over-arching Government strategy.

Nor is there such a strategy from the European Union, whence the directives came. It would be helpful if the Minister could explain in detail what representations have been made in respect of procedures currently taking place in the European Union—and, indeed, in the Geneva talks, which are of the utmost importance.

If we fail to address those important matters, we shall do a massive disservice to a very large revenue earner in this country. It is not simply finding a bureaucratic solution to satisfy the whims of the drafters in Brussels that should concern us; we should be worrying about how properly to protect the important people to whom we owe so much—the authors of music, software and all sorts of technical journals whose copyright will be at risk if we do not solve the overall problem.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give some comfort to those of us who are just a little worried about the fact that we are rushing headlong, at an unstoppable pace, into a new era of communication with one missing element: a Government strategy that will make it work.

4.37 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) has already mentioned this point, but I should like the Minister to comment. It relates to matters arising from a letter that I received from Dennis Scard, general secretary of the Musicians Union. I know that the Minister has corresponded with the union, and, indeed, with hon. Members who written to his Department following representations received from it.

The union makes it clear that

"some changes have been made in response to our representations",

and it is obliged to the Minister for that. It regards those changes, however, less as concessions than

"as an indication that the earlier drafts did not meet the objectives of the Directive or the realities of the situation."

The general secretary expresses his union's disappointment that that is still the case

"in the key issue of who the performers' right is against and the equality of that right compared to the record producer."

The letter continues:

"The Minister concedes that the term 'equitable remuneration' means a fair payment in relation to the use of the record. The fairness of such payments from users—(e.g. broadcasters) to rights owners (e.g. performers) is judged between the parties in every country, including the UK, by statutory tribunals or courts which examine the value of the right to the user, the extent of profitability of the use, and the economic circumstances and prospects of the user."

The union makes it clear:

"The formula adopted in the Statutory Instrument does not, however, allow the performers, individually or collectively, to take the user to the Copyright Tribunal on these matters, but only the copyright owner in the record. UK performers will be the only performers in the EEA in this disadvantaged position."

Is that the Minister's reading of the position? If so, and if performers in the UK will be treated differently from any other performers in the European Economic Area, will the Minister kindly reconsider the matter and find out what he can do about it? Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.40 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor: This has been a constructive debate about some complex issues and about the future of the digital age. I shall try to touch on the questions and the issues of the future.

The directives are brought together in the statutory instrument because they closely interrelate. They were not tabled by the European Union at the same time, but, by the time we got around to it, they affected the same Act—the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988. Frankly, it was just more efficient to do it this way. We should also bear it in mind that we consulted with the same dramatis personae on each of the directives. It was easier to consult on the directives at the same time than to do so consecutively, and the directives are overdue, largely because we have had such a complex and lengthy consultation. These are difficult matters to draft into UK law, as has been recognised by the hon. Members for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) and for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks).

I know that the Musicians Union was worried about whether we had fully implemented the directives. There is a difference of judgment on what the directives obliged us to do and who we should target in relation to the use of exercisable rights. Only record producers in the UK have had rights enabling them to obtain royalties from users. We do not consider it desirable to disturb the traditional relationship between producers and end users.

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

Granting performers rights would have disturbed the traditional pattern and would have meant, in effect, restructuring producers' rights. We felt that not disturbing that traditional relationship was the best way forward, and that has been reflected in our interpretation of the directives.

The Musicians Union also raised with us the issue of the percentage share. Performers are granted a 50 per cent. share, usually in respect of traditional forms of broadcasting and performance. The rights that are being granted in the UK will apply also to newer forms of exploitation that are emerging, but that have yet to become established in practice. In those changing circumstances, we are reluctant to prescribe a share.

This deals with another point that has been mentioned in all three speeches. We must try to anticipate changes in the market. It is clear that 50 per cent. would not necessarily be appropriate in relation to all the future technological means of delivery. For traditional uses of recordings, however, we understand that producers have already said that they are willing to share royalties on a 50:50 basis. Clearly, therefore, other means of distribution would be subject to negotiation.

Further questions were asked about the difficulty in obtaining payments from other European Union states unless rights in Britain are similar to those elsewhere. Again, the directive does not require any particular form of implementation, and we have had to make judgments as to what is most appropriate in Britain. In many cases, the rights that are referred to elsewhere in the EU again relate to rights for traditional broadcasting matters, not some of the newer ways in which we are likely to be engaged. There could be a collective negotiation of reciprocal arrangements, with performers collecting remuneration in other EU countries. The UK Government are prepared to take up any problems in obtaining remuneration with other EU Governments, as we have done when necessary.

There was a question about the exception to public performance rights in relation to sound recordings in section 72 of the 1988 Act and why that measure was not repealed, as some believe the directive seems to require. The directive does not expressly require us to repeal it. We consider it undesirable in any event to remove such a specific exception, approved by Parliament during the passage of the 1988 Act, without an equally express exclusion provision under the directive or other measure.

Our legal advice is that the exception in section 72, which is in respect of sound recordings contained in broadcasts seen or heard by non-paying audiences, is within the limitation to record producers' and performers' rights permitted by the directive. I am aware that record producers are concerned about the impact of section 72 on their economic interests, now that broadcasts are replacing the direct playing of sound recordings in certain retail outlets, but we do not consider that repeal of section 72 is an appropriate way in which to deal with any difficulties, particularly as it would also impact on other very different situations. In any event, the Copyright Tribunal is likely to deal with what is the appropriate royalty level for use of sound recordings in broadcast services specifically tailored to retail outlets.

Mr. Hoon: The Minister has mentioned the interests of record producers, but are not performers, record producers and, most significantly, record companies all united in asking the Government to reconsider section 72 because of those groups' clear concern about the impact on their income?

Mr. Taylor: There was pressure on us, but pressures would arise in following other courses. The retail trade, for example, is developing various ways of using music in their outlets. Repeal would be an extremely restrictive practice and, in the long term, it would not necessarily be in the interests of any of the parties concerned, which is why we have continued the exception in section 72, which was debated in the Standing Committee on the Copyright, Design and Patents Bill.

Mr. Hoon: Surely, if the retail trade or other organisation—restaurants, cafes, public houses, and so on—chooses to use music, particularly broadcast music, it should pay an appropriate fee for the use of that music. It paysa fee if it uses specialised music services. Why is there a distinction between the use of specialised services and the use of broadcast music?

Mr. Taylor: We should bear it in mind that, often, such organisations do pay a fee—to the broadcaster. We are not removing the exception in relation to the further reproduction of that music in any retail outlet. We consider that to be a sensible way forward, and therefore we have not made the changes that the hon. Gentleman has requested. It was a fine balance, but, having heard all the arguments, I decided that that was the right way forward. The Copyright Tribunal is considering the matter.

The hon. Gentleman talked about equitable remuneration for rental and how it is defined. The directive did not define "equitable", as what is fair in one set of circumstances may not be so in another. Nor, therefore, can the regulations set that out, but they do provide that remuneration is not to be considered inequitable simply because it is paid in a single sum or at the time an author or performer transfers his exclusive rental right to a producer—the directive says that the remuneration may be paid in either of those ways. Again, the matter will need to be tested by the Copyright Tribunal, were there to be a dispute.

Mr. Hoon: I accept that the directive does not, in any event, define equitable remuneration, but I made the point to inquire of the Minister whether he thought it appropriate that performers in particular should have the means to ascertain the information that would allow them to find out whether they were receiving equitable remuneration—information about the number of times that the music in question was used, the circumstances of the user, the number of times and the form in which the music was reproduced, and so on. That would allow them to build the sort of picture of remuneration that is obviously available to users.

Mr. Taylor: Obtaining the proper information is a matter for the traditional negotiations with producers. As we move forward, there will be cases in which producers may not have negotiated a particular package based on what they would regard as full remuneration, simply because of the commercial opportunity, but the regulations give performers increased rights to claim an

equitable remuneration from producers. We have taken steps to help the producers, and I have tried to explain that to them. The assumption about the transfer of authors' rental rights in films to producers—a point raised by the hon. Member for Ashfield—received careful consideration.

Throughout, we have tried to err on the side of there being a proper way to get works to market without undue complexity. We certainly do not want to put a burden on any rental outlets, many of which are small businesses. We have had to make a decision about who are authors and about the respective rights of performers. On balance, I think that we have got it right. The statutory instruments were tabled on 11 July, and we have had extensive consultation since then. I am aware of the arguments.

The hon. Member for Ashfield raised a number of minor points on which he wanted guidance. For the sake of brevity, I shall write to him on those. However, he raised a serious point about the position of uplinks within the European Economic Area, from one area to another. It is a complex matter. We have attempted to apply the copyright law from the place from which the signal has been broadcast. Of course, there will be certain safeguards for countries if the uplinkers come from outside the EEA. Again, it is a matter of giving some comfort to the broadcasters about which copyright law applies.

I do not have details to hand about the specific case of how Cable News Network would be affected, but I am concerned about the possible effects on satellite uplinks. That point has been clarified in the regulations by reference to the use of the law of the country from which the signal originates.

Mr. Hoon: It would be helpful if the Minister would say categorically that there will not be any effect on the ownership of copyright. There is ambiguity under the provisions as drafted. I am not questioning the underlying reason behind the drafting; it is simply that, because of the way in which the rather technical provisions operate, there is concern that the statutory instrument could be interpreted as defining British Telecom not only as the maker of a CNN or similar broadcast for infringement purposes—the point just dealt with by the Minister—but as the owner of the copyright in that broadcast. I hope that the Minister will say that that is not the case; that would resolve any ambiguity.

Mr. Taylor: It is not the intention behind the regulations to affect authorship of broadcast or ownership of copyright, and we do not consider that they do so. Regulation 6 states not that the operator of an uplink station is the person making the broadcast, but rather that he is to be treated as such. In addition, we believe that it is clear from the manner in which the regulations are presented that the uplink operator should be treated as the broadcaster only for certain purposes—in relation to clearance of the rights in underlying works in broadcasts identified in regulation 6.

I stress that the regulations must be construed in the light of the directives that they are intended to implement, which similarly have no bearing on authorship or ownership of copyright in broadcast. That is also the approach that will be taken by United Kingdom courts in interpreting the legislation.

The key point is that, in attempting to implement the directives in UK law, we have tried not to disturb traditional relationships. We have tried to make it as simple as possible for content comfortably to flow into the UK market. In many cases, that means that, although we have strengthened the rights of performers and given them an underlying position in negotiations—the right to equitable remuneration regardless of the economic arrangements entered into by the producers—they should nevertheless negotiate with the producer.

The Copyright, Design and Patents Act was far-reaching in its vision of the future. It covers some of the problems relating to the new age of electronic interactivity—video on demand. We are comfortable that we have anticipated ways in which that may evolve as the information society progresses. An important point, which was raised by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), is that the European Commission has already published a Green Paper on copyright in the information society. Clearly, further directives that may emanate from that in due course will consider the way in which the electronic age will be accommodated. Before I conclude, I intend to deal with the wider issues that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Mr. Miller: I am a little puzzled about the Minister's remarks relating to proposed section 144A(7) and the definition of cable re-transmission. I am not sure that the definition will meet what the Minister says is the intention. For example, in transmitting a compact disc that has been recorded digitally on to a network server, or in receiving a signal, encoding it oneself and putting it out on to a server through BT networks, who would be in breach of copyright? Clearly, the person doing that would be in breach, but there is some doubt whether responsibility would also lie with BT or the cable provider—or, in the case of mixed provision, a network of people. Will the Minister explain how the definition will work?

Mr. Taylor: In some cases, such matters will have to be tested in the courts. We are talking about issues such as common carriers, whether there is a burden of proof that there was a knowing breach of copyright by a carrier, whether it be a telephone company or a broadcaster; whether rights have been properly obtained; and whether they were knowingly obtained. Quite honestly, it is not for me, across the Floor of the House of Commons, to anticipate how the courts will interpret such matters, but they will need to be tested.

As media convergence comes about, many such matters will be affected. Indeed, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said that, increasingly in the digital age, it would be easy to lose intellectual property. There could be instant quality reproduction. That is why I have been in discussions with companies, not least the Thorn EMI laboratory, about electronic digital signatures, or watermarks, embedded into a chip, which can be picked up only by special monitoring equipment. That equipment can sensibly work out whether any broadcaster is using copyright material that has not been paid for, or material that has been paid for in the proper way. Technological solutions will have to reinforce the law as we make progress.

Mr. Tony Banks: I know that it is not the Minister's job to anticipate or interpret that which the courts might decide, but there is something that he can tell us: are performers in this country challenging the fairness of

[Mr. Tony Banks]

remuneration treated differently from performers in the other countries within the EEA? Are they or are they not being treated differently from all the other performers in the EEA?

Mr. Taylor: To my knowledge, our performers are not being treated differently from all other performers. There are variations within the EEA, from country to country. Many of the ways in which our performers feel they might be treated differently in fact relate only to traditional broadcast materials. To that extent, we are attempting to provide a flexible way for performers—while still protecting them—to pursue their interests and get equitable remuneration, without specifying that in statute. As we move forward to new distribution mechanisms, we shall quickly find that the 50:50 split is not tenable. It is in the long-term interests of performers for their material to be distributed more widely rather than for it to be carefully restricted and used less. Content will be king in the new age, putting performers in a much better position.

The Government have played a leading role in the development of the wider market. We are active in the preparations for the World Intellectual Property Organisation conference in December. I have had active talks with the various music organisations in this country and in Europe. Rupert Perry of EMI has played a leading role in that. I have recently been to India to talk about copyright issues. One or two European Union countries, such as Italy, do not have a good record on copyright. We are drawing attention to that. We have also had severe problems with China and Bulgaria.

We are well aware of the need for copyright. If intellectual property is not protected, there will not be a content industry capable of dealing with the pressure of public demand. It is also necessary to protect intellectual property by technological means. Electronic signatures, or watermarks, will be essential and there will be a much greater need for monitoring. Intellectual property will be important in the transmission of music, software and programmes. It will be downloadable only in a country in which a performer is confident that his copyright will be protected rather than one without secure copyright protection.

That can be resolved only through the implementation of responsible policies around the world. Sir Leon Brittan will be assisting in the World Trade Organisation talks. Further talks are being held by WIPO. We are putting as steadfast a case as possible, for good commercial reasons. The music industry is one of the few in this country that export twice as much as they import. It is an important player in the national economy and we want to do everything possible to ensure that it and all the other providers of intellectual property gain secure access to world markets.

Mr. Miller: Is the Minister seeking to redefine the traditional meaning of the word "broadcast" in the context of this debate? Will he press for that definition to extend to all forms of digital transmission?

Mr. Taylor: I am cautious about broadening that definition. The hon. Gentleman will well understand that I believe that there will eventually be convergence. Even the BBC has openly announced plans for broadcasting over the Internet. There will be a convergence of all means of transmission—including cable, telephone and satellite. Broadcasters and other content providers, including the music industry, will come together in the new multimedia age.

As I mentioned in the Command Paper issued yesterday in response to the report of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee on the information society, we envisage looking at the regulatory environment in the context of changing industries. The time is not yet right for that. We have made some pre-emptive moves—for example, through the regulation by the Office of Telecommunications of conditional access as a result of the Broadcasting Act 1996. We are well apprised of the changes and well aware of their significance. It is not sensible to move too far or too fast. We are watching carefully to see where technology leads.

We have to protect copyright and intellectual property. I believe that the measure will do that, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 1996, which were laid before this House on 11th July, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

Licensing Law (Northern Ireland)

5.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Malcolm Moss): I beg to move,

That the draft Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): I understand that with this, it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.

Mr. Moss: We are considering two orders, which together form a package of reforms. One deals with the licensing of premises such as public houses, hotels and restaurants, the other with the registration of private clubs in Northern Ireland to permit them to supply alcohol to members.

The orders consolidate, with amendments, existing Northern Ireland law in the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 and the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. A wide-ranging review of the laws on alcohol began in December 1992 with a review of the laws on registered clubs. A review of the licensing laws was instigated in February 1994, after it became clear that much common ground existed between clubs and licensing laws. The orders are coming before the House only now because there have been extensive consultations since then.

The orders contain many new deregulatory provisions and reflect the changing social attitudes and expectations of modern society. We have sought to strike a balance between the need to control and regulate the sale of alcohol in an effective, enforceable and equitable way and the need to have full regard to the wider public health issues. The main changes represent a balanced relaxation of the law, while preserving the safeguards necessary to promote sensible and socially responsible attitudes to drinking and prevent alcohol abuse.

I shall try to deal quickly with the more significant provisions that amend existing laws or propose new measures. I shall first explain the provisions common to both orders and then explain those unique to each.

Articles 13 and 21 of the licensing order and article 24 of the clubs order provide that liquor licences and club registrations, currently granted or renewed for a maximum of one year, may now be valid for up to five years at the discretion of the courts. That deregulatory measure will be welcomed by licenceholders and registered clubs, and will also free up valuable court time.

Article 42 of the licensing order and article 24 of the clubs order will abolish the compulsory Sunday afternoon break and allow the supply of alcohol between 12.30 pm and 10 pm on that day. That has been a contentious issue in the reforms. However, the proposal brings the law in Northern Ireland into line with that in England and Wales, recognising widespread demands to be able to enjoy a more leisurely lunch, to have an early high tea or, as is becoming increasingly popular, to watch a satellite football match with friends.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Will the Minister clarify a point in the registration of clubs order that I cannot work out? Article 24(1)(b) says that the permitted hours are

"on Good Friday from 5 in the afternoon to 11 in the evening"

Article 24(2)(b) says that the hours shall

"provide for a break of at least 2 consecutive hours between 2 in the afternoon and 5 in the afternoon on Good Friday"

Mr. Moss: That is reasonably clear. Article 24(1)(b) gives the total period during which a club can be open, provided there is a two-hour break at some stage.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Article 24(1)(b) says:

"from 5 in the afternoon to 11 in the evening".

That is six hours. Article 24(2)(b) provides for a break between 2 in the afternoon and 5 in the afternoon when the club should not be open.

Mr. Moss: I shall come back to that point when I wind up.

Now, where was I? High tea, I think. There is no evidence that the change to the law in England and Wales has led to an increase in alcohol consumption.

Article 59 of the licensing order and article 33 of the clubs order bring the law in Northern Ireland more closely into line with England and Wales with the introduction of children's certificates, which will enable young people under 18 to be in licensed premises and registered clubs up to 9 pm, provided that they are accompanied by an adult.

The presence of children in an alcohol environment has been an emotive issue in Northern Ireland, although I would inform hon. Members that children have been allowed into the bars of sporting clubs in the Province for many years. There has been a considerable demand from people in Northern Ireland to be able to enjoy a drink in the company of their family, usually as an accompaniment to a meal, and the Government are satisfied that such a proposal will also enable children to see sensible drinking in a family context. The Government have taken the power to prescribe by regulations the requirements that all licensed premises and registered clubs must meet, should that be necessary.

I come now to proposals unique to the licensing law. Article 5 creates three new categories of premises that may be licensed—guest houses, conference centres and higher education institutions. There has been a considerable demand from the public to have a drink with a meal in guest houses, and the Government, with strong support from the Northern Ireland tourist board, believe that that limited extension will assist Northern Ireland's tourism industry.

In addition, one of the fastest-growing businesses in Northern Ireland is the conference industry, and the Government believe that that industry should be given every opportunity to compete for its share of the United Kingdom market. The Province's universities also host a number of events and conferences, and having their own licences will provide them with a greater degree of flexibility.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): In communications with, I suspect, all Northern Ireland Members of Parliament, the Minister has suggested one or two conference centres that are likely to fall within the description, but he has added "and some others", which widened the description to one that we cannot define.

[Mr. Peter Robinson]

How will the Government define which centres are to be allowed a licence under the heading of "conference centres"?

Mr. Moss: Many of the larger hotels in Northern Ireland now operate as conference centres, but obviously their licences will be taken care of in the usual way. The universities open during their vacations for conferences, and the measure will enable them to run sensible bars during those conferences. The Waterfront hall in Belfast will also run conferences. The definition will be easy to achieve and, in issuing licences, the courts will be quite clear as to what constitutes a conference centre. Such a centre should have facilities available for large groups of people to participate in a proper programme of discussion and debate over one, two or more days.

Article 5 also provides the powers under which regulations may be made specifying the conditions under which shops and/or supermarkets in Northern Ireland may, in future, sell alcohol alongside other goods. The provision that currently prevents mixed trading will be dropped from the legislation, thus bringing the law in Northern Ireland more closely into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Government are aware of concerns that placing alcohol on a supermarket shelf could give the wrong message, and could result in impulse buying and in exposing children to alcohol in the course of shopping. For that reason, regulations will be put in place to ensure that, among other things, stores set aside a designated area for the sale of alcohol.

Article 42 changes the permitted hours for free-standing off-licences, which have been at variance with the rest of the United Kingdom since 1987, and those for off-licences in, or attached to, pubs, which have differed since 1989. The Government now propose to bring all off-sales outlets in Northern Ireland broadly into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Article 44 introduces two measures that I would wish to highlight. First, licence holders who apply for additional permitted hours will no longer be required to provide food and entertainment, but instead will be required to provide one or the other or, if they so wish, both. That change is in recognition of the contention that many people may want food or entertainment, but not necessarily both.

The second change will allow licensed premises providing food or entertainment, or both, to apply to the courts for an additional two hours on a Sunday night, taking the permitted hours up to midnight, other than on Christmas day or Easter Sunday. It is becoming increasingly popular in parts of the Province for Sunday nights to become social evenings, and the proposals are a sensible recognition of that.

Article 45 deals with small public houses that cannot supply food or entertainment and, under the present law, cannot have late licences. It is therefore proposed that such pubs be allowed up to 20 late licences a year, and the Government are confident that that small but significant concession will be warmly welcomed.

Article 51 deals with the conditions as to the sale of intoxicating liquor in guest houses and restaurants. I shall target my remarks primarily on restaurants, where I am bringing forward a number of changes that I should like to bring to hon. Members' attention. The sale of alcohol in restaurants will continue to be ancillary to the purchase of a main table meal, and to assist the policing of that provision, it will be a feature of the new order that payment for food and drinks must be on the same bill. Additionally, to curb the possibility of premises masquerading as restaurants when they are really discos or something similar, I have decided to introduce a provision prohibiting the charging of an entrance fee.

While on the subject of restaurants, I should point out that I have decided to remove the provisions whereby such establishments applying for a licence to sell alcohol are subject to an annual inspection by the Northern Ireland tourist board. That inspection was extremely detailed and did not need to be satisfied by the non-licensed restaurants. I decided that the system was over-prescriptive and have taken the opportunity to deregulate and allow market forces to operate.

Articles 67 and 68 strengthen the law in relation to the presence of alcohol at unlicensed entertainments or unregistered clubs. In relation to the former, the existing law is targeted at entertainments organised for gain and has proved inadequate. The new provisions prohibit alcohol at any entertainment outside of licensed premises or registered clubs unless it is being held for other than private gain, and places the onus on the organiser to prove that it is not being held for private gain. Article 68 prohibits illegal drinking in clubs that are not registered, and is targeted at what are commonly called "shebeens". Rights of entry have also been provided to the police to investigate suspected breaches of the law.

Article 72 introduces a new provision whereby the police may seek the suspension of a licence if any change of circumstances occurring since the grant or renewal of the licence would suggest that the licence holder was no longer a fit person to hold a licence, or the licensed premises were no longer suitable for such a business.

Finally, I shall detail proposals unique to the clubs law. Articles 3 and 15 are related, and I shall deal with them together. Article 3 tightens the existing restrictions on the sale of alcohol in clubs that have ceased to be registered. That provision outlaws the presence of alcohol in such premises and introduces an automatic five-year disqualification for clubs that are convicted of that offence. That tough new measure is in direct response to clubs that have been exploiting weaknesses in the existing law by claiming that alcohol present in the premises is not being supplied by the club.

Article 4 strengthens the existing laws by providing that, during the waiting period before a court hearing of an application for registration, clubs must have in place certain rules designed to demonstrate their ability to operate within the law. That is coupled with a relaxation of the existing laws, whereby the waiting period to be served by clubs before their applications for registration can be dealt with by the courts will be reduced from two years to one. The waiting period enables clubs to demonstrate that they are bona fide and well run, and a one-year probationary period is now regarded as sufficient.

Article 26 contains an amendment that will increase from 20 to 52 in any year, the number of special occasions on which a club may supply alcohol to 1 am. The figure

of 20 was fixed in 1987 and it now seems only reasonable to permit clubs to enjoy an average of one late night each week throughout the year, subject to police approval.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): While there is concern that liberalisation of the regulations could lead to increased alcoholism in Northern Ireland, residents living in close proximity to licensed premises and the premises that will have extended, late-night provision for their clientele, are concerned that they will be subjected to unnecessary disturbance arising from the late-night activities. What assurance can those people be given that, if a racket is created week on week, the Royal Ulster Constabulary will take prompt action, and the privilege that we are about to introduce will be removed?

Mr. Moss: The article enables the extension from 20 to 52, but it is an extension of permitted hours. I understand that the club would have to apply for each extension. The hon. Gentleman has rightly drawn to my attention the concerns of people in the vicinity. If such an extension caused them concern or disturbance, they would be able to oppose an extension of the permitted hours in court. That is my understanding, and if I have not given the hon. Gentleman the correct answer, I shall clarify it later.

Article 40 contains significant changes to the existing law, enabling the manner in which accounts are to be kept and presented to be prescribed. Among other things, the 1987 order contained provisions to combat racketeering in the affairs of some clubs. The Government believe that it is vital that all registered clubs should manage their financial affairs in a responsible manner, and the police, along with the terrorist finance unit of the Northern Ireland Office, have warned that there is a continued need for vigilance to ensure that clubs comply with the law.

Article 42 will therefore give the RUC wider powers of entry and inspection, so that clubs can be policed more effectively. It will enable the police to enter and inspect premises, particularly those that continue to supply alcohol after losing their registration and clubs that are awaiting registration.

Article 43 will introduce a penalty points provision under which points will be attributed for certain offences relating to the keeping and presenting of accounts. It is aimed at clubs that commit serious or persistent breaches of the law in relation to their accounts. The RUC and the Northern Ireland Office requested, and strongly support, the introduction of that provision, particularly as the courts will no longer be renewing registrations on an annual basis. Bona fide, well-run clubs, which the majority are, have nothing to fear from that proposal.

That concludes my outline of the main provisions of the Orders. I hope that hon. Members will accept that the proposals comprise sensible relaxations in the law as well as maintain essential safeguards. I commend the orders to the House.

5.22 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): As the Minister said, the two measures are to some extent deregulatory, although the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 contains a restatement of existing law, which is different from the comparable legislation for the rest of Great Britain. The order is much less deregulatory than the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which brings the law into line with that for the rest of Great Britain.

When similar licensing legislation was introduced in the House for the rest of the United Kingdom, the Labour party did not oppose it and we shall not oppose the orders this evening, although I understand and am well aware of the objections—the Minister circulated them to hon. Members—to the increased availability of alcohol, particularly on Sundays.

I wholeheartedly endorse the Minister's comments on sensible drinking and striking a balance between giving people the freedom to enjoy the increased availability of alcohol, especially on Sundays, at meal times and with their families, and increasing alcohol consumption and abuse.

I agree with the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs that the original order increased the regulations applicable to clubs in certain areas and did not deal with some of the issues that the wider club movement, both here and in Northern Ireland, wanted to raise. The Minister was good enough to meet representatives of the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs, hon. Members and myself, and the draft order was amended to take account of some of the points made. I am grateful to the Minister for the time that he took to meet us and discuss the issues at length, and for rethinking the order in relation to article 43 and penalty points. As a consequence, we shall not oppose the order.

I am conscious of the Government's fears about clubs in Northern Ireland; the Minister mentioned the enforcement details. Clubs in Northern Ireland are different from those in Great Britain. The latter are usually non-profit-making or working men's clubs. In Northern Ireland, clubs are usually of a sporting nature or have some other social function. The Government have argued that some have been vehicles for paramilitary funding and, although there is no proof, that fear remains and the Government are conscious of it, as are the Opposition.

That possibility has to be borne in mind when we discuss these proposals, particularly the requirements for improved accountancy for clubs in Northern Ireland, which we welcome. When we debate such orders in future, I hope that the accountancy systems in place and the details contained in the present orders are such that we might be able to deregulate some of the prescription surrounding bookkeeping for Northern Ireland clubs, bringing them more into line with the systems that operate throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. The Government are still overly prescriptive in a few areas, and further deregulation measures could have been implemented.

While we welcome the reduction in the waiting period for registration from two years to one, the licensing order provides for a provisional licence. We appreciate that there is a need to be able to establish that a club and its activities are bona fide and that it is seeking to obtain a licence in the proper manner. I suggest to the Minister, however, that the Northern Ireland Office could have considered a probationary licence, rather than the probationary one-year waiting period.

We also welcome the increased duration of a certificate from one to five years, which will enable clubs to enjoy a period of stability and reduce the bureaucracy surrounding annual registration—the annual visits to the magistrates

[Mr. Eric Illsley]

and the licensing bench and all that goes with that. We are aware that the Government felt that the extension merited the penalty points system. The Minister pointed out that the deregulatory aspect of the increased duration of the certificate meant that such a system should be put in place to enable the police to monitor clubs throughout the five-year period.

An application concerning a club can still be made to the courts at any time under article 13. So an application for the cancellation of registration can be made at any time, regardless of the five-year period. Under article 8, the period for consideration of the conduct of a club in relation to the renewal of a certificate has been extended to six years. The five-year registration period is also at the discretion of the courts. I hope that the magistrates courts in Northern Ireland will honour the intention of the order that the registration period should be five years, and that registrations are not granted for one or two years.

We welcome the changes that will allow clubs to apply for registration out of time and temporary premises to be certificated. We give a cautious welcome to the extension of Sunday hours. I endorse the Minister's comments about eating times on Sunday and about sporting activities on satellite television. It is now more than a year since similar legislation was introduced in Great Britain, and there have been no particular problems with it.

We welcome the special occasion authorisations, although I am conscious of the point made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs), that residents living near clubs or pubs that will have a licence to operate until 1 am should be given due consideration; we must be aware that some complaints may arise.

I hope that the courts will make a reasonable interpretation of what is a special occasion. When the Licensing (Sunday Hours) Bill was debated in February 1995, reference was made to the inconsistencies between magistrates in various parts of the country; what some regarded as a special occasion others regarded as not warranting an extension.

The order allows for children accompanied by an adult to be in a club until a 9 pm threshold, provided that the club has applied for a children's certificate. The licensing order contains a similar provision, and my comments apply to both orders, which stipulate that for a children's certificate to be granted, there must be a suitable environment for children. That means that there should be facilities for family meals, especially on Sundays. I welcome that, as it would allow families to enjoy meals together on Sundays—something of which most hon. Members will be conscious.

I am not sure how many clubs in Northern Ireland would be deemed to have a suitable environment or how many would even want to admit children. My club allows children to remain until 9.30 pm, and that curfew is well policed by members, who genuinely do not want to drink in an area with children.

Magistrates should consider no-smoking areas when children's certificates are applied for. The hon. Member for Halesowen and Stourbridge (Mr. Hawksley) raised that point during the debate on the Licensing (Sunday Hours) Bill in 1995; he objected to magistrates imposing a requirement that a club should have a no-smoking area to gain a children's certificate and maintained that they did not have that discretion. I take issue with that, and I hope that the Government, who are responsible for targets for reducing children's smoking under "The Health of the Nation", will share my view that no-smoking areas should be taken into account. For children, a suitable environment should surely be a non-smoking environment.

I fully support the idea of children being able to accompany their parents in clubs and pubs with eating facilities and a pleasant atmosphere, but I would not like children to be taken to smoky bars or taprooms with a less pleasant atmosphere. It behoves us to ensure that the environment is indeed suitable.

Some parts of the order are unnecessarily prescriptive. On article 38, can the Minister tell me why it should be illegal for clubs in Northern Ireland to advertise, when clubs in Great Britain can advertise social events and entertainment? Unfortunately, clubs in Northern Ireland do not have the system of associate membership and are restricted to the members themselves, but there is no reason why they should not be allowed to advertise events in the club to try to increase their membership or attendance.

I have already referred to the penalty points system and to the fact that the Government compromised on the issue and accepted some of what was said by the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs and by hon. Members. I hope that improved accountancy systems will enable us eventually to get rid of the points system altogether. The system is now to apply only to accountancy and bookkeeping matters, as it was felt that that was appropriate to the Government's fears about clubs and fund raising. However, the three-year period for expunging those penalty points is still too long.

Article 47 relates to the presumptions applicable in Northern Ireland but not in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is surprising that

> "Evidence that any person obtained, consumed or intended to consume intoxicating liquor in the premises of a registered club"

is considered to be evidence that the liquor was supplied by that club and that the person consumed that liquor.

The article also states:

> "Where intoxicating liquor in open vessels is found in the premises of a registered club during any period when the consumption of intoxicating liquor in those premises is prohibited . . . consumption . . . shall . . . be deemed to have taken place during that period".

That means that a police officer who walks into a club and sees an empty glass that may have contained alcoholic liquor can assume that liquor was consumed outside the permitted hours, which seems a bizarre interpretation of the law. There were complaints about the penalty points system, because it was felt that the presumptions could be abused if the police or the authorities wanted to close down a club quickly. I find the proof elements of article 47 surprising.

I want to deal with some issues that are not included in the order, but on which we pressed the Minister earlier in the year. One issue that is always raised in relation to clubs is associated membership. That system has been in use in the rest of Great Britain since 1875. It was supported in a letter from the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Northcote, to the licensing bench. He said:

"There seems no reason for refusing the exemption to a club because it admits to honorary membership subscribing members of other clubs affiliated to the Working Men's Club and Institute Union and supplies them with liquors on the same terms as its own subscribing members".

The associate membership system has been in place for more than 100 years. The Working Men's Club and Institute Union, the CIU, in Great Britain had been hoping to extend those provisions to Northern Ireland. The CIU has printed a set of model rules, which it hoped would be adopted by clubs in Northern Ireland, that would allow for associate membership but strengthen the rules for clubs there and address many of the fears that the Government have raised about improved accountancy and bookkeeping.

It appears that the model rules will not now be applied, because of the restrictions in the order. In schedule 1, paragraph 8 does not replicate the reference to temporary members in the 1987 order. There is no reference to that in the explanatory document. Temporary membership would have afforded something similar to associate membership, but it has been removed without explanation. It seems that the Northern Ireland Office is dead set against associate membership in Northern Ireland's clubs, despite its long history in this country and the fact that it has not caused problems. The associate membership system means that people attending clubs other than their own must have their membership and other details checked before they can gain entry. It is well policed and controlled by the CIU.

We will not oppose the licensing order. The provisions for the rest of the United Kingdom were debated in February 1995. There have been no significant problems with them since then. I expect that the House will soon debate further licensing deregulation, which perhaps should have been in place last year but which was rejected by the deregulation Committee in another place. There are legitimate concerns, such as the extension of Sunday drinking and the increased availability of alcohol in supermarkets and shops, and I am sure that Northern Ireland Members will list them. I endorse again the Minister's view that we have to strike the right balance between the public's freedom to drink on Sundays and the encouragement of increased alcohol consumption. Proper safeguards are essential.

We welcome the extension of licensing to guest houses, conference centres and higher education establishments. Tourism is a major industry in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom. There should be a uniform system throughout the United Kingdom. The measure will help the tourist industry in Northern Ireland. There are initiatives between the tourist boards of Ireland and Northern Ireland to increase tourism in Northern Ireland, and regulating the licensing system in this way will help.

On the mixed trading provisions, I hope that there will be adequate safeguards on sales from supermarkets and off-licences. It is all too easy for under-age drinkers to obtain access to alcohol from them. We are talking about kids obtaining access not to beer or lager, but to alcoholic water, alcopops, hooch and ciders of about 9 per cent. alcohol by volume, such as Blastaways, Castaways and all the rest. They are attractive to children and easy to drink. They are a problem, and I hope that adequate safeguards are in place to prevent under-age drinking of such alcohol.

We welcome the decrease in bureaucracy that results from longer licences and the idea of occasional licences, especially where the extended hours do not cause problems in residential areas. My earlier comments on magistrates' discretion apply to that.

I have touched on Sunday hours and I give that provision a cautious welcome. It is appropriate to extend Sunday hours and take away the break, but I hope that it is regarded sensibly and that the law will be used as intended to allow families to eat and drink together on Sunday afternoons or take advantage of Sunday televised sport. People have more leisure and they want the freedom to enjoy it in pubs and clubs.

We hope that the additional hours in the order are used sensibly by the licensed trade. There is always a demand for later drinking, but that must be balanced against the public's freedom to avoid rowdiness in the early hours of morning. My experience is that later closing times help to avoid pubs emptying at one time, which can lead to disorder and rowdiness. Lengthened drinking time will allow people to leave in a staggered process. *[Laughter.]* I mean staggered in time, not physical staggering.

I mentioned children's certificates in relation to clubs, and I would reiterate my comments on what constitutes a suitable environment. We welcome the orders and hope that they are implemented sensibly. We do not want to condone increased alcohol consumption or the increased availability of alcohol to minors, but we want the public to be able to take advantage of deregulation and have the extra freedom to drink with their children on Sunday afternoons. We shall not oppose the orders.

5.47 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I have two introductory comments. The Minister will by now have realised that, when he undertook to review licensing legislation, he took on a greater problem than he had envisaged. I am sure that he has not thanked the people in his Department and the outside interests who pushed him down that road.

Secondly, it is right that at the outset I should register a protest about the way that the legislation is being handled. We have two orders substantial in both content and size. One has nine schedules and 57 pages, the other has 113 pages and 13 schedules. They contain matters of great importance to the people of Northern Ireland. The concern of people in Northern Ireland is shown by the 700 responses that the Minister received.

However, we have only one and a half hours, and the two Front-Bench spokesmen have taken half that time. That is not adequate and should be deprecated by hon. Members who believe that there should be greater opportunity to speak on such matters, especially given the backcloth that we cannot table amendments to Northern Ireland legislation. It is put through by Order in Council on a take it or leave it basis, which is most unsatisfactory in all circumstances.

I note the cost of the orders. The Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order is priced at £11 and the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order at £7.10. Looking at the number of hon. Members in the Chamber, with the purchase price of the two orders, we could probably have bought several rounds of drink and had change left over. The high price reflects the volume of the orders.

[Mr. Peter Robinson]

I shall take the two orders separately at first. I can accept where the Minister is coming from in respect of the clubs order. Everybody recognises that there are unscrupulous organisations and individuals in Northern Ireland who will try to use every opportunity—whether in the drink trade or anywhere else—to gain funds for themselves or their organisations and the uses to which they might put the money would certainly be condemned by the House. I therefore entirely support the Minister's aim of ensuring that clubs are regulated in such a way as to ensure that no organisation with links to paramilitary or other such groups can benefit from the sale of intoxicating liquor and aid those groups as a consequence.

However, there has been a massive change in the club trade in the past few years. I am sure that the Minister recognises that the Northern Ireland Federation of Clubs has played a significant role in regularising the clubs business in Northern Ireland. There has been a massive shift away from the shebeens that were on almost every street corner in some parts of central Belfast. There are now few clubs of questionable legality operating, and all the clubs registered with the Federation of Clubs are recognised as bona fide. The federation has played a major role in urging the Minister to ensure that the licensing laws are such that they remove from the club trade those who would not be proper recipients of a licence.

The main requirement is the one that the Minister sought to deal with under article 43—to ensure that money is not siphoned off for illegal and other purposes. In his enthusiasm, the Minister might have gone beyond what is sensible in that respect. He will want to ensure that there is appropriate legislation to give the Royal Ulster Constabulary whatever support it requires in taking action against those involved in paramilitary attempts to siphon off money from clubs. However, in the original proposal for article 43, the Minister brought in a penalty point system that removed magistrates' discretion to such an extent that we would have had mandatory sentences for technical offences.

One solicitor described such a technical offence in terms of a minor infringement, such as an individual staying a minute after he or she was due to be out of a club. Technically, that individual would be guilty of having broken the law, and the magistrate would have had a duty to require that points be set against the club's licence. It would have been ludicrous for a club to lose its licence as a result of such a technical offence because the magistrates' discretion had been removed.

I am therefore glad to see that the Minister's confidence in magistrates has increased during the draft stage of the order, and that he has removed from schedule 6 several of the non-financial elements where the magistrate would have been required to impose mandatory penalty points. I welcome that change, and the Minister can expect the support of me and my colleagues on that order.

The Minister might find less welcome my comments on the licensing order. I have several concerns about that order, the first of which relates to its very nature. It is enabling legislation, and because so much depends on the regulations and conditions that will apply to the various articles, it is difficult for hon. Members debating the merits of the order to know what the final outcome will be.

The Minister's original intention expressed in a statement in January 1995 made me examine three specific areas. One of those has subsequently and, in my view, rightly been dropped from the order—the surrender requirement for licences. The House should thank the Minister for recognising that that would not have been helpful.

The general commercial value of a licence is such that many of those involved in the licensed trade use their ownership of a licence as security with their banks. Since about 1902, anyone who wants to open licensed premises in Northern Ireland has had to secure a licence from an existing licenceholder. That requirement was of benefit in preventing the proliferation of pubs and off-licences throughout Northern Ireland. In addition, licenceholders had an asset of value. I understand that about £100 million was invested in licences and that banks were greatly concerned at the prospect of so much being wiped off the balance sheets of publicans and off-licence owners, to devastating commercial effect.

The Minister has done the right thing in changing his mind. I raise this matter not only to thank the Minister, but to set down a marker, lest any successor to the Minister might be persuaded by the civil servants who originally proposed that we should go down that road. It would not help the licensed trade, nor would it help those who are against drink because it would lead to a greater number of licenceholders in Northern Ireland. The Minister has nevertheless made a brave fist of considerably extending the licensed trade in Northern Ireland through other measures in the order.

I turn now to the element dealing with mixed trading. Under the order, the Minister seems to be dragging us back to the days of what used to be called—long before the time of any hon. Member here—the old spirit grocers. Effectively, unless the accompanying regulations state otherwise, the order could result in alcohol being sold on every street corner. There will be nothing to prevent any shop from setting aside a section of floor space and employing someone over 18 for the purpose of selling liquor. The order makes it possible for alcohol to be available on almost every street in Northern Ireland. I am keen to hear what conditions the Minister will impose to ensure that we do not have, dotted across the countryside, people who will be able to run what is effectively an off-licence in every street in Northern Ireland.

The legislation is such that I suspect that it has been introduced primarily as a result of pressure by the supermarket trade—not only supermarket traders in Northern Ireland, but those with whom the Minister and the Conservative Government will be more closely associated, who are coming to Northern Ireland. I notice that J. Sainsbury plc says that it will apply for a licence for every set of premises that it opens in Northern Ireland. If it does so, it will significantly affect jobs in Northern Ireland as well as the availability of alcohol.

Supermarkets such as Sainsbury and Tesco are moving into Northern Ireland. They, and those who are already there—Stewart's, Wellworth's and so on—will undoubtedly out-price the local off-licences, where jobs will be lost.

The legislation introduces to young people the idea that drink is a normal factor in their lives. I suspect that no regulation that the Minister could frame would ensure that young people did not pass through areas where drink was

available, either in shops or supermarkets. Day by day, they will have greater contact with drink, and it will be much more obvious to them that drink is available.

I note that the BBC's "Food and Drink" programme sent several under-age individuals to various supermarkets in Great Britain to test legislation currently in force which is similar to that which the Minister proposes to introduce in Northern Ireland. On every occasion, those young people were able to buy drink, whether it was from Sainsbury, Tesco, Asda or other major supermarkets. All were able to purchase drink although they were minors.

There is a much lower standard—and, I suspect, a lower level of awareness—among people who work on the tills of supermarkets than there would be in off-licences. The Minister must at least acknowledge that he will have to take steps to give him other means of dealing with under-age people who will be able to obtain drink as a result of the legislation that he is encouraging the House to support tonight.

I notice from a recent report that J. Sainsbury at York lost its drink licence because it had been caught selling alcohol to under-18s, and children of 14 and 15 were able to buy drinks on three separate occasions when they had been sent into the supermarket by the police. Interestingly, on one occasion when they did so, the person who sold them the drink said, "Put it in a carrier bag or I will lose my job." Obviously, that individual was prepared to sell drink to someone aged 14 or 15, with the knowledge that she was selling it to a minor.

The Minister increases the opportunities for under-age drinking—a problem that already causes great concern in Northern Ireland. I suspect that, almost weekly, people will visit my surgery and those of many hon. Members from Northern Ireland, especially the Belfast area, to complain about under-age youths causing problems in their area because they have access to drink. I also suspect that those people will be able to tell us where those youths are purchasing the drink. The Minister aggravates the social problems in Northern Ireland by this legislation.

I ask the Minister, why has it not been possible, at the time that we are discussing this legislation, for us to have sight of the regulations that will control what goes on in shops and supermarkets? The legislation has not come out of the blue to the Minister; he has been talking about it since the start of 1995. The Northern Ireland Office must have an idea of what the regulations are.

Some of us suspect that the Minister seeks, by the methods that I have outlined, to push the enabling legislation through the House tonight and then introduce regulations that might make the regime very liberal. They might allow supermarkets and shops to sell alcohol to the public without much restriction.

Part of the legislation deals with restaurants, guest houses and so on. The Minister again heaps up problems for the future with that provision. Once again he has an advantage over every other hon. Member, because, although we are aware of what would happen as a result of his legislation, he does not invite us to read the regulations and conditions that would apply, under the legislation, to restaurants.

It is possible that, under the legislation, not only will alcohol be able to be sold as an accompaniment to meals by bona fide restaurants whose main business is selling food, but it could be the major source of income for many of those people whose contact with food will be only a matter of convenience for their profits, who will almost run a bar. By introducing drinking into every restaurant, which would undoubtedly be the result, such regulations would destroy the family atmosphere that exists in so many restaurants in Northern Ireland. They would increase the temptation for people to remain after their meal to continue drinking, with a consequent effect not only on social problems related to drink but on drinking and driving and so on.

The Minister has built up many problems for the future in Northern Ireland as a result of those elements of the licensing order that he brings before us tonight. I shall briefly comment on how he could overcome those problems in the regulations relating to restaurants, shops and supermarkets.

I have approached the Minister several times regarding shops and supermarkets, suggesting that they should have a separate till that deals only with products from the licensed area, and that there should be a separate door to distinguish that area from the rest of the supermarket. The Minister wants to leave things as vague as possible. That is a mistake; we, if not the Minister, will live to regret that.

The Minister should consider granting restaurants a wine licence instead of a full licence. That would restrict drinking to some extent. It would also take drink away from public view. A bar is unnecessary if there is only a wine licence. If the Minister does not follow that road, he should consider restricting the floor area of the alcohol sales element of the restaurant in accordance with the size of the restaurant.

What is the Minister's definition of a guest house? Will having an upstairs room available for a lodger allow a person to hold a licence on the strength of running a guest house? Perhaps the Minister will tell us in detail how flexible he will be about that.

On the Sunday issue, I do not agree with the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley). I do not believe that there is any demand for an extension of drinking time on Sunday. I do not believe that the Minister has been pressed by the people of Northern Ireland to extend the Sunday provisions. The whole tenor of his legislation is to extend drinking time, to increase the number of outlets from which people can secure alcoholic beverages, to increase young people's exposure to alcohol, to impose on people in Northern Ireland the view that alcohol is a normal part of everyday life, and to increase the pressure to introduce them to drink.

The Minister should consult his colleagues in other Departments to learn the cost of the abuse of alcohol to many Government Departments in Northern Ireland and to local government there. If he were as aware of that as are many of us who live in Northern Ireland, I doubt whether he would try to extend the availability of alcohol to the extent that the legislation does.

6.9 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I shall not cover the ground that was covered by the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), except to underline the concern that he expressed. There seemed to be some naivety among Members on both Front Benches when they spoke about extending the licence to stores.

I query the concern that the police might be too quick to prosecute. The evidence over the years is that they have been slow to do so. Many years ago, complaints were

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

made to a police officer that a publican was selling alcohol to minors. The police officer claimed that there was no evidence of that, but the late Rev. Sammy Simms of the Bethany congregation gave a youngster money to go into the public house and buy alcohol, and frog-marched the constable in behind him. Although we hear it said that the law is too restrictive, it may not be restrictive enough to prevent the exploitation of men and women, boys and girls.

On a recent visit to California, I was struck by the fact that, in virtually every restaurant, and in other places, there was a sign warning of the health hazards not only of smoking, but of alcohol in certain conditions. It is important to recognise that in this debate we are dealing with one of the most serious problems of the human race, especially in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Perhaps it is because I pride myself on being an Ulster Scot that I have some sympathy with the calumny of Scotland and Glasgow in the words of the song: "There's something the matter with Glasgow, boy—she's going round and round." There is nothing wrong with the one who had imbibed, but the rest of the world is in trouble.

I shall press the Minister on the issue of designated areas and ask him to underline the fact that not only the sale but the supply of alcohol to minors is against the law. That is sometimes misunderstood. People say, "But we didn't sell it to them." However, the person who sells or gives alcohol to minors is guilty of a breach of the regulations.

In the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, article 3(2) states:

"every person who supplies, obtains, consumes, keeps for supply"

alcohol without a licence

"shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both."

It is an open breach of regulations to supply or sell without a proper licence, but that carries the same penalty as supplying alcohol to a young person, which is covered by article 34. The first offence seems more serious than the second.

I make a plea to the Minister. If the House is not prepared to do so for the nation as a whole, can we not move speedily towards the introduction of a common form of ID in Northern Ireland? A shop or club selling alcohol would no longer be able to hide behind the excuse that young people look older than they are. It is common practice in the United States for the provider to ask for an ID. If that were introduced in Northern Ireland, it would clearly identify the person and make it plain whether he or she was over 18. It would also be helpful for election purposes.

I await the Minister's response to my earlier question. We have expressed our concerns for years, but the Government keep telling us to wait until there is an Assembly. I have long contended that, until there is an Assembly, the House should legislate for Northern Ireland by Bill rather than by Order in Council, so that we can examine the legislation line by line and amend it. Drafting errors have occurred. I suspect that there is one in article 24 of the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order.

The Minister will be aware that many in my constituency have been concerned about the prospect of a floating restaurant or a floating pub on the Lagan. I have no objection in principle to it being on the Lagan, but I am not so sure that I agree with the ambiguous position of the Laganside development body, which stated earlier that it had no opinion on the matter but now clearly wants the development on the Lagan—not towards the mouth of the Lagan, but adjacent to the Queen's recreation and physical education building.

The legislation in that connection is too lax, because it does not take proper account of the objections of residents. Although no firm decision has been taken, it is strange that after a public inquiry turned down the application, there are those who are still pressing for the development against the wishes of the river users of the Lagan, the residents of the surrounding area and others.

If the Government want to discourage people from drinking and driving, it is difficult for them to require licensed premises to provide car parking spaces. Churches and other establishments in new buildings can be compelled to provide parking, but apparently no such requirement applies to restaurants or Canary wharf—on the Lagan, not in London. The calm of the area has been shattered by the provision of parking facilities. It is fascinating to note that, when the floating restaurant was originally proposed, there was a yellow line along Stanmillis embankment that would have prevented people from parking, but when the developers decided that they want the restaurant, the line was removed.

If proper regulations are not drawn up, there will be further infringements of people's liberties and rights. I sympathise with the Minister and accept the necessity for the registration of clubs. I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast, East when he said that his party would support the Minister in that respect. I query the interpretation of some of the regulations. As the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) said, the clubs in Northern Ireland are different from those in this country. It is not true that there are no working men's clubs in Northern Ireland—there are—but sporting clubs are now more prevalent, and shebeens have also become popular.

I ask the Minister about the success in policing those clubs that are closely involved with paramilitary activities. How many of such clubs have had funds sequestered and how many have been put out of business? That should be a touchstone for how we shall police these laws in the future. If we cannot implement the existing regulations, how will the new regulations be an improvement?

I query the views expressed by the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central regarding simplified accountancy. During my lifetime, I have discovered that there are many creative accountants. It is fascinating to learn that restaurateurs can cook and that accountants can cook the books. I would like to see regulations set down that make it difficult for people to mix the books as easily as the drinks—to use a mixed metaphor.

Finally, I understand the concept of the family. I return to my comments in an earlier debate about activities on a Sunday—I prefer to call it the Lord's day. I believe that Sundays were given to us to use for the common good. Many years ago it was argued speciously that football should be played on Sunday because people went shopping on Saturday. Then there was a craze for Sunday shopping, and some football returned to Saturday as the primary league was televised on Sunday.

I return to the question of policing. How do we introduce the English social environment, with the old village pub, to an entirely different cultural situation in Northern Ireland? We will destroy the family if we bring children to such places. If we are introducing laws to allow clubs to open on a Sunday afternoon so that people may watch big sporting matches, how do we explain the fact that people in Belfast have been doing that for years?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): I draw the House's attention to the fact that the debate will conclude at 6.33 pm. I am sure that hon. Members want to hear the Minister answer their queries, so I ask the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) to bear that in mind.

6.23 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I understand the difficulty that the Minister faces, but our difficulties are greater. I raised the matter of time with the Minister during my last deputation to him, but he did not tell us that he intended to combine the two orders. We could have debated each order for an hour and a half. It is absolutely scandalous to conduct the debate in this manner, and the Whips Office did not inform us of the Government's intention to move the motion to facilitate that process.

It is unbecoming of the two Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) and the Under–Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), that tonight they spoke for half of the allotted time and left Back Benchers little debating time. It is a very serious matter. There are 172 pages of legislation and 22 schedules upon which we are asked to comment in a couple of minutes.

I shall not go over the ground that has been covered so ably by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). I agree with the general tone of their speeches. I ask the Minister one question: how will he deal with the planning for those premises that will be able to sell liquor? We know the difficulties faced by a public house in obtaining a licence. How will the Minister deal with the widespread clamour for liquor licences? Will there be any restrictions? What does the Minister plan to do?

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East was absolutely right when he said that we should debate the regulations tonight. We are completely in the dark in that regard. I was amazed by the Minister's explanation when he said that he would minimise the dangers: he should try to eradicate the dangers that arise from young people buying alcohol on impulse. The Minister has not been fair to the representatives of Northern Ireland in his presentation of the legislation tonight. He spent a long time consulting about the legislation, and he should have given the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives an opportunity to debate it.

The Minister is anxious to make some sort of reply to the debate, and if I were a bad boy I would stay on my feet and talk it out. However, I shall not do that. Tonight the Minister has done the people of Northern Ireland no favours—especially in his handling of the Sabbath day issue. That has serious implications. People have differing views on the matter, but those who have spoken to me say that we need not more alcohol outlets but fewer. That should be the Minister's governing principle. There are far too many alcohol outlets and we must restrict, rather than increase, their number. By contrast, we now have an open-door approach.

I conclude by referring to the sale of alcohol in spirit grocers, which ensnared young people—particularly the working-class families of Belfast—in the chain of alcoholism. One of the first acts of the old Stormont Government was to abolish them. There was a social clean-up, and young people were freed from that awful chain. As I have told the Minister, we are returning to that situation in this legislation.

6.27 pm

Mr. Moss: I shall obviously not have sufficient time in which to make even a small inroad into the queries that have been raised tonight. I promise to write to all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate to answer their questions.

In reply to a number of general points raised during the debate—particularly by Conservative Members—I am conscious of the contentious ingredients in the legislation, particularly regarding licensing. That is why it has taken three years to bring the legislation to the House. I welcome the general support for the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order and I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), the Opposition spokesman, for his helpful involvement in the consultation process. The hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) brought people to see me to discuss the clubs order and, as a result of those representations, significant changes were made to the face of the order.

I emphasise the fact that consultation took place over a lengthy period. Although criticism has been levelled this evening at the lack of detail regarding the regulations, particularly those applying to mixed trading, I assure the House that when they are published—they are currently with our legal people—I shall send them not only to Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland but to all interested parties for comment before I commit them to the legal system. I give that promise.

We took the view that certain matters should be dealt with in the form of regulations so that we would be able to make changes at short notice if we saw that such provisions were not working in the way that we wanted.

I think that all those who have contributed to the debate have talked about mixed trading. We have made it clear that we want to achieve several objectives. We want to ensure that alcohol on sale will be kept and served within a clearly segregated area. We would, within the floor space of the supermarket, ensure that such an area was clearly defined. The area will be separated from the remainder of the shop, and access to it can be gained only by passing through some form of barrier.

Any non-alcoholic goods kept within the area must also be available elsewhere in the shop to ensure that customers do not have to go into the segregated area for non-alcoholic goods. The area will be under adult supervision at all times. It will be off limits to all persons under 18 years of age unless accompanied by an adult. The prescribed area will be situated in such a way that persons entering and leaving the shop will not have to

[Mr. Moss]

pass through it. We shall be giving close attention to the provision of designated tills to ensure adherence to the tight regulations that we propose.

Some hon. Members, including the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), spoke of spirit grocers. The accusation has been made that the liberalisation of the law in the licensing order will lead to a proliferation of outlets selling alcohol. It has been suggested that there will be a shop on every corner selling alcohol. I wish to make it clear that that cannot happen, for two reasons.

First, if a licence were to be obtained from the court, need must be justified. In other words, there should be inadequate provision in a locality before a licence is granted. Secondly, and most important—I am grateful for the support given by the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson)—we have not removed the requirement of surrender. Accordingly, there is a finite number of licences to allow alcohol to be sold in Northern Ireland. That number cannot increase. Corner shops will be able to obtain licences to sell alcohol only if other licences elsewhere are surrendered. A licence is trading at about £40,000, and is used by many off-licences as security at the bank for loans. That being so, I do not believe that what we propose will lead to many shops taking up licences to sell alcohol.

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [1 November].*

The House proceeded to a Division:—

Rev. Ian Paisley *(seated and covered)*: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Are we to vote separately on the orders, which were put together? Are they to be voted on separately in the order in which they appear on the Order Paper?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's question is whether we are to vote separately on each of the orders. Is that right?

Rev. Ian Paisley: Yes. The first order deals with the registration of clubs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Rev. Ian Paisley: We shall be dividing the House on the second order. Given the way that the orders were called, we can do nothing else.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Question is, motion No. 2. I think the Ayes have it.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then put the other Question required to be put at that hour.*

Motion made, and Question put,

That the draft Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

The House divided: Ayes 61, Noes 3.

Division No. 9] **[6.36 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Amess, David
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Barnes, Harry
Bates, Michael
Body, Sir Richard
Bowis, John
Brandreth, Gyles
Bright, Sir Graham
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burt, Alistair
Campbell–Savours, D N
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Linc'n)*
Coe, Sebastian
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamf'd)*
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Fowler, Sir Norman
Fox, Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Alastair
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Hannam, Sir John
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hinchliffe, David
Horam, John
Hunter, Andrew
King, Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter
McAvoy, Thomas
MacKay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malone, Gerald
Moss, Malcolm
Newton, Tony
Ottaway, Richard
Pike, Peter L
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Sims, Sir Roger
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spink, Dr Robert
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Trickett, Jon
Waller, Gary
Wood, Timothy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

NOES

Molyneaux, Sir James
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Rev. Ian Paisley and
Rev. William McCrea.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 30th October, be approved.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

BROADCASTING

That the draft Channel 4 (Application of Excess Revenues) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 15th October, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

FAMILY LAW

That the draft Child Support Departure Direction and Consequential Amendments Regulations 1996, which were laid before this House on 15th October, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

Question agreed to.

Pinderfields and Pontefract NHS Trusts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

6.46 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): May I first of all welcome the fact that you in particular, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are in the Chair for the Adjournment debate tonight, because, although I appreciate that you will be totally neutral in chairing the debate, I want to express my personal appreciation for the work that you have done as a constituency Member on a number of the issues to which I shall refer tonight. I also express my personal appreciation to my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett), who hopes to catch your eye. I am grateful for his support in staying behind to speak in this important debate.

It is customary at the outset of Adjournment debates to express appreciation for being granted the debate, and although I am most grateful for the opportunity to raise this subject, it is a matter of great concern to me that once again I find it necessary to have to draw the attention of the House to the considerable public disquiet over what is happening in the health service in the Wakefield metropolitan district.

When a similar Adjournment debate took place on 3 April this year, the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), the Minister who is here again tonight, remarked that that was the seventh occasion in five months that I had raised the subject in the Chamber. I take no pleasure whatever in reminding him that this is the sixth separate Adjournment debate that I have had on health issues in Wakefield in my time in the House, and I have, as he knows, been forced to raise my concerns in numerous other debates and at Question Time, including Tuesday of this week.

I have found it necessary to speak so often because, throughout my time in the House, the health service in my area has appeared to be stumbling from one crisis to another, without strategy, direction or purpose. I make it clear that I do not blame in any way those dedicated people who are involved in the front-line services in the national health service in Wakefield. We are very fortunate to have in our area some of the best general practitioners, hospital consultants, doctors, nursing and ancillary staff. Most of them believe as strongly as I do in the basic principles of the NHS, but they are deeply demoralised by the consequences of Government health policy in Wakefield and the complete lack of any clear vision for the future.

Those people will have been as angry as I was to hear the Prime Minister say only this week that the service

"is now being properly managed".

If the situation were not so serious, they would have laughed at his assertion that, as a result of this "proper management",

"money is being allocated to where it should go."

Let met set out the background to the current merger proposals. The Minister knows as well as I do that the local health managers in Wakefield have, for some considerable time, faced an impossible situation in attempting to meet growing demands with resources that have not only failed to match that growth but been skewed by deliberate Government policy away from the areas of greatest need.

In previous debates, I have drawn attention to the fact that Wakefield health authority is the biggest loser in the whole of the Northern and Yorkshire region of the NHS as a consequence of the changed national funding formula being introduced in the current financial year, under which it is regarded as some £4.5 million overfunded.

According to a letter that I have received this week from the chair of the Wakefield health authority, Mrs. Ann Bolter, the health authority is facing a projected deficit of £2,225,000 based on the estimated expenditure for the year compared with budgets. I am told that the underlying projected deficit for the authority for 1996-97 is £1.7 million and that, in preparing the budget, the health authority agreed to overcommit resources by £3.3 million to cope with increasing demands and pressure from the trusts locally for more resources.

Therefore, there is a total over-commitment of £5 million and Mrs. Bolter states in her letter that the authority will have to look for further funding in 1997-98 in addition to identifying further savings from reduced management costs and the reconfiguration of services. I shall come to what is called the reconfiguration of services, but the Minister should be aware that overall funding is not the only problem.

The Prime Minister's assertion that money

"is being allocated to where it should go"—[*Official Report*, 5 November 1996; Vol. 284, c. 1031.]

is particularly off target in Wakefield. Fundholding has created serious financial problems for the hospitals and a clear two-tier system of local treatment, to which I have referred on several occasions previously. I did a calculation in the last financial year based on the figures of fundholding surpluses supplied to me by the Wakefield health authority, which showed an interesting correlation between those surpluses in general practice and local hospital deficits. Therefore, the Wakefield health authority has an over-commitment of £5 million and the main provider hospital for my constituents and some of those of my hon. Friends who represent other constituencies in the Wakefield metropolitan district, Pinderfields, faced a deficit in the last financial year of £3.16 million.

The Minister has, I know, seen the letter sent to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) on 16 July by Dr. R. L. Smith, the medical secretary of the Wakefield local medical committee regarding the seriousness of the situation facing Pinderfields hospital in particular. I remind him that the letter stated:

"We can no longer deliver a 'safe' service for your constituents with the cake you give to the NHS."

As the chair of the Wakefield health authority has admitted, what is termed a reconfiguration of services is seen as perhaps the only way of substantially addressing those serious problems. My particular concern is that the supposed public consultation process being undertaken on the proposed merger of the two acute trusts in Wakefield metropolitan district is fundamentally dishonest in not explaining to local people the real agenda of service reconfiguration that is being considered at present.

On Tuesday, during Health questions, the Minister referred to the fact that I was personally critical of the original establishment of three separate and competing

[Mr. David Hinchliffe]

third wave trusts within the Wakefield metropolitan district. I made it clear at the time that I believed that a health market would undermine strategic planning in health care and be wasteful of scarce resources. As the consultation document on the proposed merger makes clear, all my fears have, sadly, materialised and, if anything, the situation has become even worse than I originally envisaged.

The dishonesty of the consultation document relates to its avoidance of the key question of what the service reconfiguration will mean to my constituents and those of my hon. Friends representing the users of Pinderfields hospital, Wakefield, and Pontefract general infirmary. Page 8 of the consultation document states that the merger proposal and consultation processes

"do not relate to any proposal to relocate services across the district."

It goes on to say

"such proposals would be the responsibility of Wakefield Health Authority to develop and consult upon."

The Minister is well aware that, several weeks ago, the consultation process being undertaken by the two acute trusts concerned with the merger was stopped and passed to the health authority to continue. No one has offered me a formal explanation for that. The Minister did not answer the point on Tuesday when I questioned him at Question Time, but I expect a full explanation from him tonight.

Regardless of the reasons for that development, as the matter is now formally in the hands of the health authority, in accordance with what is said in the consultation document, my constituents and those of my hon. Friends and yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, now expect to be informed exactly what is proposed in relation to the relocation of services. The original excuse of this being a matter for the health authority will not wash, as the consultation process is now being handled by the health authority itself.

The Minister will recall that, in my contribution during the previous debate on the subject, in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth and in meetings and in correspondence that my hon. Friends, including yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I have had with the Secretary of State, we have consistently pressed for a wider review of health care in Wakefield prior to any decision being made on a trust merger.

Our central criticism of the current proposal, apart from the attempt to camouflage a rationalisation agenda, is that it is a piecemeal, panic measure, designed temporarily to stem the tide of huge funding problems, which does not look any further at key questions of direct relevance to Wakefield's problems. It does not touch on the enormous implications of radical changes being introduced in the operation of general practice in our area, which will clearly impact upon acute provision, and it in no way anticipates the likely changes in primary and community care. The four Members of Parliament for the area were astonished to learn from the community trust's chief executive and chair that they had not even been consulted before the formulation of merger proposals by the two acute trusts.

Bearing in mind those points and the fact that the Wakefield health authority is now responsible for the remainder of the merger consultation process, I found it interesting, to say the least, to learn this week that, in the agenda for its monthly meeting, the Wakefield health authority was considering a paper proposing

"an urgent review of acute service provision within the district."

The authority's report says:

"This work is likely to take at least six months to complete, and will be a completely separate exercise to the consultation process on Trust mergers . . . The process will enable a thorough consideration of strategic options for the future provision of acute services and in particular will take account of the drive towards a primary care led NHS."

We are promised yet another so-called public consultation process in the summer of 1997.

The Minister must accept that proceeding with merger proposals prior to such a review of acute services is putting the cart before the horse in a highly irresponsible way. I suspect that key personnel at Wakefield health authority, some of whom I know reasonably well and respect, know that to be the case, but they have been told to get the merger out of the way by the Northern and Yorkshire region. That is not good enough, and the Minister knows it. I want him to give a clear undertaking to block further progress on the merger proposals, and to tie them in with the wider review of acute provision that will be held in the new year.

I also want the Minister to give me a detailed explanation of the reasons for the resignation last week of Mr. Roy Cusworth, the chair of the Pinderfields trust. I wrote to the chair of the Northern and Yorkshire region, Mr. John Greetham, asking for an explanation. His reply of 1 November states:

"Roy Cusworth did not offer his resignation but decided for personal and business reasons that he did not wish to offer himself for re-appointment."

I believe that Mr. Cusworth was forced to resign, and we have a right to know why. The Minister must understand that the removal of the chair of the trust in that way has created considerable tensions at Pinderfields hospital. The consultants at that hospital met on Monday night, and have advised me through the chair of the hospital medical committee, Mr. Oliver Fenton, of their serious concern about yet another upheaval at Pinderfields, the purpose of which no one can understand. As the Minister will probably know, representatives of the Pinderfields consultants are to see the chief executive of the Northern and Yorkshire region next week to seek urgent reassurances on the position of Pinderfields, especially in the context of the proposed merger.

I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have serious anxieties about the future of Pontefract general infirmary if the merger goes through. I share your concerns and determination to defend the interests of the users of that hospital. In the light of recent events, I have fears for the future of Pinderfields.

Following the transfer of regional neurosurgery provision from Pinderfields to Leeds, I strongly fear that it will lose other regional specialisms, such as plastic burns and spinal injuries. It is common knowledge that certain senior consultants at Pinderfields are being head-hunted by the Leeds trusts, and that St. James's, with a deficit of £8 million, and Leeds general infirmary, with a deficit of £7 million, are desperate for the additional revenue that further regional specialisms would attract.

Clearly, the situation in Leeds and the outcome of the recent health review have an important bearing on health provision, especially regional specialisms, in other parts

of west Yorkshire. I fear that, particularly since the demise of the Yorkshire regional health authority, there has been little, if any, attempt to interfere with the operation of naked market forces and the obvious ambitions of the Leeds trusts. I assume that that approach has the Government's blessing, but the logical consequence will be the reduction of Pinderfields hospital and Pontefract general infirmary to the status of cottage hospitals, as all the key specialisms would be concentrated in Leeds.

A merged acute trust in Wakefield may offer a much-needed short-term financial fix, but without the wider strategic review for which my hon. Friends and I have persistently pressed, the future direction of health care in Wakefield metropolitan district will be uncertain, leaving our services wide open to predators. The health authority recognised that fact, and the acute review proposed this week makes obvious sense, but beyond keeping the lid on things until the general election, it makes no sense for regional officials to insist on the separation of this process from the merger debate. I hope that the Minister has listened carefully to the points that I have made, and that he will respond positively to them.

7.4 pm

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): I wish to associate myself with the remarks that my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) made about you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and about the high quality of the staff—clinicians and managers—employed in the health service in the Wakefield area.

Until recently, I was a publicly elected representative in a major city—Leeds. I was closely involved with the Leeds health service for a considerable time. We had two relatively robust general hospitals, albeit within a flawed health care structure. Since being elected to represent Hemsworth, I have been dismayed to discover the fragile state of the health service in our district.

My constituents come within the catchment areas of Pontefract and Pinderfields hospitals. I can therefore express an overall view of the services provided right across the district. The NHS provision in the area suffers from a series of structural problems, which, taken together, produce a service in serious crisis. In no particular order, I shall identify seven structural problems.

First, the continued underfunding of the service in our area has been compounded by the recent changes to the funding formula. That means that our district is to lose several millions of pounds a year, and is certainly the worst loser in the region. Secondly, there is a lack of recognition in the funding formula of the problems that arise from trying to apply a uniform health service across such a heterogeneous set of communities as there is in our district.

The third structural problem is the acute fragmentation—almost a disintegration—of the health institutions in our district. There is clear evidence of a breakdown of confidence between the health providers: the two acute trusts and the community health trust. As Members of Parliament for the district, my hon. Friends and I have been informed of the extraordinary allegations that have been made by people in one or other of those organisations against their colleagues.

Fourthly, that fragmentation has been seriously exacerbated by the effects of the internal market. There is evidence of what can only be regarded as irresponsible poaching by each of the trusts from the others, and by trusts outside the district. More serious still is the impact of the extension of GP fundholding in the Wakefield district, to a point where every practice is part of the fundholding system, thereby achieving twice the national average level of GP fundholding. The impact of that extension of fundholding is not yet fully understood, but it is already having a serious effect on the acute trusts.

In my constituency, at least two practices have constructed, without proper planning, what can only be described as mini-hospitals, which are taking services away from the existing acute trusts. It is widely believed that services are being purchased by GP fundholders in our district from hospitals as far away as Manchester and Glasgow. I have been informed of patients being sent by taxi to hospitals in Manchester for minor ophthalmic operations. I have been told of one patient who was taken by taxi to Manchester airport and flown to Glasgow for a relatively minor operation that was paid for by a local GP fundholder.

The fifth problem is that the health service in the area suffers to a degree from regional imbalances. The presence of big neighbours, such as Leeds, inevitably causes problems for smaller hospital trusts. The sixth problem is the general morale in the district, which, as in the rest of the country, is now poor. Hospital trusts are suffering from major problems of recruitment and retention of key staff.

The seventh problem is the lack of leadership among those who have been appointed to give directions to the health service in our area. In Pinderfields, both the chief executive and, now, the chair of the trust appear to have been removed without adequate public explanation, and with no private explanation to any of us who represent the area. I am led to believe by a senior individual in the Pontefract region that the chair of the trust there is likely to be reappointed only for a single year. Can anyone—such as the Minister—explain why such action is being taken? Why was the Pinderfields chair removed recently, and why was the chief executive removed? We have been given no explanations about that, or about why the unusual procedure of establishing a single-year appointment has apparently been adopted.

My exposition of those seven structural problems may not constitute a comprehensive description of all the difficulties facing our area's health service, and not everyone may share my analysis; but it is clear that nearly everyone who is interested in the health service in our area believes that the service faces serious difficulties. Anyone who doubts that should read this week's edition of *The Independent on Sunday*, which draws attention to the extraordinary fact that a whole ward of nurses has been privatised. It is understood that this is the first time that nursing for a whole ward has been put out to tender. That must be regarded as a step towards privatisation of the health service, either by stealth or, possibly, by incompetence.

The answer from those responsible for the health service in the area has been wholly inadequate. They have been unequal to the task, tackling only one symptom of the problem rather than the multiple causes. To suggest that we can solve all the problems to which I have alluded, and others as well, simply by merging two acute trusts is a grotesquely inadequate response that fails to recognise the scale of the crisis. Indeed, such a response does not address one of the structural problems that I have

[Mr. Jon Trickett]

described. It disappoints by its lack of ambition; it was also badly bungled, and the manner in which it was executed was arguably illegal, or at least outside the law. If it was not illegal, it was certainly unethical.

How could anyone seriously believe that the public consultation could be conducted properly and transparently by individuals who not only were the authors of the merger proposals but were actively advocating the cause of the merger during that consultation—and, moreover, appeared likely to benefit from the merger? No one could have confidence in a public consultation exercise undertaken in such a way.

Particularly extraordinary is the fact that, when the views of local residents and health care users were supposedly being obtained at public meetings, members of the project team did not merely attend those meetings to provide information but advocated the proposals—and then commented on and participated in a debate that was taking place, supposedly, among health care users. Even more extraordinary, they then proceeded to vote.

At a meeting in Upton, in my constituency, an extraordinary event took place. Every member of the public who was present voted against the merger; every one of the seven votes in favour came from one of those who had been brought along by, or were apparently connected in some way with, the project team who had been charged with consulting the public. It is bizarre, surely, that one of the principal architects of the proposal for a merger, a senior executive on one of the trusts and a member of the board, was actually found to be voting in favour of a merger about which he was supposedly consulting the public.

Will the Minister now tell the House why the public consultation exercise was aborted—why it was handed over to the district health authority, and removed from the project team? I have received no explanation; indeed, I have received no information that such a change has taken place. I understand that no other local Member of Parliament has been told that a new round of public consultation has been taking place. I consider that a fundamental error. Perhaps it will be explored in other places.

Public consultation about the merger has produced overwhelming hostility from the people of the area. Other than those with vested interests in the outcome of the proposal, no significant represented body or elected individual throughout the Wakefield district—as far as I am aware—has been found to favour it. The proposal was cooked up behind closed doors, and no one has yet made an admission to Members of Parliament representing the district about who first came up with the idea.

What we do know about the mystery is that primary care providers were certainly not consulted at the time. Surely it is outrageous that the community health trust in particular—on which the merger will have a direct bearing—was not consulted when the proposal was being drafted. It is also apparent from first-hand accounts given to me—and others—by local general practitioners that they were not consulted, either. Moreover, we know that the district health authority was not directly involved in the drafting of the proposal. Finally, it appears that the consultants were not involved in the conceptual stages, either individually or as a body.

Who sponsored the original suggestion, if it was not the clinicians and those responsible for the direct provision of care? It seems that the whole train of events was concocted by Department of Health officials, whose primary motivations were financial and administrative rather than clinical. There is also evidence that those same administrators had been conducting discussions with developers about a private finance initiative in relation to the district hospitals, concurrently with preparations to seek the trust merger. Indeed, one of the chairs of the hospital trusts let the cat out of the bag to local Members of Parliament when he informed us that a named private sector developer—we know the name—had requested that the discussions about the PFI in the Wakefield area in relation to the hospitals be put on ice until the proposal had been agreed.

The Secretary of State had suggested to the district Members of Parliament that he would judge any merger proposal on the basis of improvement in clinical care; yet we know that the basis of the merger document about which we are now being consulted was financial and administrative rather than clinical. Indeed, the whole thrust of the document is based on non-clinical considerations. It could not be otherwise, given the way in which the merger proposal itself originated.

Hon. Members will search the document in vain for any detailed proposal about clinical changes. A reading of the document, taken together with discussions with practising hospital clinicians, leads to the conclusion that the reconfiguration of clinical services that is implied—but not made explicit—in the merger document will be revealed only subsequent to any decision to merge. That is clearly putting the cart before the horse. Changes in the structure of the NHS should follow clinical change, not vice versa.

A reconfiguration of the services is inevitable if a merger takes place, as we all know; yet the public have no idea what the new configuration will look like. Notwithstanding that, they are still being required to express their views during the current flawed public consultation exercise.

Although those who manage the health service in the district have not been prepared to come clean about the new configuration, I think that it is possible to guess its likely shape. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, here is my own educated guess about the likely shape of the health service in the district within a few years, given that the merger proceeds and assuming the continuation of the financing regime of the current Conservative Government.

I guess that a single privately owned acute hospital—possibly on neither of the two existing sites, and clearly geographically and clinically remote from the communities that I represent—will have emerged. Statutory ratios will have changed, and the terms and conditions of staff employment contracts will have been renegotiated. Indeed, secret discussions with the trade unions are already taking place on those matters.

The clinical services will have been transferred—sometimes out of the district entirely—and frequently devolved to fundholding practices. Already existing tensions with other health providers will be exacerbated and the community health trust's future will be placed in jeopardy. Heaven knows what will happen in the case of statutory duties of care that are owed to certain vulnerable

groups. I understand that, in some cases, those duties have already been transferred out of the district to other providers.

That is not the right outcome for our district. I do not accept that the current modus operandi in relation to the consultations is valid in determining the district's needs. What is required is a halt to the merger proposal until such time as a major review, of the type described by my hon. Friend, takes into account both health needs and the district's institutional structures, dealing with, among other points, the seven problems that I outlined.

I hope that the Minister will deal with our request for an overall review and, even at this late stage, put on ice the merger discussions until we can identify the long-term future of health care, which all our citizens would dearly love to be of the best.

7.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). I congratulate him on again securing time to debate a subject that is linked to health services in Wakefield—in this case, the proposed merger between Pinderfields hospital and Pontefract general infirmary trusts. He said that this is the sixth time during this Parliament that he has raised a Wakefield health services matter in an Adjournment debate. Indeed, it is better than that. It is the fourth time since January 1995, which must be a record. I also note the interest of the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett) in the subject. I associate myself with the tribute that the hon. Member for Wakefield paid to the front-line staff in Wakefield, who, I have every evidence, do a first-class job on behalf of the people in the Wakefield region.

I listened to the concerns of the hon. Member for Wakefield and his case in favour of halting the trust merger consultation. He may be trying, however, to link two separate issues: the management of the acute trusts at Pontefract and Pinderfields and delivery of services. The proposal under discussion in Wakefield and in Pontefract is to merge two trusts or, to be more exact, to dissolve two trusts and create a new one. That proposal is to change the management structure of national health service trusts in Wakefield. It is not, I repeat, a proposal to change services.

I am told that the proposal has strong clinical involvement, and there is said to be clinical support for it. Separately, Wakefield health authority has recently announced that it will shortly reconsider its health strategy and will hold separate public consultation at the appropriate time next year.

Mr. Hinchliffe: The Minister has listened to my explanation, and to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett), of the acute financial difficulties facing health care providers in Wakefield. Does he accept that it is a complete waste of scarce public resources to have, yet again, a public consultation, when that consultation will deal with exactly the issues about which we are concerned in the current consultation on merger?

Mr. Horam: That is a matter for the local health authority. Clearly I am in the position, in effect, of an independent person waiting to adjudicate on these matters, when and if they come to me.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I apologise for intervening again.

My intelligence on this issue is that Wakefield health authority will be happy to conduct the public consultation on the merger alongside this wider review, but it has been prevented from having the review of acute services by the regional executive of the NHS. Common sense would suggest that the health authority would want to do that, so the Government are stepping in to prevent it from proceeding in that direction.

Mr. Horam: That is not my information, which is, as the hon. Gentleman knows, that a separate consultation is taking place on the merger and that, recently—certainly well after the consultation on the merger began—the health authority said that it wished to reconsider the acute side of its health strategy. That is the chronological order in which things have happened. Therefore, it would be strange for the health authority to merge the two things, having separated them to begin with. I am surprised at what the hon. Gentleman says.

Mr. Trickett: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman will know that this is the debate of the hon. Member for Wakefield, and I want to continue a little further.

Separately, as I have said, Wakefield health authority has recently announced that it will shortly reconsider the acute side of its health strategy consultation and will hold separate public consultation at the appropriate time next year. If I can come to the point raised by the hon. Members for Hemsworth and for Wakefield, it is set out in law that the Secretary of State for Health is required to consult on proposals to establish a new NHS trust. The trust project team asked for local views with the intention of passing them to the Secretary of State. The process began in July and lasted until 22 October. It was soon realised, however, that more was needed to fulfil statutory consultation requirements. That is why the health authority decided to extend the consultation.

The health authority was asked to consult on behalf of the Secretary of State and the consultation period was therefore extended. That has meant that consultation will take longer than it might otherwise have done. The extra consultation period, however, will not be wasted. All the views expressed during both consultation periods will be passed to the NHS executive and, ultimately, to Ministers. The extension has also allowed more time for local people to advance their views—in fact, it has almost doubled the time, as I told the hon. Member for Wakefield earlier this week at Question Time.

After the consultation period has ended in January, the decision whether to merge the two trusts will be taken by Ministers. As I have emphasised, at this stage we must take an independent view of all the proposals that are referred to us. Many factors need to be taken into account

[Mr. Horam]

when considering such a proposal. We will consider carefully both the adequacy of the consultation process and local people's views, which the hon. Member for Wakefield has stressed are so important. We will also consider the likely impact on the effectiveness, efficiency and accessibility of the potential creation of a new trust. Accessibility was referred to particularly by the hon. Member for Hemsworth, whose constituency adjoins Wakefield.

Any potential economies of scale will have to be balanced against any possible loss of patient choice. Ministers are rightly enjoined to take into account that mixture of considerations when considering the results of consultation. Until all the facts are before us, clearly we cannot comment, beyond saying that we will take it all into the account.

I understand that the hon. Member for Wakefield believes that the consultation on a proposed trust merger is already, in effect, a fait accompli. I assure him that that is absolutely not true. We have a statutory responsibility to consult publicly. Ministers need sufficient information to be able to judge the proposed merger for the value it may or may not have, and the adequacy of the consultation process that has taken place.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the "resignation" of the chairman of the Pinderfields trust, Mr. Roy Cusworth. It is more accurate to say that his period of office as trust chairman ended on 31 October, as the hon. Gentleman knows. Mr. Cusworth did not seek renewal of his appointment. He has, as the hon. Gentleman knows, other business commitments to pursue.

It should be said on Mr. Cusworth's behalf that he leaves behind an able acting chairman and a trust that has recruited 25 new consultants since 1993. The trust has transformed the quality of its treatment for elderly people and has developed a centre for enhanced eye surgery, and Pinderfields and Pontefract hospitals are already co-operating with Dewsbury district hospital to provide an integrated clinical haematology service locally and for a wider population. That is a considerable achievement under Mr. Cusworth's chairmanship, and we should give him due credit for that.

At Health questions earlier this week, the hon. Gentleman and I talked about the "Cook" test, after the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). The test was: will organisational change lead to better service? I have no doubt that it has led to better services in Wakefield.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth criticised the agency nurses who had possibly been brought to man a ward, but surely he agrees that it is a flexible way of manning a new ward when an extra ward is needed. We are talking about an extra facility for elderly people so that the local trust can manage resources effectively during the coming winter and have additional facilities available for elderly people. We are talking about additional facilities. Surely the hon. Gentleman is not against that.

I recognise that Pinderfields hospital trust is facing a complex set of interdependent issues. The ultimate goal is to ensure that sustainable high-quality and cost-effective clinical services are provided in modern facilities. Although the consultation on the proposed merger of the two trusts and, separately, the configuration of health services will take time, those processes should ensure that whatever solution emerges is based on informed debate among the public and the professions.

The hon. Member for Wakefield suggested that the merger proposals should be stopped or combined with a review of health services in Wakefield. In view of his great knowledge of and interest in the matter, he will recall that not long ago Wakefield health authority undertook a detailed consultation on its five-year health strategy. In fact, it was in 1994, and the health strategy was published as recently as March last year. The document covers the needs of everyone in the Wakefield metropolitan district council area. More than 1,000 copies of the full document were issued locally and regionally. A further 125,000 copies of the summary were printed, most of which were issued through the free press. The remainder were handed out at various local events throughout the district.

Representatives of Wakefield health authority also spoke about the strategy to a large number of local groups, as well as holding meetings with the three local national health service trusts and the two community health councils in Wakefield and Pontefract. Those meetings certainly included one with local Members of Parliament. It is worth stressing that Wakefield's health strategy discussed how health services in Wakefield will be shaped over the next five years. It also examined the need for a strategic shift to primary care. Local general practitioners were closely involved in the process.

We are talking about a considered, strategic examination of the health needs of the people of Wakefield. Nevertheless, the health authority plans to revisit and review that part of its health strategy relating to acute health services. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman said that it was sensible to do that. There are plans to take that forward in the near future. The process is likely to take about six months, and I am assured that it will involve detailed discussions with clinicians and general practitioners and active participation by the two community health councils. Public consultation will follow later in 1997. Judging by the number of debates that we have had—and your own interest, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I have no doubt that local Members of Parliament will be fully and actively involved in the process.

I am grateful for having had this opportunity to respond to the debate. We share the determination of the hon. Member for Wakefield to ensure that high-quality treatment and care continue to be available to people in the Wakefield area. I am absolutely sure that Wakefield health authority, as well as the trusts in the Wakefield and Pontefract area, shares that commitment. Whether a merger of the two trusts in Wakefield will assist in that process is a matter on which I shall keep an open mind until the statutory consultation is completed in January, and the results are known.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes to Eight o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 24 October 1996

HOME DEPARTMENT

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Dykes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the recent report by Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary on the specialist operations department of the Metropolitan police. [229]

Mr. Maclean: Yes. I have today placed in the Library a note of the recommendations from the report, together with the Commissioner's responses and the police authority responses, which take into account the advice my right hon. and learned Friend and I have received from the Metropolitan police committee.

Immigration Laws

Mr. Dykes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the outcome of the programme of work arising from the scrutiny of enforcement of immigration laws which he announced on 18 July 1996. [230]

Miss Widdecombe: The programme of work announced by my right hon. and learned Friend in July 1995 was designed to implement the findings of an efficiency scrutiny which examined ways in which the Government as a whole could work more effectively to strengthen immigration control and to prevent those temporarily or illegally in this country from receiving state benefits to which they should not be entitled.

I am pleased to say that the scrutiny process is now complete. It has successfully:

- created a coherent legal framework which bars immigration offenders and temporary visitors from access to important and expensive benefits such as child benefit, family credit and publicly subsidised housing assistance;
- made it an offence under the immigration laws for temporary visitors to have unauthorised recourse to public funds;
- established a general policy on the identification of persons subject to immigration control who claim benefits or services to which they are not entitled through the revision of departmental instructions, the production of a guidance booklet and the opening of the immigration and nationality directorate's status inquiry service to more registered users;
- strengthened the arrangements, within existing data protection legislation, for the exchange of information between Government Departments, agencies and local authorities in order more effectively to administer benefits policy and more quickly to identify and locate immigration offenders. A copy of a circular about the exchange of information with IND issued to local authorities has been placed in the Library.

Exchanges of information with IND are all conducted within the provisions of the data protection laws. The Commission for Racial Equality has been consulted about proposals on which its advice was important to ensure the maintenance of good race relations in this country. The measures taken have laid the basis for anticipated public expenditure savings of over £100 million in the next three years. They will strengthen our immigration control and will greatly reduce the incentives for those seeking to enter or remain unlawfully in the United Kingdom.

Some of the work is incomplete because it will necessarily stretch beyond the normal time limits of the scrutiny process. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is considering linking eligibility for both student awards and home fee status classification to those who are lawfully settled in the United Kingdom under the immigration laws. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is considering better ways to identify those persons from abroad who are not eligible for free medical treatment. Such work will be taken forward by the Departments concerned.

The Government believe that it is wrong that people who are admitted to this country on the basis that they can provide for themselves or who are here illegally should receive benefits paid for by the taxes of lawful residents. The measures we have now taken and the work currently in hand will see that they do not.

ENVIRONMENT

Building Research Establishment

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the future of the Building Research Establishment. [388]

Mr. Gummer: On 2 October, the Construction Industry Council sent to me the business plan developed by the construction industry for a national centre for construction, thus meeting the deadline I set out in my reply of 2 April to a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Mr. Garel-Jones). I am grateful for the work the industry's representatives have put into the preparation of this plan which I have considered very carefully, but I have concluded that it does not provide a satisfactory basis on which to enter a single tender negotiation to transfer BRE to the private sector. As I advised the House of 2 April, my next option is to privatise BRE through a competitive sale. I am therefore putting in hand at once the action necessary to seek tenders.

Petrol Vapour Recovery

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what progress has been made in implementing in the United Kingdom the European Commission stage 1 petrol vapour recovery directive. [652]

Mr. Clappison: We are laying regulations in Parliament today, under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, to implement the EC directive (94/63/EC) on the control of volatile organic compound emissions resulting from the storage of petrol and its distribution from terminals to service stations. These are important measures which aim to reduce emissions of the volatile organic compounds which contribute to the formation of ground level ozone.

The directive requires the fitting and use of equipment, in the distribution and storage of petrol, which is designed to capture and recover petrol vapours rather than venting them into the air as at present. The provisions of the directive will be implemented in a phased programme running through to 2004.

The Government have decided to apply a derogation in the directive which exempts from its provisions small service stations in areas where emissions are unlikely to contribute significantly to environmental or health problems.

The regulations laid today include a map showing the areas in which the derogation will apply to new small service stations. These are in rural areas in the northern half of Scotland where petrol vapour emissions do not contribute significantly to ozone formation and ground level ozone is not itself a problem. The directive applied immediately to any proposals for new service stations which are not eligible for the derogation.

The provisions of the directive do not apply to existing small service stations until 2004. The areas in which the derogation will be applied to these stations will be defined closer to that date, using the best scientific information then available.

Legislation to implement the directive with regard to petrol tankers was introduced in August in amendments to the Carriage of Dangerous Goods Regulations.

Direct Labour and Direct Service Organisations

Mr. Devlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what further action he proposes to take against those local authorities whose direct labour and direct service organisations failed to meet their statutory financial objectives in 1994–95. [653]

Sir Paul Beresford: On 30 July this year, 22 statutory notices were served on 17 local authorities concerning the failure of their direct labour and service organisations to meet the required financial objectives in 1994–95, and one notice was served on an authority for submitting a qualified account for work which it was carrying out. My right hon. Friend has now considered the responses to those notices, and has decided to give 16 directions to 12 local authorities.

The directions take the following forms:

Restricting the type of work the authority can carry out, and preventing the authority from carrying out any part of the wor', if it fails to meet the financial objective in 1996–97 or 1997–98:

The London borough of Brent (building maintenance).

Preventing the authority from carrying out the work if it fails to meet the financial objective in 1997–98 or 1998–99:

Great Yarmouth borough council (grounds maintenance).

Preventing the authority from carrying out the work if it fails to submit unqualified accounts in 1995–96 or 1996–97:

Mid Devon district council (building maintenance).

Requiring authorities to retender the work and to seek the consent of the Secretary of State if proposing to award the work in-house:

Amber Valley district council (refuse collection), Harborough district council (grounds maintenance), Stockton on Tees borough council (vehicle maintenance).

Requiring authorities to retender work if they fail to meet the financial objective in specified years, and to seek the Secretary of State's consent where the work has to be retendered and where the authority subsequently wish to award work in-house:

1996–97 and 1997–98: Knowlsey MBC (highways and sewers), Rossendale borough council (highways and sewers), The London borough of Tower Hamlets (building maintenance).

1997–98 and 1998–99: Rotherham MBC (grounds maintenance).

The Secretary of State has also decided to take no further statutory action in respect of financial failure in 1994–95 by:

Bedfordshire county council (vehicle maintenance), Cambridge city council (building cleaning, refuse collection, other cleaning), Chorley borough council (highways and sewers), Halton borough council (vehicle maintenance) and North East Derbyshire district council (refuse collection).

To date, 67 notices have been served by the Department on 47 local authorities for losses incurred by their DLOs/DSOs in 1994–95, and one notice served on an authority for producing qualified accounts. Today's decisions follow those announced on 13 May and 20 June this year, and complete the programme of financial failure action in relation to 1994–95 accounts.

This action demonstrates our commitment to protect the interests of local taxpayers, and ensure that they receive value for money services from their local authorities. Where authorities' in-house teams have failed to achieve their financial targets, and where they do not seem to have taken the steps necessary to bring about an improvement in their performance, we will not hesitate to take statutory action.

Environment Council

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Environment Council on 15 October. [654]

Mr. Clappison: Together with my noble friend the Earl of Lindsay I represented the UK at the Environment Council in Luxembourg on 15 October.

Policy debates were held on the review of the fifth environment action programme and on the proposals to revise directive 90/219 on the contained use of genetically modified micro-organisms. In each case, the Council is expected to reach agreement in December. There were also useful discussions on the "auto-oil" proposals, the proposals for a revision of the drinking water directive and on the review of the Community waste management strategy.

The Council agreed conclusions on the EU position for the third conference of the parties to the convention on biological diversity. The Council noted a report from the presidency on the progress which is being made on the negotiation of a protocol to the UN framework convention on climate change and on a framework agreement on humane trapping standards.

TREASURY

Economic and Finance Ministers Council

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the recent Council meeting of the Economic and Finance Ministers of the European Union. [190]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I represented the UK at the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 14 October.

The Council considered a Commission report on guarantee arrangements for lending outside the Union by the European investment bank. The main issues discussed were the coverage and level of the guarantees on EIB lending provided by the loan guarantee fund and the proportion of lending on which the EIB should find third party guarantees—that is, guarantees which do not fall on the EU budget or member states. No final agreement was reached, and this item will be taken again at a future ECOFIN meeting.

Over lunch, EU Finance Ministers met EFTA Finance Ministers to discuss employment policy. A joint communique was issued which emphasised the need for macro-economic frameworks to support strong and sustainable economic growth, prudent budget policies and joint efforts further to implement the single market.

Commissioner Monti presented the Commission's work programme on VAT. Over the period to 2000, the Commission plans to bring forward a series of proposals to overhaul the current EC VAT arrangements to allow tax authorities to collect revenue and tackle tax avoidance with greater certainty. There was no discussion of this item.

The Council noted the report of the high-level working group on trans-European networks. This report rules out extra funding for TENs by a revision to the financial perspective and instead concludes that every effort should be made to remove all non-financial delaying factors.

Labour Market Statistics

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes to labour market statistics the director of the Office for National Statistics will introduce following the Steel report; and if he will make a statement. [191]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: The director of the Office for National Statistics has conducted wide-ranging consultation on the Steel report both inside and outside Government. This showed some support for monthly publication of employment and unemployment and estimates from the labour force survey, but also doubts about whether the additional £7 million to £8 million annual cost of redesigned and enlarged survey represented value for money. An alternative option, costing an additional sum of around £200,000 a year, was also considered based on monthly publication of three–month rolling average estimates from the existing quarterly survey. The benefits of this in terms of informing macro-economic debate could, however, be diminished by potential problems of misunderstanding estimates which related not to individual months but to rolling three–month periods.

Accordingly, ONS will retain the current quarterly frequency of publication for the LFS. The Government have, however, accepted the recommendation, in the Employment Select Committee's report on unemployment and employment, that greater prominence should be given to the results from the existing quarterly LFS. ONS will be developing proposals for enhancing the dissemination strategy used for the survey in order to achieve this aim.

Further details are set out in the Government's response to the Employment Committee's report sent earlier to its successor, the Education and Employment Committee.

Share Trading (Stamp Duty)

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the progress of his proposals for stamp duty on share trading. [192]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I announced on 24 July 1996 that I intended to replace the current stamp duty on exemptions for market makers and broker dealers on the London stock exchange with a new relief for purchases made on any UK recognised investment exchange or European Economic Area regulated market by any firm fulfilling the role of intermediary on that exchange. The new regime would apply to all UK shares on which stamp duty is levied. Following detailed consultation by the Treasury over the last three months, I have now decided that it is not necessary to confine the relief available to intermediaries to purchases which are offset by sales within a given period. The introduction of such a time limit would impose additional compliance costs on firms; it would encourage a new type of tax-driven trading; and it would do little, if anything, to protect the revenue from stamp duty on shares.

My central expectation is that the proposed new regime, without a time limit, should deliver broadly the same yield from stamp duty on shares as the current regime. However, in order to guard against any potentially significant losses in revenue which may emerge on the introduction of the new tax regime and the stock exchange's new trading system, I propose to take reserve powers to impose a non-zero rate of stamp duty on share purchases and other defined classes of transactions by intermediaries. These powers could be activated to prevent against loss of revenue arising from abuse of the extended relief for intermediaries' transactions.

As well as replacing the current reliefs for stock exchange market makers and broker dealers, the proposed regime would also replace the existing stamp duty reliefs for market makers and principal traders on the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange. Stamp duty relief would be available to LIFFE equity options intermediaries for equity purchases on other exchanges of the stocks in which LIFFE trades an option and the purchase is made on a recognised investment exchange or an EEA regulated market. LIFFE intermediaries would not necessarily have to become intermediaries on other exchanges in order to gain relief.

Detailed provisions, reflecting these proposals, will be brought forward for the 1997 Finance Bill, with a view to implementing the new regime as soon as is practicable during 1997–98.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Mr. David Porter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made to establish a Disability Discrimination Act telephone information line. [84]

Mr. Burt: I am pleased to announce that following a successful tender exercise, the contract to run the Disability Discrimination Act information line has been awarded to Merit Direct Ltd. The line will be operational by 2 December 1996. Literature and fact sheets on the employment rights and the rights of access to goods, facilities and services will be available through an operator, by textphone, and on the Internet. Additionally, the fact sheets will be available by fax. Initially an automated service may be used for re-ordering literature.

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces Act 1996

Mr. Devlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress to complete the work on the secondary legislation for the Reserve Forces Act 1996. [82]

Mr. Soames: Work to develop the necessary secondary legislation to enable the Act's new powers to operate is proceeding well. Both new regulations and amendments to existing ones will be necessary, with some requiring formal public consultation before they are made.

That process of consultation has now begun. On 18 October we published a consultative document on schemes for exempting reservists from call-out and recall, and for financial assistance for reservists and their employers, provided under part VIII of the Act. The document is available in the Library of the House. As required by the Act, copies have been sent to representatives of employers, employees, the self-employed, and to the Council of Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Associations. Copies have also been sent to those who responded to the last consultation exercise on the draft Reserve Forces Bill, and to selected reserve units. The consultation period finishes on 29 November and I would encourage all those that the regulations affect or who have an interest in them to read the document carefully and to send in their comments.

I consider it most important to allow adequate time for interested parties to respond to our proposals, and for a measured assessment of those comments. I have therefore decided that the regulations, and the Act as a whole, should take effect from 1 April 1997 rather than 1 January 1997, the original target date for implementation.

Challenger 2 Programme

Mr. David Martin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current status of the Army's Challenger 2 programme; and if he will make a statement. [194]

Mr. Portillo: The Challenger 2 development programme was successfully completed, with all reliability targets achieved on development tanks. Following a series of trials on early production tanks we identified a need to improve the reliability of some of the elements of production vehicles to meet the very high standards set. An agreed programme to achieve this is being undertaken by the contractor, Vickers plc, at no additional cost to my Department. Central to the programme is a sequence of production reliability growth trials with agreed technical milestones.

The company has met the requirements set in the first of those trials, which was held in July. Challenger 2 has already demonstrated an impressive capability. I am confident that Challenger 2 will fully meet all our technical and reliability requirements in 1997. In order to ensure that the comprehensive logistic support arrangements that we require are properly established, I have agreed that the in-service date for Challenger 2 will be June 1998.

HEALTH

Social Services Conference

Mr. Sykes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library copies of his speech to the social services conference in Edinburgh on 18 October and of the two documents whose publication he announced on that occasion; and if he will make a statement. [83]

Mr. Burns: In his speech on 18 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced the publication of a consultation document on setting the standards of conduct and practice for social services staff, entitled "The Obligations of Care". Copies are being sent out to interested parties this week. Comments have been requested by 28 February 1997.

My right hon. Friend also announced the publication of Tom Burgner's report on his review of the regulation and inspection of social services, and gave the Government's initial response to it. Copies are being sent to interested parties this week. The Government intend to publish a White Paper on social services in January next year, and some more detailed responses to the Burgner recommendations will be given then. Meanwhile, we shall be initiating the necessary further consultations on particular issues with the relevant interests, whom we shall be approaching direct in due course.

Copies of both documents and of the speech have been placed in the Library.

Long-term Care

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he proposes to establish a partnership scheme for long-term care. [389]

Mr. Dorrell: The Government remain committed to the proposals for a partnership scheme set out in the consultation paper "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age", copies of which are available in the Library. In the light of responses to the consultation paper, they also intend to legislate to allow residents in care homes to "top up" the care arranged by their local authorities.

The Government intend to introduce a Bill as soon as legislative time is available. In the meantime, they are discussing the details of legislation with the financial services industry, representatives of local authorities, and other interested parties. They will publish a draft Bill, and a statement of their policy in the light of comments on the consultation paper, in the new year.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 25 October 1996

TRANSPORT

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to proceed with the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. [954]

Sir George Young: Air traffic control services provide a vital cover for the growing air transportation industry. Their standards are, and must be, of the highest. The national air traffic services face continuing demands for additional investment in the latest and most sophisticated equipment. The Government believe that these demands can most effectively be met in the private sector, freed from the constraints of public expenditure controls.

The Government therefore intends to bring forward legislation to privatise NATS early in a new Parliament. To this end, we will be developing proposals, taking account of work done previously, in consultation with the Civil Aviation Authority and other interested parties, with a view to publishing a draft bill as soon as possible in 1997.

Air Bags

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research he has undertaken into dangers to children arising from air bags fitted to cars. [22]

Mr. Bowis: None. This Department is already fully aware of the danger posed by air bags to children in rear-facing child seats.

Heavy Goods Vehicles (Safety)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research he has carried out on products that ensure that wheels do not come off heavy goods vehicles. [60]

Mr. Bowis: None.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Watercourse Management Division

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in establishing the watercourse management division of the Department of Agriculture as a next steps agency. [1057]

Mr. Ancram: The watercourse management division of the Department of Agriculture has been established as an executive agency from 1 October 1996. It will be known as the Rivers Agency.

I have set a number of key performance targets for the agency to achieve in its first six months. These are as follows:

To construct or refurbish 1.4 km of urban flood defences.

To increase the length of designated sea defences having appropriate standards of protection to 27 per cent.

To accommodate increased storm run-off from 448 hectares of development land.

To replace/refurbish 38 per cent. of dangerous culverts identified at 1 October 1996.

To complete maintenance works on 330 km of urban watercourses and 1,020 km of rural watercourses.

To extend or provide new water recreation facilities at 17 sites throughout Northern Ireland.

To issue substantive replies to 75 per cent. of written enquiries within 15 working days of receipt.

To respond to 100 per cent. of schedule 6 applications within three months.

To aim to have all navigation locks operable for at least 90 per cent. of the period.

To maintain expenditure within allocated cash limits.

To achieve at least 4 per cent. efficiency savings in the 1996–97 financial year.

To commission a scoping study on the feasibility of introducing private finance in capital works.

To implement phase 1 of the development of management information systems and databases to establish unit costs for protecting land from flooding and maintaining drainage benefit to agricultural land.

Copies of the framework document which sets out the terms within which the agency will operate, will be placed in the Library, along with its first corporate and business plan.

WALES

Cardiff Bay Development Corporation

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action has been taken to implement the conclusions and recommendations of the 1994 financial management and policy review report of the Cardiff Bay development corporation. [1008]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Department and the corporation have jointly considered the conclusions and recommendations of the report. Action taken in response to the report has brought about improvements in the running and administration of the corporation, clarified its accountability and improved the working relationship between the Department and the corporation.

Copies of the formal account of the action taken in response to each conclusion and recommendation, have been placed in the Library of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Low Level Offenders

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses he has received commenting on the consultation paper "Alternative Penalties for Fine Defaulters and Low Level Offenders". [957]

Mr. Howard: Of the 31 responses to the paper, 30 were from organisations and individuals with a direct interest in the criminal justice system.

There was overall support for the wider use of community penalties as proposed in the consultation paper. Seventy-seven per cent. of respondents supported community service and 58 per cent. supported curfew orders for fine default. Sixty-one per cent. supported community service and 51 per cent. curfew orders for persistent low level offenders.

I have considered the responses carefully in finalising the details of the proposals which are included in the Crime (Sentences) Bill, published today.

"Protecting the Public"

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses he has received commenting on the sentencing proposals set out in the White Paper "Protecting the Public". [958]

Mr. Howard: We have received responses from 189 members of the public and from 90 organisations and other individuals with a direct interest in the criminal justice system. The sentencing proposals were widely welcomed by the public. Overall, 139 responses from the public, 74 per cent., expressed full support and a further 13, 7 per cent., qualified support. A range of views were expressed by those other individuals and organisations who commented on the proposals. There was support from police associations. There was criticism from the judiciary about the principle of mandatory sentences in particular, and a number of responses expressed concern about how the proposals would operate in practice.

I have considered the responses carefully in finalising the details of the proposals which are included in the Crime (Sentences) Bill, published today.

Mentally Disordered Offenders

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses he has received commenting on the proposals set out in the consultation paper "Mentally Disordered Offenders: Sentencing and Discharge Arrangements". [955]

Mr. Howard: We have received 182 responses to the consultation paper, many of which expressed the views of organisations rather than individuals.

One hundred and two respondents, 56 per cent., expressed support for the principle of the proposal to introduce a hospital direction disposal for mentally disordered offenders. Twenty-four of these wished the power to be available only to those diagnosed as suffering from psychopathic disorder.

The responses revealed strong support for the proposal to extend the maximum duration of the interim hospital order. There was broad support for our proposals in relation to discharge and subsequent supervision of mentally disordered offenders.

I have considered the responses carefully in finalising the detail of the proposals which are included in the Crime (Sentences) Bill, published today.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses he has received commenting on the proposals in the consultation paper "Sentencing and Supervision of Sex Offenders". [956]

Mr. Howard: We have received 238 formal responses to the consultation paper. In general, there was strong support for all the proposals canvassed. Not all respondents commented on all five proposals outlined in the consultation paper. Of those who did, 94 per cent. were in favour of extended supervision for convicted sex offenders released from prison; 82 per cent. were in favour of DNA testing of convicted sex offenders still serving a prison sentence who have not already been DNA tested; 87 per cent. supported a requirement for convicted sex offenders to notify the police of their address and any subsequent change thereto; 87 per cent. also supported the proposal to make it an offence for convicted sex offenders who seek employment with children; and 91 per cent. supported the proposal for a supervised access regime for victim statements and photographs in sex cases.

I have considered all these responses carefully. The Crime (Sentences) Bill, published today, contains provision for the extended supervision of sex offenders after their release from custody. I will also be bringing forward proposals to require paedophiles and other serious sex offenders to notify changes of address to the police.

Other proposals for legislation will be brought forward when suitable opportunities arise.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, when he expects to reply to the hon. Member for Nottingham North's letter of 17 October on the sale of drugs by Nottingham bouncers. [403]

Mr. Maclean: A reply will be sent shortly.

DEFENCE

Army Technical Support Agency

Mr. Couchman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the planned collocation of the Army Technical Support Agency. [848]

Mr. Soames: I have decided, in the light of the Government's determination to exploit fully the potential offered by the private finance initiative, that the collocation of the Army Technical Support Agency should be taken forward as a PFI project.

On 4 June, *Official Report*, column *388*, I described the further work to be undertaken following the responses to the earlier consultation document. This has included a further investment appraisal—including the Andover, Ludgershall and Chilwell options—and the production of a new business case.

The work has shown that Andover is the preferred location for ATSA because of its proximity to the agency's main customers, principally the Director General Equipment Support (Army) and his staff who are already based at Andover. I am arranging for copies of the investment appraisal and business case to be placed in the Library of the House.

Andover will therefore be the public comparator in the PFI exercise and the Andover north site will be available to bidders if required. Bidders will be able to put forward alternative options, including existing ATSA sites, so long as these satisfy ATSA's business needs and the PFI requirements for risk transfer and value for money. We shall shortly be seeking expressions of interest and I would expect to be in a position to decide on the preferred option by the middle of 1998, allowing collocation to be achieved around the end of 1999.

A formal period of consultation is not required until either a PFI solution is identified or we decide to follow a conventional public sector delivery route. I should, nevertheless, be very pleased to receive any further representations from hon. Members, ATSA staff and other interested parties at this stage.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

EU Research Council

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EU Research Council on 7 October. [872]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The Council had a first exchange of views on priorities for the fifth framework programme for research and technological development, in responses to the European Commission's initial strategy document "Inventing tomorrow". The UK stressed the need for the fifth programme to address the medium-term needs of EU industry and to support EU policies more broadly, including those designed to bring about improvements in the quality of life. It considered that the programme needed to be more sharply targeted than hitherto on clear objectives responding to user priorities and to give the users of research a stronger voice.

The Council had a short discussion on EU-funded research into bovine spongiform encephalopathy and related diseases. It approved conclusions calling for enhanced co-operation among EU members states in research into BSE and related diseases and for strengthened support for such research in the fourth framework programme. The conclusions also invite the Commission to report again to the Council in December, following the report of the group of experts chaired by Professor Charles Weismann.

The Council considered the question of supplementary funding for the fourth framework programme. It took note of the Commission's intention to clarify the funding available within category 3 of the current financial perspectives, and agreed to return to the matter at its next meeting in December.

Institute of Food Research

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the prior options review of the Institute of Food Research sponsored by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. [873]

Mr. Ian Tayor: The Government announced on 29 September 1995 that all public sector research establishments would be subject to prior options reviews. I announced on 24 November 1995 reviews of BBSRC-sponsored institutes concerned with agriculture and plant sciences, and on 22 February 1996 reviews of BBSRC–sponsored institutes concerned with animal sciences.

A review has now begun of the BBSRC's arrangements for sponsoring the Institute of Food Research. The review was advertised in the September issue of *Government Opportunities*. This review is taking place alongside those of establishments parented or sponsored by other Government Departments which are carrying out work in similar or related fields and will build on any relevant recent studies.

Information Technology

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to monitor and assess the United Kingdom's progress towards the information society relative to other countries. [870]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The Department of Trade and Industry commissioned Spectrum Strategy Consultants, as part of the information society initiative, to undertake a pilot exercise to determine how to measure the UK's progress towards the information society. The aims of the study were to examine a range of possible indicators, to determine their significance and provisionally to measure the performance of nine countries—UK, Germany, France, Sweden, USA, Canada, Australia, Japan and Singapore. A report, "The Development of the Information Society: an International Analysis", was published on 28 August 1996 by HMSO, ISBN 0-11-515424-8. An executive summary was also produced and is available on the Internet (http//:www.isi.gov.uk/dotis/index.htm/) or by ringing the ISI info line (0345 15 2000), or by e-mail (info@isi.gov.uk).

I have placed copies of the report and the executive summary in the Library of the House.

EU Telecommunications Council

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EU Telecommunications Council on 27 September 1996. [875]

Mr. Ian Taylor: I represented the UK at the Telecommunications Council held in Brussels on 27 September.

The Council reached political agreement on a common position on a directive on licensing in telecommunications. Greece announced its intention of voting against the common position. In addition, the Council reached unanimous political agreement on a common position on a decision for EU action on the introduction of satellite personal communications services.

Following an informal lunchtime discussion on a draft directive on postal services, it was agreed that this proposal should be referred back to the Committee of Permanent Representatives for further discussion with a view to reaching political agreement on a common position at the 28 November Telecommunications Council.

Following a debate on measures to combat the dissemination of paedophile images and information via networks of the Internet type, the Council agreed unanimous conclusions on the creation of a working party to present proposals to combat illegal use of the Internet or similar networks—taking account of UK measures in this area—in time for the 28 November Telecommunications Council.

There was also a Commission presentation on a directive on the application of open network provision to voice telephony in a competitive environment.

EU Industry Council

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EU industry council on 8 October. [874]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The UK deputy permanent representative to the European Union represented the UK at the Industry Council held in Luxembourg on 8 October.

The Council reached unanimous political agreement on a resolution on new political priorities for the information society. The Council also reached unanimous political agreement on a decision to promote linguistic diversity in the information society.

The Commission made presentations on recent Commission communications in the information society field—"The Information Society: From Corfu to Dublin/The new emerging priorities", "The implication of the Information Society for European Union policies: Preparing the next steps", "Standardisation and the global information society: The European approach" and "Living and working in the information society: People first"—and on a proposal for a directive concerning regulatory transparency in the field of information society services.

As part of the arrangements for a structured dialogue with applicants for membership of the EU, representatives of the 10 associate member countries of central and eastern Europe were invited to participate in an exchange of views of the information society.

Nuclear Safety

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when the international convention on nuclear safety will enter into force. [871]

Mr. Page: The convention on nuclear safety entered into force yesterday, 24 October, just over two years after being opened for signature at the International Atomic Energy Agency general conference in September 1994. The principal objective of the convention is to encourage best practice in the safe regulation, design and operation of civil nuclear power plants. States party to the convention will submit national reports, for discussion at periodic review meetings, on how they meet safety obligations established in the convention.

The United Kingdom ratified the convention on 17 January this year. Seventeen nuclear states and eight states without civil nuclear power plants have now ratified the convention. The speed of entry into force of the convention is a considerable achievement by the international community. It demonstrates the importance, underlined in the declaration of the Moscow summit in April this year, that many states attach to achieving high standards of nuclear safety worldwide.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 28 October 1996

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Aid Projects

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are taken by the Overseas Development Administration to ensure that all aid projects are assessed for their environmental sustainability. [739]

Dr. Liam Fox: All projects are subject to environmental assessment according to the guidelines and procedures set out in the manual of environmental appraisal. ODA has recently revised and updated the manual. It is accompanied by guidance on the major international environmental agreements and their implications for both aid donors and recipients. Copies of both documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

UN World Hunger Conference

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals Her Majesty's Government intend to place before the UN world hunger conference to be held in Rome in November; and if he will make a statement. [483]

Dr. Liam Fox: The Government's principal objective for the world food summit is to work for international consensus on the future action needed to reduce hunger and malnutrition in the world. To help achieve this objective, we propose to present to the summit a paper on policy towards food security. In preparing this paper, we have consulted extensively among interested groups in the United Kingdom.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mahmood Hussein Mattam

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received relating to the conviction for murder and subsequent hanging in Cardiff in 1952 of Mahmood Hussein Mattam; and if he will now refer the matter to the Court of Appeal. [777]

Mr. Kirkhope: On 10 October 1996, solicitors acting on behalf of Mr. Mattam's family submitted a substantial dossier in this case. My right hon. and learned Friend will decide as soon as possible whether any action on his part would be appropriate.

Police Equipment

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the items of new equipment authorised by his Department for use by *(a)* the Metropolitan police and *(b)* other police forces in England and Wales in the last two years; how much training is required by his Department (i) initially and (ii) annually for each piece of equipment; and what assessment he has made of the impact of the introduction of each piece of equipment on the time available to police officers on active duty. [75]

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. and learned Friend gave his consent to the following in the Metropolitan police district, in accordance with the Metropolitan Police Town Clauses Act 1829:

(i) on 23 November 1994, 24 in and 26 in straight batons;

(ii) on 28 June 1995, expandable three-piece friction lock batons.

In addition, between 1 March and 31 August 1996, Metropolitan police officers participated in operational trials of CS aerosol sprays with my right hon. and learned Friend's consent. His consent is not required to the introduction of police equipment in other forces.

Training in the use of equipment is a matter for individual chief officers. An assessment was made of the effect of the introduction of expandable side-handled batons on working days lost by injury to police officers. No conclusions could be drawn because it coincided with a period in which there was a large fall in the number of officers on long-term sick leave.

Omanga Mangwete

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost to his Department of the custody of Omanga Mangwete in the UK prior to his removal to Canada. [165]

Mr. Kirkhope: The cost of detaining Mr. Mangwete in the United Kingdom prior to his removal was £21,521.17.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total number of asylum seekers whose application has been rejected but remain in Britain awaiting appeal. [669]

Mr. Kirkhope: As at 30 September 1996, an estimated 20,100 refused asylum seekers, excluding dependants, were pursuing appeals.

Micrea Ilin

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost of the custody of Micrea Ilin prior to his release from prison; and what was the cost to his Department of their actions on his case. [164]

Mr. Kirkhope: The cost of detaining Mr. Ilin was about £6,630. The cost to the Home Department of our actions in this case could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

ENVIRONMENT

Construction Industry (Recycling)

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what progress has been made in increasing the use of recycled material in the construction industry. [202]

Mr. Clappison: There is increasing interest in the use of recycled materials for construction in order to conserve primary aggregates. This has been further encouraged by the introduction of the landfill tax. Reliable data on the extent of usage of recycled materials are not presently available.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the administrative cost of implementation of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 by English local authorities. [668]

Sir Paul Beresford: Information about such costs is not available centrally, but I would expect any administrative costs to local authorities of implementing the housing provisions of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 to have been offset by savings arising from the changes, introduced by the Act, to the duties owed by authorities to asylum seekers under the homelessness legislation.

Planning Application (Wallsend)

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will call in for determination planning application NT/0925/96 DM made to North Tyneside council for residential development at the Northern Electric sportsground, Wallsend. [782]

Sir Paul Beresford: If it is minded to approve this planning application, North Tyneside council will refer it to the Secretary of State for the Environment as a departure from the development plan, and he will then consider whether to call it in. I have asked the Government office for the north-east to write and let the hon. Member know his decision.

Stockport Unitary Development Plan

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects the inspectors' report into Stockport UDP to be published. [73]

Sir Paul Beresford: The inspectors' report on objections to the Stockport unitary development plan is expected to be delivered to the council at the end of December this year. It will then be for the council to decide when to publish the report. I have asked the Planning Inspectorate's chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. Greenfield to Mr. Andrew F. Bennett, dated 25 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for the Environment has asked me to reply to your question about the Inspector's report from the public inquiry into the Stockport Unitary Development Plan.

The report is expected to be issued to the Council at the end of December. It will then be for the Council to decide when to publish it.

Planning Appeal (Stockport)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects a decision to be taken into the appeal by Gladmen Homes to build a nursing home on land at Lisgard lane, Stockport. [74]

Sir Paul Beresford: The provision of information on planning appeals is the responsibility of the Planning Inspectorate. In the absence of the inspectorate's chief executive, Mr. Chris Shepley, I have asked the deputy chief executive, Mr. James Greenfield, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. Greenfield to Mr. Andrew F. Bennett, dated 25 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question asking when a decision is expected on the planning appeal by Gladman Homes for the erection of a nursing home on land at Donelons Yard, Lingard Lane, Bredbury.

The appeal has now been decided, and I enclose a copy of the inspector's decision letter.

Footpaths

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to place a duty on local authorities to adopt footpaths. [783]

Mr. Clappison: We have no plans to do so.

Liverpool Airport

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects to make a decision on proposals to expand Liverpool airport; and if he will make a statement. [493]

Sir Paul Beresford: A decision will be taken as soon as possible on the planning applications made by Liverpool Airport plc for the phased development of Liverpool airport. These were called in for the Secretary of State's determination in June 1994 and a public local inquiry was held from 4 April 1995 to 30 June 1995. The report of the inquiry inspector, which was submitted on 25 July 1996, is being considered.

It remains our intention, if feasible, to announce decisions simultaneously on the applications for the phased development of Liverpool airport and for a second runway at Manchester airport.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the net carbon dioxide emissions from Britain *(a)* in each year since 1990 and *(b)* in each year up to 2010. [154]

Mr. Clappison: Emissions of carbon dioxide, net of the increase in carbon stored in forests and wood products, for the UK are estimated to have been:

	Million tonnes CO^2
1990	574
1991	579
1992	563
1993	549
1994	546

Projected emissions are subject to greater uncertainty. They are currently estimated to be:

2000: 545

2005: 588

2010: 591

Waste Disposal

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the proportion of discarded *(a)* glass, *(b)* paper, *(c)* plastic, and *(d)* biodegradables which have been (i) recycled and (ii) composted in each of the past five years, the current year, and each of the next five. [156]

Mr. Clappison: It is not possible to provide information in the form requested. Information on plastic recycling and composting of biodegradables is not held centrally.

The Department does obtain information from trade associations on the amounts of glass and paper recycled as a proportion of glass and paper consumption in the UK. Figures for the years 1989–1994 are given in the table.

Glass and paper recycling as a proportion of the consumption of these materials in the UK

Year	*Glass recycling (per cent.)*	*Paper recycling per cent.)*
1989	17	28
1990	21	32
1991	21	34
1992	26	34
1993	29	32
1994	28	33

The Department has not made projections of these figures.

Housing Rents

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the average rent paid by *(a)* council tenants and *(b)* housing association and housing trust tenants in each year since 1990. [158]

Mr. Clappison: Average weekly rents for council and housing association tenants in England are set out in the table:

	(a) Council tenants[1] £	*(b) HA tenants*[2] £
1990	23.74	n/a
1991	27.29	n/a
1992	30.57	29.62
1993	33.62	34.03
1994	35.68	37.56
1995	38.31	40.60

[1]At 1 April.
[2]At 31 March.
Source:
Housing subsidy claim forms (council rents), Housing Corporation HAR10/1 return (housing associations).

Global Temperature Changes

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment from what sources he draws his evidence of global temperature changes; and on whom he relies for the evaluation of this information. [495]

Mr. Clappison: The Hadley centre, Bracknell, complies global temperature data and analyses them for indications of change. The result of the Hadley centre's work are published in scientific journals and hence subject to peer review. These results, with the work of other investigators around the world, have been assessed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—IPCC—and reported in the IPCC's most recent report, the second assessment of climate change 1995.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Goods (Environmental Claims)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action he intends to take following the publication of the National Consumer Council report on environmental claims on goods. [240]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My Department is currently working with the Department of the Environment to draw up, in consultation with industry and consumer interests, a code of practice for the making of environmental claims.

Coal Imports

Mr. Redmond: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the country of origin and tonnage of coal imports for 1995. [436]

Mr. Page: The information requested is given in the table:

Coal imports for 1995

Country of origin	*Thousand tonnes of coal*
Australia	3,641
Belgium/Luxembourg	13
Canada	1,364
Colombia	2,687
Czech Republic	2
Estonia	59
Germany	131
India	9
Indonesia	65
Irish Republic	25
Netherlands[1]	104
Norway	2
People's Republic of China	77
Poland	1,274
Republic of South Africa	1,313
Russia	160
Sweden	10
United States of America	4,858
Vietnam	101
Total	15,896

[1]Imports include extra-EU coal routed through the Netherlands.
Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 1996.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the tonnage of coal imports for each of the last 10 years. [437]

Mr. Page: The information requested is given in the table:

Coal Imports

Year	*Thousand tonnes of coal*
1986	10,554
1987	9,781
1988	11,685
1989	12,137
1990	14,783
1991	19,611
1992	20,339
1993	18,400
1994	15,041
1995	15,896

Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 1996.

R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what *(a)* grants and *(b)* other assistance have been given by his Department to R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd. in the last five years. [176]

Mr. Page: There is no record of any assistance having been given by this Department to R. R. Donnelley's York plant within the past five years.

However, R. R. Donnelley's Gateshead plant has received business support assistance through its local training and enterprise council. The total value of this assistance is approximately £21,000.

Departmental Investigations

Mr. Byers: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when his Department began its investigation into the activities and conduct of *(a)* Butte Mining, *(b)* Richmond Oil and Gas plc and *(c)* the Robertson Group; when the investigations were completed; what action was taken; and which Minister dealt with the matter. [785]

Mr. Lang: It is not my Department's practice to comment on the affairs of individual companies.

DEFENCE

Porton Down

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the file with the classmark WO 32/20843 recorded at the Public Record Office relating to experiments at the chemical and biological defence establishment is currently retained by his Department; and if he will open it. [724]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Arrangements are being made to review WO 32/20843 to see whether release into the public domain is now possible. I will write to the hon. Member on completion of the review process.

Beef Consumption

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if British beef is purchased by the armed forces for their own consumption in the United Kingdom. [198]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement of food for the armed forces is contracted to the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes—NAAFI. My Department does not specify the source of origin from which the NAAFI should obtain beef—or any other meat—but expects it to seek the best market price for the product. There are no constraints on the choice of British meat products, which are considered equally with meat products sourced generally in the open market. The majority of our requirements are, however, for frozen beef which is not readily available from the British market and I understand that on cost grounds the majority of beef joints have been sourced from South America, predominantly Brazil and Uruguay, although a range of beef products including sirloin, forerибs, minced and diced beef are normally procured in the UK along with other meat and poultry produce.

Mine Clearance (Former Yugoslavia)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of mine clearance and detection vehicles and equipment in service with British forces in operations under the NATO, UN and implementation force—IFOR—programmes in former Yugoslavia. [397]

Mr. Soames: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Married Quarters Estate

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received opposing the sale of military married quarters to a Japanese-led consortium; what plans he has to review the sale; and if he will make a statement. [484]

Mr. Arbuthnot: My Department has received a number of letters expressing views on the future ownership of the married quarters estate. The sale is proceeding satisfactorily, with exchange of contracts having taken place on 24 September and completion scheduled for 5 November. A copy of my Department's press release announcing the exchange of contracts was placed in the Library of the House.

Tornado Crash (Blackpool)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of the nine F3 Tornados referred to in his answer of 16 October, *Official Report*, column *1094*, had been refurbished by British Aerospace, Warton, Lancashire, by means of *(a)* fitting a new mid-section fuselage taken from an F2 Tornado and *(b)* making good directly the previously damaged fuselage mid-section. [786]

Mr. Arbuthnot: All nine of the Tornado aircraft to which I referred in my answer of 16 October were refurbished by means of fitting centre fuselage sections taken from Tornado F2 aircraft held in store.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the same-day authorisation to fly the F3 Tornado that crashed at Blackpool on 28 September constituted the full normal manufacturers' certificate of airworthiness. [780]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The full and normal certification was provided by British Aerospace as contractor in respect of this aircraft, concurrently with the Ministry of Defence authorisation provided by my Department's principal quality assurance officer at British Aerospace, Warton, where the aircraft was being refurbished.

Future Large Aircraft

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with his German counterpart concerning the future large aircraft programme. [247]

Mr. Arbuthnot: When I met State Secretary Simon on Tuesday 3 September, the future large aircraft programme was among the subjects we discussed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has not recently discussed the future large aircraft programme with his German counterpart.

Operation Joint Endeavour

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the aims of Operation Joint Endeavour; what part will be played by British military forces; and if he will make a statement. [485]

Mr. Soames: Operation Joint Endeavour is the NATO-led implementation force—IFOR—operation in Bosnia. Its primary aim is to implement the military aspects of the Dayton peace agreement. The operation has been conspicuously successful and all the key military objectives have been achieved. Britain is making a major contribution to IFOR through our leadership and status as framework nation for headquarters Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps, which commands the land operation, our command of one of the three multinational divisions and a troop contribution which is second only to that of America.

Departmental Headquarters Refurbishment

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his plans for refurbishing his Department's main building headquarters using the private finance initiative. [246]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Main building was constructed in the 1950s. Many of its key services are now in urgent need of replacement and the accommodation falls far short of meeting today's needs. To correct these deficiencies requires a major programme of work that will provide a modern working environment, maximum utilisation of space and flexibility for the future.

The Department intends to examine private finance options for the redevelopment and subsequent operation of the building. In due course, we would expect to be inviting ideas for the scheme from potential private sector partners. I hope to be able to make an announcement on the way ahead within the next few weeks.

Nicola Goode

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to complete his official investigation into the case of Nicola Goode, 2 Victoria heights, Dartmouth who suffered an injury on 2 February 1996 at RAF Halton; and will he make a statement. [257]

Mr. Soames: I will shortly write to the hon. Member in respect of his constituent in this case.

SCOTLAND

Andover Primary School, Brechin

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will announce a decision on the compulsory purchase order regarding land or the proposed replacement building for Andover primary school, Brechin; and when he received the application for this compulsory purchase order. [248]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: A decision on this order, which was submitted for confirmation in March 1995, will be made shortly.

SOCIAL SECURITY

War Widows

Mr. George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his Department's policy in respect of the pensions of war widows whose husbands' deaths are assessed to be related to smoking while in prisoner of war camps during the second world war; and if he will make a statement. [498]

Mr. Heald: A war widow's pension may be awarded where the late husband's death was due to, or was substantially hastened by, any service in the armed forces. There is no automatic entitlement to a war widow's pension simply because the late husband was a war pensioner.

The war pensions scheme has never been intended to compensate for the effects of a personal habit such as smoking. Policy on this has not changed. Over more than 40 years, that has been the general policy of successive Governments; it has applied to all those who served including those who were prisoners of war.

The law does, however, provide for awards in respect of smoking-related conditions where there is a severely disabling mental condition—itself attributable to service and assessed for war pension purposes at a minimum of 50 per cent.—which rendered the individual incapable of exercising personal choice and prevented him from giving up the habit.

Income Support

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* of those of adult working age and *(b)* pensioners are currently in receipt of income support; and if he will list separately the estimated number whose income is less than (i) £6,000 annually and (ii) £5,000 in each group. [223]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table:

	Millions
Number of income support claimants of adult working age	4.080
Number of pensioner income support claimants	1.588

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry November 1995.

Notes:

1. Adult working age is between 16 and 60 years for females and up to 65 years for males.

2. Sample size 5 per cent.

3. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

4. Numbers include all income support recipients of working age irrespective of their circumstances.

State Pension

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what increase could be paid to recipients of a state pension if it had been consistently uprated in line with earnings since 1980; and what would be the gross cost of this in the current financial year and the cost net of taxation and losses of other benefit entitlement. [159]

Mr. Heald: If the basic state retirement pension had been increased in line with average earnings since 1980, the standard rate of basic pension would be increased by £19.10 a week. The gross cost of such an increase is estimated at £8.8 billion in 1996–97. After taking account of the effect on income-related benefits and taxation, the net cost is estimated at £5.5 billion.

Sources:

1. Estimates of gross costs provided by Government Actuary Department.

2. Net costs estimated using standard offset ratios from the Policy Simulation Model 1996–97, which is based upon data from the family expenditure surveys 1991, 1992 and 1993.

3. Estimates of changes to income tax revenue provided by the Inland Revenue, using a provisional projection of FES 1994–95 data to 1996–97.

4. Average earnings index, all employees, taken from the new earnings survey for each year.

Notes:

1. All estimates are in 1996–97 prices, rounded to the nearest £100 million.

2. This reply refers to increases in basic retirement pension only.

Pensions

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many full-time employees are currently estimated to have no arrangements for pension purposes outside the state pension; and what percentage of the work force this amounts to. [155]

Mr. Heald: We estimate that in 1994 approximately 2.8 million full-time employees had no current additional pension arrangement other than the state earnings-related pension; this represents about 17 per cent. of all full-time employees.

Source:

1994 general household survey and labour force surveys.

Note:

This information refers to current membership of schemes, it does not include employees who have preserved rights from previous membership of an occupational scheme.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many of those claimants of incapacity benefit who failed the all work test were also refused unemployment benefit due to failing to meet the availability for work criteria. [224]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the table:

	Number
Number of claims for unemployment benefits by former incapacity benefit claimants.	72,564
Number disallowed unemployment benefits because not available for work or unreasonable restriction placed on availability for work.	208
Number disallowed unemployment benefits because not actively seeking work.	40

Source:

Employment Service.

Note:

All data from 13 April 1995 to 30 September 1996.

Child Support Agency

Sir Roger Sims: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what reports he has received recently concerning the performance of the Child Support Agency. [1095]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has recently received two reports, both of which are being placed in the Library today. These are the annual report for 1995–96 from the chief child support officer and the mid-year report of the Child Support Agency.

The CSA's mid-year report shows that by the end of September maintenance totalling more than £183 million had been collected or arranged by the agency and that it was clearly on course to meet the target of £380 million to £400 million for the year. In September, 80 per cent. of assessments were correct to the nearest penny and 98 per cent. of payments received from absent parents were paid over to the parent with care within 10 working days. In addition, the report shows the agency's commitment to prompt enforcement action by issuing over 25,000 deductions from earnings orders and applying for over 1,000 liability orders against non-compliant absent parents.

The CCSO's report for 1995–96 shows continued improvement over the standards of adjudication for the first two years of the agency's operation. The CCSO, who is independent of the CSA and Ministers, acknowledges the progress made and the dedication of agency staff at all levels towards securing better standards of adjudication. He also points out that the agency's assessment of accuracy and the assessment of his own monitors are now broadly in line.

Both reports clearly indicate that the CSA has turned the corner in terms of its performance over the last 18 months and that it continues to make very encouraging progress, with substantial improvements in many areas. We shall be looking to the agency to continue this much-needed improvement, meet its end-of year targets and deliver an ever-improving and more efficient service.

WALES

BSE

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the impact of BSE on staffing levels in his Department as at 1 April, 1 October and prospectively for 1 April 1997. [778]

Mr. Hague: My Department continually keeps under review its staffing requirements for each area of business. Priorities have been established which will enable the BSE work to be taken forward.

Cattle Farming (Assistance)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to assist farmers, unable to have their cattle culled as a result of the culling backlog, with the cost of winter feed; and if he will make a statement. [71]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Government have made a further £29 million available to assist beef farmers and are consulting the industry on how this can be most effectively allocated. The Government have committed a total of £2.5 billion to supporting the agriculture industry.

Agricultural Holdings

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the number of agricultural holdings and the hectarage of agricultural land in each county in Wales in the year (i) 1994, (ii) 1995 and (iii) 1996. [772]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information requested is shown in the following table. Data for 1996 are not yet available.

	1994		*1995*	
County	*Hectares*	*Holdings*	*Hectares*	*Holdings*
Clwyd	197,581	3,774	194,384	3,506
Dyfed	485,021	11,137	479,625	10,580
Gwent	92,642	2,181	91,176	2,053
Gwynedd	324,976	4,813	322,847	4,490
Mid Glamorgan	57,158	950	57,398	891
Powys	443,325	5,679	443,260	5,286
South Glamorgan	23,832	501	23,566	474
West Glamorgan	45,767	875	44,759	796
Wales	1,670,301	29,910	1,657,013	28,076

Source:
June agricultural census.
Figures are for main holdings and include estimates for common rough grazing land.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Illegal Drugs

32. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Lord President of the Council what progress has been made in respect of the use of illegal drugs since the publication of "Tackling Drugs Together". [600]

Mr. Newton: Since there are as yet no data beyond 1995, the year in which "Tackling Drugs Together" was published, it is too early to make such an assessment. However, good progress has been made in carrying forward all elements in the strategy which the White Paper set out.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have so far failed to sign the comprehensive test ban treaty; when he expects the ban to become international law; and if he will make a statement. [490]

Mr. David Davis: The following countries had not signed the CTBT by 28 October:

Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belize, Bhutan, Botswana, Brunei, Burma, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Czech Republic, Dominica, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, The Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, India, Iraq, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Korea (North), Laos, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritius, Moldova, Nauru, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Rwanda, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Surinam, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Uganda, Yugoslavia, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

According to article XIV of the treaty, the CTBT will enter into force 180 days after the date of deposit of the instruments of ratification by the 44 states listed in annexe 2 of the treaty, but in no case earlier than two years after its opening for signature.

Antarctic Treaty

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to the Government of Japan concerning ratification of the Antarctic treaty; and if he will make a statement. [671]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I refer the hon. member to the answer that I gave him on 22 July, *Official Report*, columns *39–40*, since when there has been further correspondence between British and Japanese officials on detailed technical issues relating to the environmental protocol and we have against urged Japan to ratify the protocol as soon as possible.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in discussions with fellow signatories to the Antarctic treaty on the establishment of a secretariat; and if he will make a statement. [672]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave on 22 July, *Official Report*, columns *39–40*. There has been no recent discussion.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total budget spent in each of the last three years on *(a)* Britain's responsibility on Antarctica through the Antarctic treaty and *(b)* grant to the British Antarctic Survey. [225]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Our only financial responsibility in relation to the Antarctic treaty is contributions to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. FCO contributions for the last three years were as follows:

1993–94: £31,685

1994–95: £31,932

1995–96: £32,700

The Natural Environment Research Council is responsible for funding the British Antarctic Survey. The council provided the following information on the NERC grant to the survey in each of the last three years:

1993–94: £21,436,000

1994–95: £24,321,000

1995–96: £26,380,000

Romania (Human Rights)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of Romania concerning human rights; and if he will make a statement. [670]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We monitor closely the human rights situation in Romania, as we do in other countries. When appropriate, we raise concerns bilaterally or in company with our EU partners.

Argentina

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list by date the discussions he has held with representatives of the Argentine Government since January 1991. [674]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary met his Argentine counterpart on the following dates:

26 July 1995

27 September 1995

15 December 1995

30 January 1996

28 February 1996

13 April 1996

10 June 1996

29 July 1996

25 September 1996

27 September 1996

His predecessor met the Argentine Foreign Minister on the following dates:

10 December 1990

24 April 1991

26 September 1991

23 February 1992

24 February 1992

22 September 1992

8 January 1993

30 March 1993

1 November 1993

3 March 1994

10 May 1994

5 October 1994

19 April 1995

8 June 1995

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what review of the Government's arms policy with regard to Argentina has taken place since January 1991; what factors underlay the review; what classes of equipment were released from embargo as a consequence of the review; what quantities of such equipment have been sold since January 1991; and what information was released to *(a)* Parliament and *(b)* industry by his Department in respect of the review. [677]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I refer the hon. Member to my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary's remarks in the House on 24 October 1996, *Official Report*, column 141.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear, there has been no relaxation of the embargo and no goods have consequently been released from embargo. However, there have been exceptions allowed under the embargo in specific cases. I also refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to the hon. member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on 13 June 1996, *Official Report*, column *263*.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has held with representatives of the Argentine Government since January 1991, in respect of relaxing the arms embargo. [675]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Argentine representatives have raised their desire to have the arms embargo relaxed on several occasions. I have nothing further to add to the remarks made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary on 24 October, *Official Report*, column 141.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the British Government's policy on the export of arms and military equipment to Argentina. [676]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I refer the hon. Member to the remarks made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary on 24 October, *Official Report*, column 141.

Helms-Burton Act

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United States ambassador in respect of the Helms-Burton Act; and if he will make a statement. [481]

Mr. David Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has discussed the Helms-Burton Act with the United States ambassador and the US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher.

We consider that this legislation sets a dangerous and unwelcome precedent. It is against the spirit, if not the letter, of international trade law. While we agree with the US objective to promote democracy in Cuba, we disagree fundamentally on the means to achieve this. US sanctions against British companies are not the way forward. We have put firmly on record with the US Administration and Congress bilaterally, and also collectively with our EU partners, our views and our objections to the legislation. The EU has requested World Trade Organisation disputes panel to rule on the issue. Countermeasures are under consideration in Brussels. The Government are determined to do everything possible to protect our legitimate business interests and the law-based international trading system.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Drug Abuse Resistance Education

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) on what occasions she has visited the Nottinghamshire DARE programme; and if she will make a statement. [400]

(2) what estimates she has made of the cost of ensuring all nine-year-olds undertook a 17-week DARE course on social skills. [401]

Mrs. Gillan: My right hon. Friend has not visited the Nottinghamshire drug abuse resistance education—DARE—programme, but officials of the Department maintain regular contact with DARE representatives and monitor its progress closely.

No estimates of requiring the DARE programme to be implemented nationwide have been made. While we encourage inter-agency drug education initiatives, it is for individual schools to decide which approach best suits their needs and circumstances. DARE is one of a number of possible programmes.

Down's Syndrome Children

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children with Down's syndrome are being educated *(a)* in mainstream schools and *(b)* in special schools in each local education authority; and if she will make a statement. [784]

Mrs. Gillan: This information is not collected centrally. Local education authorities are under a duty to educate children with special education needs in mainstream schools, provided this accords with parents' wishes and is compatible with the child receiving appropriate special educational provision, the provision of efficient education for other children and the efficient use of resources.

Physical Education Teachers

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many physical education teachers are employed in local education authority schools; and what has been the percentage change since 1979. [502]

Mr. Forth: In 1992, there were 24,400 full-time teachers in maintained, including grant-maintained, secondary schools in England who were teaching at least one lesson of physical education—PE—a week. Comparable figures are not available for later years. This represents a decrease of 36 per cent. since 1984, the earliest year for which comparable figures are available.

Most teachers in maintained primary schools teach some PE.

Children (Employment)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment she has made of the educational effects of *(a)* children in registered work and *(b)* children working illegally; and if she will make a statement. [174]

Mrs. Gillan: Employers must register any children they employ with the local education authority—LEA. If the LEA considers that such employment is affecting a child's fitness to obtain full benefit from his or her education, it is for the authority to prohibit or restrict the child's employment with that employer.

The Government deplore any illegal employment of schoolchildren. The provisions of the legislation, which among other things forbid a child to work during school hours, or for more than one hour beforehand, are designed to avoid any adverse effect upon his or her education. They should be enforced rigorously.

R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of Sate for Education and Employment what *(a)* grants and *(b)* other assistance have been given by her Department to R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd. in the past five years. [175]

Mr. Paice: R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd. has used recruitment services provided by the Employment Service and a variety of training and enterprise council services which will have been funded either wholly or in part by the DFEE. There is no record of any direct grant by the Department to R. R. Donnelley (UK) Ltd. in the last five years.

Vocational Qualifications

Mr Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have been awarded each vocational qualification. [781]

Mr. Paice: The number of national vocational qualifications, NVQs, Scottish vocational qualifications, SVQs, general national vocational qualifications, GNVQs,

general Scottish vocational qualifications, GSVQs, and other vocational qualifications awarded for the last three years are set out in the following table:

Year	NVQs/SVQs	GNVQs/GSVQs	Other VQs	Total
1992–93	194,000	—	781,000	975,000
1993–94	240,000	19,000	773,000	1,032,000
1994–95	277,000	48,000	613,000	938,000

Infant School Class Sizes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is her estimate of the cost of reducing to a maximum of 30 all maintained infant school classes for pupils of five, six and seven years of age. [170]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Department's statisticians estimate that it would have cost between £120 million and £250 million to reduce to a maximum of 30 pupils all single-teacher classes in years 1, 2, and 3 in January 1996. The exact cost will depend on the extent to which children in larger classes could be accommodated in existing smaller classes or grouped together in new classes. The estimated costs are for extra teachers only.

HEALTH

Cervical Cancer Screening

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what guidance he has issued as to the acceptance by NHS pathologists as adequate of cervical cancer screening test record cards that do not confirm that visual inspection has taken place; [457]

(2) if he will place in the Library copies of the guidance he has issued about the adequacy and competence of cervical cancer screening tests; [393]

(3) what representations he has received as to the adequacy of cervical cancer screening tests where no visual inspection of the cervix has taken place. [494]

Mr. Horam: In October 1995, a working party of the Royal College of Pathologists, the British Society for Clinical Cytology and the national health service cervical screening programme produced guidelines entitled "Achievable Standards, Benchmarks for Reporting and Criteria for Evaluating Cervical Cytopathology". These guidelines were launched by the chief medical officer in March this year, together with two further sets of guidelines relating to cervical screening: "Quality Assurance Guidelines for the Cervical Screening Programme" and "Standards and Quality in Colposcopy", and issued to the NHS. No specific representations have been received as to the adequacy of cervical screening where no visual inspection has taken place. However, the importance of visual inspection is emphasised in the British Society for Clinical Cytology's training video and booklet for smear takers "Taking Cervical Smears", which was promulgated to the NHS under cover of EL(94)33. Copies of all guidance documents relating to cervical screening are available in the Library.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cervical cancer screening tests were carried out in each health authority area since 1990, indicating in each case the percentage of cases requiring follow-up. [501]

Mr. Horam: Information on cervical screening tests is collected from pathology laboratories and is not held at district health authority level. The number of adequate smears examined by pathology laboratories in England in the years 1990–91 to 1994–95 is shown by region in the table. Questions relating to cervical screening in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Number of adequate smears examined by pathology laboratories in England 1990-91 to 1994-95

	1990-91		1991-92		1992-93		1993-94		1994-95	
	Total adequate smears[1] (thousands)	Percent of results requiring follow up[2]	Total adequate smears[1] (thousands)	Percent of results requiring follow up[2]	Total adequate smears[1] (thousands)	Percent of results requiring follow up[2]	Total adequate smears[1] (thousands)	Percent of results requiring follow up[2]	Total adequate smears[1] (thousands)	Percent of results requiring follow up[2]
England	3949.2	7.0	4252.0	7.1	4055.0	7.1	4131.0	7.9	4150.2	8.5
Regional health authority										
Northern	296.2	6.3	302.0	5.7	306.7	6.2	274.2	6.5	287.1	8.2
Yorkshire	227.0	6.2	271.9	5.4	265.3	4.8	302.1	6.4	326.3	7.3
Trent	419.2	5.5	418.2	5.7	398.6	5.8	300.9	7.2	416.0	8.0
East Anglia	134.3	5.5	163.2	5.6	167.6	5.7	174.7	6.3	177.9	8.1
North West Thames	236.0	4.7	321.7	7.3	292.7	6.5	434.7	7.0	302.7	7.9
North East Thames	340.0	9.4	350.0	8.9	329.6	6.4	348.0	7.2	324.8	7.9
South East Thames	261.4	7.1	299.8	7.4	299.7	7.5	286.0	7.2	300.5	7.2
South West Thames	236.2	6.3	250.5	6.1	243.3	6.1	267.5	7.7	291.5	8.3
Wessex	193.0	5.4	243.7	6.4	239.4	6.3	265.8	8.8	244.6	9.2
Oxford	244.6	11.9	237.9	8.3	223.3	7.4	228.9	7.0	228.2	8.2
South Western	254.2	8.3	306.6	7.5	222.4	7.7	233.1	10.2	239.8	9.5
West Midlands	483.8	6.8	494.2	7.9	491.0	8.4	436.9	8.5	422.3	8.6
Mersey	223.1	8.0	208.8	8.0	201.4	8.0	170.2	8.1	219.3	8.4
North Midlands	400.2	5.1	383.4	11.2	373.9	12.2	407.9	11.6	369.5	11.6

[1] Excludes smears found to be inadequate

[2] Includes all smears tested found to be positive or abnormal.

The information is obtained from the central return KC61 which collects information about cervical smears examined by pathology laboratories. The date inlcude all cervical smears examined for whatever reason ie symptomatic as well as screening programme smears.

Hospital Information Support System

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to seek compensation in respect of the NHS HISS. [452]

Mr. Horam: There is no such thing as a national health service hospital information support system—HISS. In 1989, the NHS executive established a HISS initiative to test out the means of purchasing and implementing hospital-wide integrated computer systems. The 25 NHS trusts sponsored by this initiative demonstrated a number of options for achieving this goal. These were pilot projects and have provided the basis of lessons learned for the future. The National Audit Office report on the HISS initiative published on 17 April 1996 makes no suggestion of waste of money. On the contrary, it recommends further work by the NHS executive to increase the value for money already obtained.

NHS Trusts (Bed Closures)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds in NHS trusts have been closed since 1 April with resource problems cited as the cause. [445]

Mr. Horam: The information requested is not available centrally. Information on the average daily number of available beds in each national health service trust is published annually in "Bed availability for England", copies of which are available in the Library. Data for the 1995–96 financial year will be available shortly.

Long Term Care Report

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends publishing the Government's response to the Health Committee's report "Long Term Care: Future Provision and Funding", HC59 of Session 1995–96. [1082]

Mr. Burns: We have published the Government's response to [illegible]y. Copies are available in the Library.

NHS Funding (Charities)

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what account his Department takes of the quantity of funding received by the health service from charities in determining public expenditure in this area; [491]

(2) to what extent Government financial policy on the NHS assumes a continued level of charitable contributions to keep the service functioning. [488]

Mr. Horam: None.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if it is Government policy to substitute NHS equipment facilities funding in the service with charitable donations. [489]

Mr. Horam: No.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will indicate the levels of money raised in the past three years via charitable donations to supplement funding of the NHS. [487]

Mr. Horam: The table shows the total income of funds held on trust by the national health service in England.

	£000s
1992–93	256,012
1993–94	245,032
1994-95	255,702

Source:
Summarised account for the trust funds held by regional and district health authorities, NHS trusts and special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals and special trustees.
Note:
Funds held on trust include both charitable and non-charitable funds.

Nurses

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses were in NHS hospitals in April 1992; and how many are currently employed. [492]

Mr. Horam: The Department of Health's non–medical work force census collects the number of hospital and community health services nursing and midwifery staff as at 30 September each year. Individual hospital units cannot be separately identified in the census, but up until September 1994 nursing and midwifery staff could be sub–divided between those working in hospitals and those working in the community on the basis of their area of work. Areas of work were determined by a combination of the pay scales nurses and midwives were paid on and their occupation codes. Data for September 1992 are available in the Library from the Department of Health's publications: "Health and Personal Social Services Statistics for England", 1995 edition. The sub–division of nursing and midwifery staff between hospital and community areas of work is not possible for the 1995 non–medical work force census—the latest available—and future censuses because of the introduction of new occupation codes.

Head Lice (Organophosphates)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to prevent the use of organophosphates in the treatment of head lice among children. [76]

Mr. Horam: Malathion is the only organophosphate authorised for the treatment of head lice. There is no evidence to suggest that malathion is dangerous when used for this purpose. Like all marketed medicines, products containing malathion are continually monitored for safety.

Computerised Tomography Scanners

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if it is his Department's policy that a CT scanner is a necessary piece of equipment for a district general hospital. [486]

Mr. Horam: It is not the Department's policy for every district general hospital to have a computerised tomography scanner as a necessary piece of equipment. It is for the purchasers of health care to ensure that they have access to those services necessary to meet the needs of their patients.

Nurses' Pay

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what pay increases for *(a)* nursing and *(b)* ancillary grades has been agreed for the current financial year in the NHS; and what proportion of it has been funded by his Department. [167]

Mr. Malone: As recommended by the nursing pay review body, nurses on national terms of service received a 2 per cent. national increase from 1 April 1996, with local negotiations for further increases. Ancillary grade staff on national terms also received a 2 per cent. national increase, with local negotiations. For staff on national health service trust terms and conditions, pay increases are a matter for local negotiation. Pay costs are funded within overall NHS resources.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data he collates concerning the pay increases for *(a)* nursing and *(b)* ancillary grades by each English NHS trust. [166]

Mr. Malone: Executive letter EL(96)63 sets out the information which is collected centrally from trusts about annual pay settlements reached for nursing and ancillary staff on national terms and conditions. Copies of EL(96)63 will be placed in the Library.

Children (Employment)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with representatives of local government concerning the employment of children; and if he will make a statement. [172]

Mr. Burns: Officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in local government regarding the employment of children.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning the employment of children in the United Kingdom. [173]

Mr. Burns: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him on 21 February 1996, *Official Report*, columns *163–64*.

Child Care (Vetting)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the modus operandi of the list held in his Department of individuals deemed unsuitable to work with children; which other agencies have the right to consult that list in their vetting procedures; how frequently the list has been consulted in each of the last five years; and what consultations he has undertaken recently to extend its coverage and use. [779]

Mr. Burns: The operation of the consultancy service index, which is the list to which the hon. Member refers, is described in annexe C to circular LAC 93(17), copies of which have been placed in the Library. The service is currently subject to review and consultations have taken place with the Home Office, Department for Education and Employment and other interested bodies.

Approximately 55,000 checks against the index are made each year.

Housing (Refugees)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the housing of refugee families since August 1996 by English local authorities within the terms of the Children Act 1989. [667]

Mr. Burns: Special grant report No. 22 (HC 16) relating to the persons from abroad children's grant was laid before the House on the 23 October. The purpose of this grant is to compensate social services departments for the additional expenditure they incur under the Children Act as a consequence of changes in social security entitlement and local authorities' housing duties towards certain asylum seekers.

TRANSPORT

North West Regional Railways

19. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take steps to ensure the final version of the North West Regional Railways Ltd. passenger service requirement issued by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising maintains the current timetable. [581]

Mr. Watts: No.

Motor Car Commuting

21. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what measures he plans to deter commuting by motor car. [570]

Mr. Watts: The Green Paper stresses the benefits of companies drawing up commuting plans to reduce car dependency. Improved rail services by private operators and better promotion of bus travel will encourage a switch to public transport.

Helicopters

23. **Miss Hoey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to meet the Civil Aviation Authority to discuss helicopter use. [572]

Sir George Young: None.

Rail Privatisation

24. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on what date the decision was made not to pursue proposals for profit participation or revenue risk sharing with bidders for rail franchises. [573]

Mr. Watts: The decision not to pursue proposals for profit participation was taken prior to the publication of invitations to tender for the first three rail franchises in May 1995. The decision not to pursue revenue risk sharing was taken in October 1995, after the receipt of indicative bids for those three franchises.

A2 (Bexley)

25. **Mr. Evennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received about the A2 road through the London borough of Bexley. [574]

Mr. Bowis: I have received representations about a number of issues on the A2 in Bexley.

Scottish Air Traffic Control Centre

26. **Mr. Gallie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects National Air Traffic Services to announce the successful bid for the building and operation of the new Scottish air traffic control centre; and if he will make a statement. [575]

Sir George Young: The original timetable for this project assumed an announcement in February 1997. I understand that, in the light of the current Civil Aviation Authority review of the two-centre strategy, a paper will be presented to the CAA board in November on the tenders for the new Scottish centre.

Public Transport (Disabled Access)

27. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to support those agencies planning to provide travel training for the people with mobility impairments who might wish to transfer to forms of public transport recently made accessible. [576]

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to support those agencies planning to provide travel training for people with mobility impairments who might wish to transfer to forms of public transport recently made accessible; and if he will make a statement. [398]

Mr. Bowis: The Department of Transport works closely with transport operators and with disability organisations on this and many other issues arising from the growing move towards fully accessible public transport.

The importance of travel training will also be highlighted in guidance issued by the Department in parallel with regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which will set standards to ensure that future public transport is accessible.

A30

28. **Mr. Matthew Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on progress on upgrading the A30 across Goss moor. [577]

Mr. Watts: The main road programme includes a scheme to improve the A30 from Bodmin to Indian Queens across Goss moor. The scheme will be brought forward when funds allow.

Fenchurch Street Rail Service

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent representations he has received on the Fenchurch Street line service. [579]

Mr. Watts: I have received two letters this year.

Cycling Safety

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to improve cycling safety. [571]

Mr. Bowis: Providing a safer environment for cyclists, as well as more convenient one, will be important for achieving national targets for increasing cycling set out in the national cycling strategy, which was launched in July. The Government will play their part towards achieving this: for example, through our education, publicity and research programmes; through advice to local authorities, and funding for their transport packages and local safety schemes; and through our involvement in the National Cycling Forum, the first meeting of which I am chairing next month.

Vehicle Parts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if German type approval of vehicle parts is sufficient basis for them to conform to British standards. [13]

Mr. Bowis: In Britain, most vehicle components are type approved in accordance with the appropriate European standards. Components approved to those standards in Germany are acceptable in Britain.

Road Signs

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is his Department's policy on road signs announcing distances in miles/yards and kilometres/metres. [203]

Mr. Watts: The current Traffic Signs Regulations specify that all distances must be shown in miles and yards. I have no plans to change that.

Watford Junction (Rail Incident)

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the scheduled departure time for Euston of the train which overshot Watford Junction station on Wednesday 10 July. [122]

Mr. Watts: The scheduled departure time from Euston was 08.00.

Departmental Car Parking Spaces

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the cost of car parking spaces at his Department's building on the basis of equivalent central London charges. [769]

Mr. Bowis: There is provision for 23 car parking spaces in the Department's headquarters building, Great Minster house, which houses approximately 1,100 staff. On the basis of equivalent local commercial rates, these would cost some £69,000 per annum.

Passenger Rail Services

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what plans he has to extend passenger rail services from Matlock to Buxton; and what finance he proposes to make available for this project; [162]

(2) what plans he has to re-introduce passenger traffic on the Bletchley to Bicester line; what assessment he has made of the quality of the track; and if he will make a statement; [160]

(3) what plans he has to reintroduce passenger services on the Aylesbury to Bletchley to Bicester line; and if he will make a statement. [161]

Mr. Watts: None.

Noise (Vehicle Sound Systems)

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what are the operational needs of the police to enable them to combat excessive noise emitted from stereo systems in motor vehicles; [221]

(2) what representations he has received from environmental and enforcement bodies *(a)* on the scale of the problem of excessive noise emitted from stereo systems in motor vehicles and *(b)* the most effective way for dealing with it; [222]

(3) what existing powers and practices exist to enable environmental health officers to combat excessive noise emitted from stereo systems in motor vehicles. [220]

Mr. Bowis: Following the failure of a prosecution under regulation 97 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, which relates to excessive noise from vehicles, the Metropolitan police have suggested that the regulation be amended so as specifically to include noise from car accessories, such as stereo systems or radios. This would enable the police to continue to issue fixed penalty notices to offenders.

In response, I have sought comments from bodies representing environmental, local authority, police and motoring interests to ascertain their views on the scale of the problem and the adequacy or otherwise of existing powers to deal with it. I am currently considering these comments.

Local authority environmental health officers have powers under part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 as amended by the Noise and Statutory Nuisance Act 1993 to deal with noise of all types from vehicles parked on premises and in the street. I understand that a number of local authorities have also recently brought successful prosecutions for noise from car stereos under the loudspeaker provisions of the Control of Pollution Act 1974.

Concessionary Travel (London)

Mr. Bendall: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has had from users and service providers of the London concessionary fares and taxicard schemes regarding the proposals recommended in a review of the operation of those schemes carried out for the London committee on accessible transport; and if he will make it his policy that the present administration of these schemes will not be impaired. [496]

Mr. Bowis: I have received representations from the company which is contracted to provide the London taxicard scheme.

These are matters for the London boroughs and my Department is not able to intervene.

Passengers Charter

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list the proportion and absolute number of rail journeys which failed to achieve the required passengers charter performance standards, with regard to reliability, for all routes monitored by the Central Rail Users Consultative Committee, for each year since 1993; [219]

(2) if he will list the proportion and absolute number of rail journeys which failed to achieve the required passengers charter performance standards, with regard to punctuality, for all routes monitored by the Central Rail Users Consultative Committee, for each year since 1993. [218]

Mr. Watts: The information is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Information regarding the punctuality and reliability of train operating companies are provided in the British Railways Board annual report and accounts 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Humber Bridge

Mr. Michael Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he plans to announce how much Humber bridge debt the Government will write off under the Humber Bridge (Debts) Act 1996. [568]

Mr. Watts: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply of 8 July, *Official Report*, column *65*. When the Secretary of State has received, and reached a decision on, the inspector's report into the recent tolls inquiry, he will consider proposals for an order under the Humber Bridge (Debts) Act 1996.

London Underground

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proposals he has to improve the London Underground network. [566]

Mr. Bowis: London Transport is investing over £1.1 billion in the current year. This is four times as much in real terms as was spent in 1979.

With substantial support from Government, both through public funding and the private finance initiative, London Underground is undertaking a comprehensive programme of investment both in modernising its existing infrastructure and rolling stock and in constructing the Jubilee line extension.

Consultants

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list all consultants, outside individuals and organisations employed by his Department over the previous 12 months, the nature of their employment, the duration of their employment, and the total cost of their employment to his Department. [1052]

Mr. Bowis: I shall write to the hon. Member with details and place a copy in the Library.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Questions

33. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will review the arrangements for the answering of parliamentary questions by Ministers. [601]

Mr. Newton: I have no plans to do so. The arrangements for the answering of parliamentary questions fall within the remit of the Procedure Committee.

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Lord President of the Council what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the length of time devoted to questions to the House of Commons Commission; and if he will make a statement. [593]

Mr. Newton: The time devoted to questions to the Commission appears to me to be adequate, but I will of course look with care at any representations my hon. Friend may wish to make to me.

Parliamentary Calender

34. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Lord President of the Council what plans he has to review the parliamentary calendar. [602]

Mr. Newton: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 26 June, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Oral Questions

35. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will assess the advantages of moving oral questions to Ministers to the morning. [603]

Mr. Newton: No. The Select Committee on Sittings of the House considered this possibility and rejected it.

Private Motions

36. **Mr. Spearing:** To ask the Lord President of the Council what proposals he has for enabling hon. Members to move private motions in the current Session. [604]

Mr. Newton: None.

State Opening

37. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Lord President of the Council how much time he had to devote to preparing for the state opening of Parliament. [605]

Mr. Newton: Apart from work as chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Future Legislation, the amount of time required to change from one suit into another.

Loyal Address Debates

38. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Lord President of the Council what consultations he has had to facilitate the choice of dates and subjects for debates on the Loyal Address. [607]

Mr. Newton: The subjects for debate on the Loyal Address and the days on which they are debated are by tradition chosen by the main Opposition party. I refer the hon. Gentleman to page 234 of the 21st edition of Erskine May's "Parliamentary Practice."

Child Care Facilities

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what progress has been made concerning the provision of creche facilities and nursery vouchers for hon. Members and their staff. [591]

Mr. Michael J. Martin: I have nothing to add to the oral reply given by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), representing the House of Commons Commission, on 8 July, *Official Report*, columns 15–16.

Catering Staff (Pay)

Mr. Janner: To ask the right hon. member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the pay of House of Commons catering staff. [594]

Mr Beith: Until this year, the pay rates for staff in the Refreshment Department—RD—catering grades were linked to the rates negotiated between the Treasury and the National Union of Civil and Public Servants, now Public Services, Tax and Commerce. With the introduction of "delegated pay", the Treasury no longer negotiates national pay agreements and the House now has direct responsibility for negotiating the pay rates of all staff, subject to the statutory requirement to keep the pay and conditions of service broadly in line with the civil service.

A pay increase of 3 per cent. has been negotiated with the unions representing staff of the House in grade 8 and below, to take effect from 1 April 1996. An offer of a 4 per cent. increase in basic pay rates, with no change in the rates paid for overtime, has been put to the unions representing the RD catering grades. Bearing in mind the retention of the existing rates of pay for overtime, this pay offer is very close to the 3 per cent. increase already paid to other staff of the House and is broadly in line with this year's pay settlements in the civil service.

Access (Constituents)

Mr. Skinner: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if he will make a statement on the arrangements for constituents to lobby their hon. Members. [606]

Mr. Michael J. Martin: I am satisfied with the usual arrangement whereby constituents lobby hon. Members in the Central Lobby. The well-established arrangements for more constituents than can be immediately accommodated in the Central Lobby to lobby hon. Members are set out in the leaflet "Mass Lobbies". I have asked the Serjeant at Arms to send a copy of the leaflet to my hon. Friend.

Access (Wheelchair Users)

Mr. Tom Clarke: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if he will introduce arrangements to remove the requirement to be met by a parliamentary passholder in respect of wheelchair users who wish to attend meetings in Committee Rooms in the Palace of Westminster. [1012]

Mr. Michael J. Martin: I have asked the Serjeant at Arms to look into the matter and to write to my hon. Friend.

Thomas Paine

Mr. Allen: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee if he will list the locations of pictures and other representations of Thomas Paine in the Palace of Westminster. [402]

Sir Raymond Powell: No pictures or representations of Thomas Paine are on display in the Palace. I understand that an engraving was purchased by the Works of Art Committee in March 1996 and is currently in store awaiting conservation prior to display.

Parliamentary Works

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what is the estimated cost of building and decorating work carried out to the Palace of Westminster during the summer recess. [595]

Sir Raymond Powell: About £17 million-worth of work was carried out on the parliamentary estate during the summer recess.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what works have been completed in the parliamentary estate during the summer recess. [592]

Sir Raymond Powell: During the 12 weeks of the summer recess a large programme of works was undertaken on the parliamentary estate including installation of the parliamentary data and video network at Star Chamber Court and Norman Shaw North, the next phase of the Refreshment Department modernisation programme at Members' and Strangers' Cafeteria as well as automatic fire detection, new telephone wiring, new electrical wiring, lift modernisation including facilities for the disabled, lavatory refurbishment, essential maintenance such as heating modernisation and other minor works.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Imports

Sir Jim Lester: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what tonnage of beef has been imported since March 1996; and what were the figures for the comparable period in 1995. [197]

Mr. Baldry: Imports of beef[1] into the United Kingdom for the periods April to June 1995 and 1996, as recorded in the overseas trade statistics, are as follows:

1995: 69,000 tonnes

1996: 60,000 tonnes

These figures are provisional.

Branch C, Statistics (Commodities and Food) Division, Economics and Statistics Group.

[1]Beef includes the following; beef carcase meat; bovine offal; and beef meat and bovine offal preparations.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many inspectors his Department sent to those countries importing beef into the United Kingdom to examine their farms and slaughterhouses in order to assess their compliance with EU regulations. [258]

Mrs. Browning: None. The import of beef into the United Kingdom is subject to harmonised Community rules. For intra–Community trade, responsibility for ensuring premises comply with those rules lies with the competent authority in the member state of origin. Responsibility for auditing member states' controls, and for inspecting red meat premises in third countries approved to export beef to the Community, currently rests with the Office of Veterinary and Phytosanitary Inspection and Control of the European Commission.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which countries outside the EU exported beef to the United Kingdom in each of the last three years; and in what quantities. [255]

Mr. Baldry: Imports of beef[1] into the United Kingdom from countries outside the EU in each of the last three years, as recorded in the overseas trade statistics, are as follows:

Thousands of tonnes

Country	*1993*	*1994*[2]	*1995*[2]
Brazil	58	41	45
Argentina	14	15	28
Uruguay	8	8	13
Zimbabwe	14	9	12
Australia	10	9	10
Botswana	7	5	7
Namibia	5	5	6
New Zealand	3	3	5
Mauritius	2	5	5
USA	2	3	4
Other	4	2	2

[1] Beef includes the following; beef carcase meat; bovine offal; and beef meat and bovine offal preparations.
[2] 1994 and 1995 data are provisional.

Area Payments Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many agricultural holdings and what area of agricultural land in hectares came within the area payments scheme in each county in England in (i) 1995 and (ii) 1996; [776]

(2) if he will set out by county a breakdown of the 1994 arable area payments scheme. [774]

Mr. Baldry: The table gives the county breakdown of claims under the arable area payments scheme in 1994 and 1995. A single claim may cover more than one holding where the holdings form part of one business. Equivalent figures for 1996 are not yet available.

	1994		1995	
	Number of claims	*Area paid ha*	*Number of claims*	*Area paid ha*
Avon	392	16,243	393	16,134
Bedfordshire	593	64,296	589	64,520
Berkshire	279	38,493	268	40,633
Buckinghamshire	647	55,651	632	58,001
Cambridgeshire	2,194	199,681	2,155	198,446
Cheshire	991	28,138	938	26,416
Cleveland	226	16,092	223	15,986
Cornwall	1,688	39,462	1,697	39,371
Cumbria	907	14,951	905	15,801
Derbyshire	799	32,892	793	32,921
Devon	2,637	65,107	2,668	63,392
Dorset	726	60,573	715	58,417
Durham	661	41,941	657	43,648
Essex	1,539	188,352	1,530	193,778
Gloucestershire	993	84,569	1,000	84,558
Greater London	65	4,637	63	4,734
Greater Manchester	145	5,522	143	5,406
Hampshire	794	115,020	778	117,954
Hereford and Worcester	2,015	98,986	1,982	100,759
Hertfordshire	487	68,991	483	71,255
Humberside	2,139	204,332	2,097	209,743
Isle of Wight	126	9,674	126	10,224
Kent	1,050	113,942	1,039	117,870
Lancashire	488	17,953	484	18,354
Leicestershire	1,133	100,128	1,109	107,256
Lincolnshire	3,466	342,318	3,386	356,061
Merseyside	190	9,889	171	9,438
Norfolk	2,949	232,519	2,887	235,074
Northamptonshire	916	110,522	910	117,893
Northumberland	860	90,473	842	95,863
Nottinghamshire	1,036	92,580	1,017	93,776
Oxfordshire	912	117,621	914	125,755
Shropshire	1,612	85,486	1,581	86,321
Somerset	1,270	50,673	1,253	48,087
Staffordshire	872	48,438	838	49,251
Suffolk	2,081	193,026	2,087	193,500
Surrey	216	14,453	207	14,912
East Sussex	440	30,259	437	30,443
West Sussex	493	47,102	492	45,912
Tyne and Wear	118	8,996	112	9,503
Warwickshire	910	79,348	877	80,937
West Midlands	102	5,557	101	5,585
Wiltshire	1,021	121,196	1,010	118,515
North Yorkshire	3,266	214,945	3,196	215,832
South Yorkshire	554	43,424	543	44,275
West Yorkshire	393	24,483	380	25,169

Organophosphates

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to prevent the use of dangerous organophosphates in veterinary products. [77]

Mrs. Browning: No veterinary medicine is authorised unless it meets statutory criteria of safety, quality and efficacy. The Government are advised on this by the independent scientific Veterinary Products Committee, VPC. The suspected adverse reactions surveillance scheme monitors trends in adverse reactions, which are reported regularly to the VPC. The continued use of organophosphorus—OP—sheep dips is kept under review by the VPC. OP sheep dips are important in the control of serious, sometimes fatal, sheep diseases. The committee has advised that, on the basis of current scientific evidence, there is no reason to ban OP dips but that it is essential that they are used properly and in accordance with manufacturers' instructions.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to complete his review of the impact of organophosphate sheep dips on the health of farmers and farm workers. [78]

Mrs. Browning: The Veterinary Products Committee, which gives independent scientific advice to the Government on issues concerning veterinary medicines, has completed its most recent review of organophosphate sheep dips, and Ministers expect to receive advice in the near future. An announcement will be made as soon as possible thereafter.

The Government-funded epidemiological research project to examine the possible long-term human health effects of organophosphate sheep dips commenced earlier this year and is expected to be completed by April 1999.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to monitor the investigation of Gulf war syndrome to establish lessons for the examination of the health side effects of exposure to organophosphate sheep dips among farmers and farm workers. [79]

Mrs. Browning: Officials of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate are in regular contact on this matter with the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health.

EU Fishing Rights (West Africa)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what rights exist for EU countries to fish off the west African coast: which countries enjoy such rights; and what sums have been paid to African Governments by the EU in order to facilitate these concessions. [253]

Mr. Baldry: Details of the fisheries agreements between the European Community and west African countries are shown in the table.

EU Fisheries Agreements with countries on the west coast of Africa

Country	*Fishing opportunities*	*Main EU beneficiaries*	*Annual cost of agreement*
Angola	Licences for five surface longliners and 19 freezer tuna seiners. Opportunities for 6550 GRT' per month of shrimp trawlers, 1900 GRT per month of demersal trawlers and 900 GRT per month of bottom set longliners with fixed gillnet.	Spain, France, Portugal	13,000,000 ECU

EU Fisheries Agreements with countries on the west coast of Africa

Country	*Fishing opportunities*	*Main EU beneficiaries*	*Annual cost of agreement*
Cape Verde	Licences for 23 freezer tuna seiners, 17 tuna canners and surface longliners and three bottom long-liners. A quota of 4850 tonnes of tuna per annum is available.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	500,000 ECU
Equatorial Guinea	Licences for 47 freezer tuna seiners, two pole and line tuna vessels and four surface longliners. A quota of 2750 tonnes of tuna per annum is available.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	222,000 ECU
Gambia	Licences for 23 tuna freezer seiners and seven pole and line tuna vessels. Annual opportunities of 410 GRT for fresh fish trawlers, 2000 GRT for freezer trawlers fishing for shrimps and 750 GRT for freezer trawlers fishing for other species.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	466,667 ECU
Guinea Bissau	Licences for 26 freezer tuna seiners, 16 pole and line tuna vessels and surface longliner vessels. Monthly quotas of 8800 tonnes of shrimps and 4000 tonnes of fin fish and cephalapods are available.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	6,350,000 ECU
Guinea Conakry	Licences for 24 freezer tuna seiners, 10 pole and line tuna vessels and five surface longliners. Opportunities for 4200 GRT per month.	France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain	1,350,000 ECU
Ivory Coast	Licences for 46 tuna seiners and seven pole and line tuna vessels and surface longliners. A quota of 7500 tonnes of tuna per annum is available. Opportunities for 600 GRT per month of freezer trawlers fishing for demersal species.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	833,333 ECU
Mauritania	Licences for 17 tuna canners and surface longliners, 40 freezer tuna seiners and 22 pelagic freezer trawlers. Monthly quotas of 5500 GRT of crustaceans, 8500 GRT of black hake, 9700 GRT of demersals, 300 GRT of crawfish and 7500 GRT of cephalapods.	France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	54,410,000 ECU
Morocco	Licences for 27 pole and line tuna vessels and five sponge catching vessels. Monthly opportunities for 30212 GRT cephalapods 11200 GRT shrimps, 11350 GRT longliners, 6100 GRT seiners, 1300 GRT pelagics, 1550 GRT artisanals and 3000 GRT black hake.	Spain, Portugal	125,000,000 ECU
Senegal	Licences for 11 tuna canners, 47 freezer tuna seiners and six surface longliners. Annual quotas of 1000 GRT ocean going and freezer trawlers and 5000 GRT shrimp freezer trawlers. Quotas for four month period of 2000 GRT for ocean going and freezer trawlers.	France, Greece, Italy, Spain	9,000,000 ECU
SAO Tome E Principe	Licences for 37 freezer tuna seiners, seven tuna canners and 25 surface longliners. A quota of 9,000 tonnes of tuna per annum is available.	France, Spain, Portugal	725,000 ECU

[1] Gross registered tonnes.

Agricultural Land

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was *(a)* the number of agricultural holdings and *(b)* the hectarage of agricultural land in each county in England in (i) 1995 and (ii) 1996. [775]

Mr. Boswell: The information requested for 1995 is set out in the table. Equivalent information is not yet available for 1996.

	Number of holdings [1]	Area [2] ha
Avon	2,032	81,383
Bedfordshire	1,174	89,285
Berkshire	842	71,456
Buckinghamshire	1,853	123,870
Cambridgeshire	3,283	281,529
Cheshire	4,180	166,038
Cleveland	429	27,616
Cornwall	6,679	276,045
Cumbria	6,270	461,830
Derbyshire	3,837	185,206
Devon	11,513	521,705
Dorset	2,949	196,627
Durham	2,169	156,081
Essex	3,554	263,693
Gloucestershire	3,389	204,613
Greater London	431	13,819
Greater Manchester	1,454	40,215
Hampshire	2,981	226,024
Hereford and Worcester	6,531	307,935
Hertfordshire	1,313	103,265
Humberside	3,391	284,561
Isle of Wight	487	25,859
Kent	4,078	246,643
Lancashire	5,307	215,116
Leicestershire	2,888	194,120
Lincolnshire	5,530	519,807
Merseyside	454	19,458
Norfolk	4,949	428,769
Northamptonshire	2,014	184,214
Northumberland	2,335	382,370
Nottinghamshire	1,987	149,672
Oxfordshire	2,077	203,110
Shropshire	4,728	283,205
Somerset	5,794	272,248
Staffordshire	4,640	195,244
Suffolk	3,443	304,483
Surrey	1,696	65,345
East Sussex	2,227	112,718
West Sussex	2,225	123,331
Tyne and Wear	271	13,485
Warwickshire	2,403	153,476
West Midlands	459	15,014
Wiltshire	3,062	266,171
North Yorkshire	8,420	628,643
South Yorkshire	1,395	84,259
West Yorkshire	2,989	97,122

[1] Main holdings only (account for some 99 per cent. of agricultural land).

[2] Exluding common rought grazing.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* the advantages and *(b)* disadvantages of the United Kingdom not re-negotiating the common fisheries policy when it next falls for renewal. [254]

Mr. Baldry: It is for the Council of Ministers to decide before 31 December 2002 on any necessary changes to the common fisheries policy. The only realistic course for the United Kingdom is to continue to play a full role in negotiating improvements to the CFP in the run-up to its renewal.

Thirty-month Scheme

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will provide advance payment to those farmers wishing to send their 30-month-old cattle to slaughter but who are unable to do so due to insufficient capacity at slaughterhouses and renderers. [259]

Mr. Baldry: We have no plans to do so. The weekly slaughter rate has been more than doubled, to over 50,000 animals, through the injection of an additional £16.6 million for extra cold storage and changes in rendering practice. As from 4 November, priority will be given to animals over 30 months old awaiting slaughter which have been registered with the Intervention Board under the registration system announced on 21 October.

Beef Overproduction

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his Department's estimate of the current extent of overproduction of beef in the United Kingdom. [252]

Mr. Baldry: The table gives figures for UK beef and veal production as a percentage of new supplies.

		Thousands of tonnes		
		Home-fed production [1]	Total new supply [2]	Home-fed production as a percentage of total new supply
1993		881	885	100
1994		943	851	111
1995		996	890	112
1996	Q1	226	198	114
	Q2	139	177	79

[1] Home-fed production includes the meat equivalent of live exports but excludes all animals slaughtered under the over-30-month scheme and the calf processing aid scheme.

[2] Home-fed production plus imports minus exports.

Branch D, Statistics (Commodities and Food) Division, Economics and Statistics Group.

Sea Defences

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of *(a)* changes in sea levels around the coast of the United Kingdom over the next (i) five, (ii) 10 and (iii) 15 years, *(b)* the likely levels of flooding that could result and *(c)* the costs of improving sea defences to prevent that flooding. [153]

Mr. Boswell: The Ministry's current guidance to operating authorities recommends them to make allowances for sea level rise and predicted vertical land movements of between 4 mm and 6 mm a year when assessing the need for coastal defence measures.

Virtually all land and property which would be at risk from sea level rise is dependent on existing defences for protection. Operating authorities are expected to consider potential increases in the risk of flooding at individual locations and all recent flood defence works take account of the predicted rise.

The total cost of allowing for sea level change is not available.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 29th October 1996

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Risks

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the research he has evaluated to show that, among the elderly, fear of crime by the elderly is greater than the reality of crime. [145]

Mr. Maclean: The latest—1996—British crime survey, which is conducted by the Home Office, shows that the risks of crime for the elderly are considerably lower than for younger age groups.

The elderly tend to rate their chances of victimisation in line with younger age groups, and they are as worried about falling victim to specific crimes. They also exhibit greater anxiety about being out alone after dark.

Fear of crime is about not just the chances of victimisation but the perceived consequences. Greater anxiety on the part of the elderly about their safety on the streets may be because they see the physical, emotional and financial consequences of victimisation as greater than do the young.

Mr. Solely: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has evaluated to show the relative risk to *(a)* young people and *(b)* senior citizens from (i) violent street crime and (ii) crimes committed by people gaining entry to their homes. [146]

Mr. Maclean: According to the latest—1996—British crime survey, which is conducted by the Home Office, a young person aged 16 to 29 is 18 times more likely to be a victim of violence in a street location than a person aged 60 or over.

The relative risk to young households—head aged 16 to 29—of burglary, which covers offences in which there is actual or attempted trespass with the intention of theft, assault or criminal damage, is 2.6 times that for households whose head is aged 60 or over.

Police Training

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the length of time devoted to dedicated police training for a new constable. [142]

Mr. Maclean: Under the police probationer foundation training programme, recruits to the police service in England and Wales, other than the Metropolitan police, spend a total of 15 weeks undergoing formal training at police training centres. In addition, they undergo a further 15 weeks training in their forces which is divided between formal classroom training, operational experience and development under the supervision of experienced tutor constables. During the remainder of their probation period, constables may be required to attend a minimum of 30 days' further training at their force training school.

Recruits to the Metropolitan police service spend an initial 18 weeks at the Metropolitan police training school at Hendon, followed by 10 weeks on division undergoing street duty training under the supervision of an experienced officer. During the remainder of the two years' probation, they are required to attend training courses at area training units for a further 28 days.

Police Constables

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average annual cost of employing a police constable in England. [93]

Mr. Maclean: Data on the average annual cost of employing a police constable are not collected centrally. However, the cost of employing a probationer constable in 1996–97 is estimated to be £19,738 outside London and £22,320 in London.

Drug Abuse Resistance Education

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set up an inquiry into the desirability of extending the DARE programme to all United Kingdom police forces. [765]

Mr. Maclean: No. It is a matter for individual chief officers to decide how to assist schools in drugs prevention work, taking local needs and circumstances into account. Drug abuse resistance education is one of a number of initiatives undertaken by police forces in this field.

Drug Dealers

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to ensure the maximum recovery of funds from convicted drug dealers. [245]

Mr. MacLean: As recommended by the Home Affairs Committee last year, the working group on confiscation legislation which brings together Government Departments and enforcement agencies has been given the task of examining recovery rates from confiscation orders made against drug traffickers and other criminals, and to make recommendations for improvement. It is expected to report by March 1997.

PCL Group

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken to recover fees from the PCL group after the decision to terminate the contract for transferring pre-1981 criminal records to the national computer's Phoenix database. [861]

Mr. Maclean: The contract between the Home Office and PCL was ended by mutual consent. Since then, no sums have been due from PCL.

Suspects (Interrogation)

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will identify the research referred to in his speech to the Conservative party conference which indicates that the number of suspects refusing to answer questions has nearly halved; and if he will place a copy of the research in the Library. [904]

Mr. Maclean: The research to which my right hon. and learned Friend referred is emerging findings from a wider study by the Home Office research and statistics directorate which looked at the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Data collected from a sample of cases from eight police stations around the country found that during interview suspects responded to questions from the police as follows:

Per cent.

	1993–94	*1995–96*
All questions answered	75	84
Some questions answered	14	10
No questions answered	11	6

A report of this study has not yet been published but is currently being prepared with a view to publication next spring, when a copy will be placed in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Witnesses (Payments)

Mr. Michael Brown: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he proposes to take to prevent payments to witnesses being made in judicial proceedings. [1428]

Mr. Streeter: The Government have today published a consultation paper, "Payments to Witnesses," which invites comments on the proposal that payments to witnesses by the media, as well as offers of payment and requests for payment, should be prohibited. The Government consider that such payments can constitute a real risk to the administration of justice and that their prevalence justifies serious consideration of what action should be taken. We do not believe that the law in this area is clear or that the matter can be left to media self-regulation alone.

The paper seeks views, by 31 December 1996, on the proposal that payments, offers of payment and requests for payment should be prohibited, and on specific questions relating to:

- whether the prohibition should take the form of a contempt of court or a criminal offence;
- whether a risk of prejudice to the proceedings need be proved;
- whether an intention to interfere with the course of justice need be proved;
- at what stage the prohibition should begin;
- whether the prohibition should cease at the end of the trial;
- whether there should be any defences.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Quasi-legislative Material

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has to introduce new Crown copyright licensing arrangements for the electronic reproduction of quasi-legislative material. [1496]

Mr. Freeman: I am pleased to announce that from 1 November a new generic licence called QLM/3 will be available on a non-exclusive basis to cover the commercial reproduction in electronic and microform formats of Crown copyright quasi-legislative material—material which forms or explains the framework within which legislative provisions are administered and the regulatory practices followed by public servants within that framework. I am placing copies of the licence in the Libraries of the House today.

These new arrangements will make it significantly easier for publishers to gain rights to reproduce quasi-legislative Crown material in their electronic publications. Holders of the licence, which is renewable after seven years, will be able to reproduce material without seeking prior permission from the Crown and at a standardised royalty rate.

The Government are the largest producers of information in the country and this licence offers great benefits to the electronic publishing industry—in particular, the legal publishing sector. It will help to create a climate conducive to the growth of commercial electronic information services, both on open and closed networks. This accords both with the Government's aims of increasing the competitiveness of the UK information industry and with its open government objectives of encouraging the widest possible dissemination of official material.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what exceptions there are to the normal arrangements relating to the pay of special advisers. [1497]

Mr. Freeman: Yes. Special advisers are normally paid on the salary spine ranging from £20,631 to £71,517. Mr. Norman Blackwell, the head of the Prime Minister's policy unit, is an exception. When he was appointed, he was given the rank of second permanent secretary, according to established precedent.

Furthermore, Dr. Alan Kemp, special adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister, although paid at the top of the special adviser's spine also receives a payment of 15.9 per cent. of salary in lieu of superannuation.

These salary arrangements were announced at the time the appointments were made.

TREASURY

Agency Co-operation

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on co-operation between the Inland Revenue, the Contributions Agency and Customs and Excise since 5 February. [97]

Mr. Jack: Progress on closer working between the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise and the Contributions Agency has far exceeded expectations. The wide-ranging programme of practical measures is now delivering real benefits to business. There are currently over 30 projects in hand. Recent measures include:

- on 7 October 1996 a national employers' telephone helpline opened. It gives general advice, at local call rates, on pay-as-you-earn and national insurance issues, along with advice on VAT registration;
- joint information and advice pages are available on the Internet (www.open.gov.uk/dssca/jw/jw.htm);
- a single notification form and leaflet was introduced in April 1996, which allows new businesses to notify all three Departments that they have started up in business.

Landfill

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the environmental bodies which have made representations regarding enrolment as appropriate bodies to receive donations from landfill operators; [109]

(2) how many landfill operators in each Customs and Excise region had registered their liability as landfill operators on 1 September; [111]

(3) if he will list the landfill operators in the South Yorkshire region who had registered their liability for landfill tax on 1 September; [110]

(4) if appointments to the regulatory body set up to oversee the operation of the landfill tax will be made by open competition; [108]

(5) if he will list the members of the regulatory body set up to oversee the operation of the landfill tax already appointed. [112]

Mr. Oppenheim: I refer the hon. Lady to the letter I sent her on 25 October in reply to questions she tabled at the end of the 1995–96 Session. I have placed a copy of my letter in the Members' Library.

Inheritance Tax

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the average per capita sum of inheritance tax collected in each of the regions of England. [92]

Mr. Jack: I regret that information at regional level is not available centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. It is provisionally estimated that in 1995–96 the average inheritance tax liability for taxpaying death estates in the United Kingdom was £73,000.

Inland Revenue (Audits)

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many joint audit visits for large employers and single audit visits pay-as-you-earn and national insurance contributions have been conducted since 6 April. [96]

Mr. Jack: Between 6 April and 30 September 1996 the Inland Revenue has conducted 31 joint visits to large employers and 18,083 single visits to check compliance with the regulations relating to PAYE and NICs.

Shipping (Tax Incentives)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce improved tax incentives for United Kingdom ship owners to invest in new tonnage; and if he will make a statement. [68]

Mr. Jack: We have introduced valuable tax measures to promote investment in new tonnage in the form of roll-over relief for capital allowances balancing charges on the sale and purchase of ships. This was extended to groups of companies in last year's Budget and has been warmly welcomed by the UK shipping industry.

The Government are of course, always willing to consider representations from the shipping industry about any particular difficulties it faces.

Profit-related Pay

Mr. Caborn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of tax revenue which has been lost as a result of the introduction of tax relief for profit-related pay in the years 1990 to 1996. [862]

Mr. Jack: Estimates of the cost of income tax relief for profit-related pay schemes in 1995–96 and 1996–97 are published in table 1.6 of "Inland Revenue Statistics 1996", a copy of which is in the Library. Estimates for other years can be found in earlier editions.

EDS Ltd.

Mr. Hutton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will update the estimate contained in his answer to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) of 16 October 1995, *Official Report*, column 7, relating to the savings which will accrue as the result of the contract awarded to EDS Ltd. to provide information technology services for the Inland Revenue. [975]

Mr. Jack: At the time of signature of the contract with EDS for the provision of IT services—May 1994—the Inland Revenue estimated that the Department would save £225 million, compared with continuing in-house costs, over the 10 years of the contract. This was based on transfer of work to EDS in two phases in July 1994 and January 1996.

The latest estimate shows that total savings to the Department are still expected to be of a very similar order—in the range £220 million to £225 million—though precise figures of savings will always still depend on the future level of the Department's information technology requirements.

Ministerial Visit (China)

Dame Jill Knight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the purpose of the Economic Secretary's recent visit to China. [1181]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The principal purpose of the visit was to sign the memorandum of understanding on the exchange of information and mutual assistance in securities and futures matters between the Treasury, the Securities and Investments Board and the China Securities Regulatory Commission. I also took the opportunity to call on the state organisations which are at the forefront in China's economic reform. I was accompanied by Sir

Andrew Large, chairman of the SIB, co-signatory to the MOU, Ian Salter, the deputy chairman of the London stock exchange and a delegation of senior executives from the financial services sector.

The memorandum of understanding is a landmark agreement between the United Kingdom and Chinese authorities and is the result of two years' intensive negotiation by the Treasury, the SIB and the London stock exchange. It is of immense importance to our financial services industry in opening the gates to allow it to participate in and contribute to the rapid development of China's financial services sector. In particular, it will allow Chinese companies to list on the London stock exchange. The Chinese authorities have formally recognised London's status as the international financial centre. We are the first European country to receive official Chinese recognition and the first European stock exchange to be selected for listing. The MOU signing ceremony received considerable Chinese press and media coverage.

We were welcomed extremely warmly by all our Chinese hosts and I have no doubt that this historic agreement will strengthen the increasingly close wider relations between our Government and China. My task in the financial services area was considerably eased by the successful recent visits by the Deputy Prime Minister, the President of the Board of Trade, the Minister for Trade and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The memorandum of understanding also has provisions for technical co-operation. My Chinese hosts impressed on me how much they can learn from London, both from a regulatory perspective and from our privatisation experience. The signing of the memorandum will therefore involve us closely in China's future economic development as the development of China's capital markets will play a key role in its economic reforms. The Chinese stressed their specialist training and educational needs and we have considerable expertise in this area.

In addition to my hosts at the CSRC, I also called on Vice-Minister Wang Chunzheng of the State Planning Commission, Assistant Minister Gao Qiang of the Ministry of Finance, Mr. Zhou Zhengqing, the Deputy Secretary General of the State Council, Deputy Governor Chen Yuan of the People's Bank of China and Vice-Minister Wu Jie of the State Commission for Restructuring Economic Systems. I took the opportunity at these meetings to emphasise London's international importance as a financial centre and the range and depth of our expertise to assist with China's economic reforms. I also took the opportunity to lobby on behalf of British banks—more branches and Reminbi (RMB) banking—and insurance companies seeking licences. On the banking front, it now seems certain that a British bank will be able to participate in local Reminbi banking which is a major step forward. The Chinese repeated their assurances that British companies would receive insurance licences in the near future.

This was a very successful delegation which I believe marks a significant step forward in our relations with China, both on financial services and more widely. We now need to maintain and build on these opportunities.

Copies of the memorandum of understanding are available in the Libraries of the House.

School Fee Payment Plans

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the tax position of investors in school fee payment plans with education trusts whose charitable status has recently been under review. [1185]

Mr. Jack: The Inland Revenue has decided that, because of advice it gave in the past about the tax treatment of investors in these plans, it will not collect tax on payments made under plans in existence on 20 June 1996. This is subject to the proviso that plans are not changed to increase the benefits which would be payable or replaced by new plans,for example, to provide benefits for a different child.

In principle, investors will be liable to tax on a proportion of any profits made from the school fee payment schemes. However, the educational trusts aim to eliminate any tax charge by ensuring that any profits are donated to charity. If a tax charge were to arise, tax legislation gives investors the right to recover any tax payable from the scheme.

This means that the position of people who have invested in these schemes in the past will be safeguarded and they should not be faced with unexpected tax liabilities. I welcome the Revenue's decision and am satisfied with the protection it provides for existing investors.

UK Tax Havens

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of the loss to the Revenue as a result of the residence of *(a)* United Kingdom citizens and *(b)* companies in (i) Jersey, (ii) Guernsey and (iii) the Isle of Man. [157]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The information on which to base such an estimate is not available.

ENVIRONMENT

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what further deregulation proposals he has in respect of the Health and Safety Executive. [655]

Sir Paul Beresford: In May 1994, the Health and Safety Commission published a report entitled "Review of Health and Safety Regulation". The review was the most cmprehensive examination of health and safety legislation for 20 years. The Government welcomed and accepted in full its recommendations to modernise and simplify health and safety law and to make other changes designed to reduce administrative burdens on business without lowering necessary standards of protection.

The HSC is now over halfway through its programme of work to implement the recommendations of the report. Details of the activity to be carried out in the present year are set out in the HSC plan of work 1996–97 published last May.

Water Leaks

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what discussions he has had with the Health and Safety Executive and the water companies to assess the need for risk assessment on the likelihood of water leaks from company pipes destabilising ground and producing accidents; and if he will make a statement. [443]

Sir Paul Beresford: None. Works concerned with the repair of leaking pipes are covered by current health and safety legislation which protects the company employees and members of the public. The likelihood of a leaking pipe destabilising the surrounding ground depends on a number of factors, including topography, ground conditions and the force of the leak. The main occurrences are as a result of bursts in mains pipes which are readily visible and are quickly repaired with the necessary safety precautions. All companies have introduced programmes to reduce leakage from their pipes which will also reduce the likelihood of any long-term damage to surrounding ground.

Village Pubs (Rate Relief)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will include village pubs as businesses eligible for rate relief. [894]

Sir Paul Beresford: Village pubs will be eligible for discretionary rate relief under the measures introduced in the Local Government and Rating Bill.

Waste Management

Mr. Waller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to review the policies described in "United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste". [1182]

Mr. Clappison: The Government's policies on exports and imports of waste are set out in "United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste", which was published in 16 May 1996 following a period of public consultation in 1995 which included consultation with Community member states and the European Commission. The plan came into operation on 1 June and reflects the Government's long-standing policy of self sufficiency in waste disposal and the well-established principle of proximity—that waste should be disposed of in, or as close as possible to, the country of origin.

Since the plan was published, the Government of the Republic of Ireland, through their Department of the Environment, have made a formal request to the Government to allow the continuing export of a limited quantity of specified clinical waste until the end of 1997. This request follows the closure of all but one of the Republic's clinical waste incinerators in recent years as a result of the more demanding emission standards imposed by European legislation. The Government are minded to agree to the request from the Government of the Republic on grounds of public health and safety and in line with the proximity principle. This exemption would be in order to allow the Republic time to bring its own facilities for the environmentally sound disposal of these wastes on stream.

It has also become apparent that the plan requires clarification on one minor aspect. The plan bans most imports of waste for disposal, but exceptions are made under limited circumstances for mainly chemical wastes moving for high temperature incineration. Since publication of the plan, there have been differences in interpretation of the definition of high temperature incineration. The Government propose therefore to clarify the definition to ensure that only those wastes destined for high temperature incineration in general purpose chemical waste incinerators are permitted in the limited circumstances allowed under the plan.

My Department has therefore today published, for consultation, details of these proposed changes. Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library of the House.

Local Government Pensions

Mr. Waller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he proposes to consult local government pension interests in England and Wales as part of the proposals for change initiative on new regulations governing the local government pension scheme; and if he will make a statement. [1183]

Sir Paul Beresford: In July, I announced that regulations would be prepared to give effect to the proposals for change initiative for the local government pension scheme. Today, draft regulations are being circulated for consultation with local government pension interests in England and Wales. The closing date for comments is 10 January 1997.

The scheme's provisions have been radically recast to provide new, easy-to-read regulations in a more accessible and user-friendly format. These are designed to improve the ease with which local authorities interpreted the scheme's legal provisions and to provide scheme members with a clear set of scheme rules. Many out-of-date regulations have been removed. New opportunities are included for employers to provide optional benefits for scheme members on a share cost basis. In addition, a number of other key improvements and changes are proposed, including an equalisation of future employees' contribution rates.

Existing scheme members' pension entitlements will remain statutorily protected. Eligible members would be able to benefit from any proposed changes to the scheme's provisions.

Further consultations will begin shortly covering new provisions for the investment management of local authority pension funds, revised regulations for dispute resolution within the LGPS and measures to ensure a smooth transition from the existing to the new scheme.

Several regional seminars have been arranged to explain and discuss the proposals with local government and other interested parties as an integral part of the statutory consultation exercise. I know that all LGPS interests will wish to participate fully and ensure that the new scheme regulations will provide a long-term, secure, statutory basis for the LGPS.

Subject to the outcome of these consultations, it is intended to make and lay the new scheme regulations early in 1997, with them coming into effect on 1 April 1998.

Housing

Mr. John Townend: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what action he proposes to take where a local planning authority proposes to adopt policies on affordable housing in its development plan which are inconsistent with Government guidance. [1184]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify the position concerning the provision of affordable housing through the planning system. The Department's policy guidance on affordable housing is set out in PPG3 revised in March 1992 and circular 13/96, published on 8 August 1996.

PPG1—planning policy guidance 1 March 1992—sets out the position, in paragraph 29, with regard to the need for development plans to avoid conflicts with national or regional policy guidance which are not justified by local circumstances. Guidance on intervention by the Department in the preparation of development plans is set out in paragraphs 4.16 to 4.17 of PPG12—February 1992—and in paragraphs 71 to 76 of the code of practice on development plans—September 1995.

Where a local planning authority has not yet adopted its local plan or unitary development plan, it will have to have regard to circular 13/96 in preparing its plan—sections 12(6), 31(6) and 36 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. However, where development plans are very close to adoption—for example, where an inquiry into proposed modifications has already been held and no further inquiry is envisaged—it may be appropriate, in order not to delay the plans, for local planning authority to adopt its plan and subsequently to prepare proposals for alterations to the plan having regard to the policy guidance in circular 13/96.

Local planning authorities should prepare such proposals for alterations expeditiously and agree timetables for alteration with the Government office for the region. In cases where local planning authorities fail to take such action promptly, the Secretary of State may well consider it appropriate to direct them to prepare alterations to their adopted development plans within a specified period—sections 21(1A)(a), 32(2)(a) and 39(1)(a) of the 1990 Act. In relation to affordable housing policies in development plans this approach will constitute a modification of the statement in the last sentence of paragraph 29 of PPG1 which reads;

"if no such intervention is made, local authorities may take it that the Secretaries of State are content with the plan at the time of adoption and will attach commensurate weight to it in decisions they make on appeals on called-in applications".

Where plans which include policies which conflict with the guidance in circular 13/96 had been adopted prior to the publication of the circular, the need to have regard to the circular should be taken into account when the plan is reviewed. All local planning authorities will have to take into account the policy guidance in the new circular in determining applications for planning permission—paragraphs 20 and 21 of PPG1.

Urban Waste Water Treatment

Mr. John Townend: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of advice from the National Rivers Authority on estuary boundaries under the EC urban waste water treatment directive; and if he will make a statement. [1186]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: Earlier this year, my Department asked the National Rivers Authority—now the Environment Agency—to make recommendations for reconsidering the criteria for determining estuary boundaries for the purposes of the EC urban waste water treatment directive, specifically looking at the Severn, the Humber, and Swansea bay.

Having considered the agency's recommendations, my Secretary of State, together with the Secretary of State for Wales, has decided on the following:

to draw the seaward limit of the Severn estuary at a line from Lavenock point through the Holms to Howe Rock on Brean Down;

to return the seaward limit of the Parrett Estuary to the Clean Rivers (Estuaries and Tidal Waters) Act 1960 boundary, being a line drawn from Howe Rock on Brean Down to Hinckley Point; (the Parrett estuary boundary was considered during the setting of the Severn Estuary boundary in 1994 and the agency considered it appropriate to reconsider it during this exercise).

similarly, to return the seaward limits of the Humber and of Swansea Bay to the 1960 Act boundaries, being:

(a) for the Humber, a line drawn from Spurn Head to Donna Nook at TF434029971;

(b) for Swansea Bay, a line drawn from Mumbles Head to Sker Point.

These decisions will mean that all sewage discharges of a size greater than 2,000 population equivalent into these newly defined estuarine waters will be required to have secondary treatment.

The outer boundaries for all other estuaries in England and Wales are to remain the same as those used by the Environment Agency for other purposes. These are also the boundaries established by the Department for UWWTD purposes in 1994.

Global Temperatures

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimates have been made by his Department for 10-year projections in global temperatures in each of the last five years. [497]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The 1995 second scientific assessment from the intergovernmental panel on climate change suggests that the underlying rise in global average temperature will be about 0.1 to 0.2 deg C over the next decade. The actual temperature changes will be strongly affected by natural variability. The comparable estimate in the first IPCC scientific assessment in 1990 was 0.3 deg C per decade; the 1995 estimate is lower because it has taken into account the cooling effect of aerosols produced by man-made sulphur dioxide emissions.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Works of Art (Export)

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when the 1995–96 report of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art will be published. [1187]

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: The reviewing committee's annual report, 1995–96, has been published today, and copies have been laid before Parliament.

BBC

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what representations she has received about the BBC's observation of clause 4.4(e) of its agreement with her Department; and if she will make a statement. [499]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* Representations have been received from the Broadcasting Campaign for Scotland. My officials are discussing with the BBC the provision of the information required under clause 4.4(e) of the agreement to ensure that it is made available in the BBC's annual reports or elsewhere as appropriate. Meanwhile, the hon. Member will be aware that the BBC Scotland annual review 1995–96, published on 25 October, includes further information about BBC production in Scotland.

Football Trust

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what was the income of the Football Trust in each week since 1 November 1994 *(a)* in total, *(b)* from pool betting duty and *(c)* from spot the ball. [500]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* Football Trust weekly income from 1 November 1994 is set out in the table.

Week Ending	Total income £	Pool betting duty £	Spot the ball £
November			
4	733,750	473,752	259,998
11	724,750	468,851	225,899
18	758,972	479,946	279,026
25	730,158	473,315	256,843
December			
2	703,908	455,816	248,092
9	694,337	450,908	243,429
16	675,709	448,161	227,548
23	696,142	460,085	236,057
30	1,460,364	924,477	535,887
1995			
January			
6	119,323	116,368	2,955
13	161,749	160,420	1,329
20	583,560	393,654	189,906
27	610,005	404,662	205,343
February			
3	614,825	408,250	206,575
10	605,460	408,357	197,103
17	606,123	401,609	204,514
24	599,293	398,305	200,988
March			
3	594,043	398,545	195,498
10	584,063	389,026	195,087
17	579,733	386,974	192,759
24	586,984	386,892	200,092
31	578,654	381,238	197,416
April			
7	565,827	369,835	195,992
14	565,397	372,364	193,033
21	567,903	375,494	192,409
28	551,028	363,933	187,095
May			
5	475,885	349,427	126,458
12	491,057	354,366	136,691
19	483,546	354,411	126,135
26	462,926	336,321	126,605
June			
2	466,731	335,725	131,006
9	459,213	328,176	131,037
16	428,790	311,703	117,087
23	443,163	321,627	121,536
30	434,357	313,315	121,042
July			
7	435,190	312,106	123,084
14	427,861	309,524	118,337
21	411,226	297,011	114,215
28	420,019	304,625	115,394
August			
4	414,367	299,673	114,694
11	399,916	289,773	110,143
18	382,969	279,530	103,439
25	397,699	289,334	108,365
September			
1	409,326	299,532	109,794
8	404,044	297,407	106,637
15	400,544	295,237	105,307
22	410,667	302,533	108,134
29	415,098	306,839	108,259
October			
6	407,116	300,100	107,016
13	405,738	297,780	107,958
20	407,511	298,040	109,471
27	411,044	301,645	109,399
November			
3	405,125	295,681	109,444
10	405,849	298,747	107,102
17	404,842	294,120	110,722
24	402,318	293,416	108,902
December			
1	398,331	289,939	108,392
8	398,049	289,338	108,711
15	402,164	293,782	108,382
22	391,445	283,498	107,947
29	411,405	300,072	111,333
1996			
January			
5	560,091	401,400	158,691
12	159,265	130,543	28,722
19	339,522	250,948	88,574
26	372,567	270,677	101,890

Week Ending	Total income £	Pool betting duty £	Spot the ball £
February			
2	369,470	268,169	101,301
9	376,828	277,341	99,487
16	367,609	266,200	101,409
23	368,823	269,949	98,874
March			
1	366,173	263,694	102,479
8	367,728	268,100	99,628
15	358,472	258,182	100,290
22	358,185	258,903	99,282
29	367,834	269,316	98,518
April			
5	349,126	250,775	98,351
12	355,102	259,469	95,633
19	382,098	289,125	92,973
26	335,174	244,342	90,832
May			
3	348,454	254,269	94,185
10	341,152	246,880	94,272
17	349,514	251,802	97,712
24	375,797	282,632	93,165
31	368,854	274,978	93,876
June			
7	368,568	271,416	97,152
14	354,238	269,069	85,165
21	361,547	272,636	88,911
28	353,878	267,070	86,808
July			
5	356,322	268,660	87,662
12	350,073	265,169	84,904
19	344,740	267,155	87,585
26	344,716	259,799	84,917
August			
2	339,789	254,140	85,649
9	341,366	258,223	83,143
16	323,049	243,116	79,933
23	324,388	245,296	79,092
30	344,649	260,941	83,708
September			
6	347,177	264,018	83,159
13	343,176	261,185	81,991
20	360,015	274,070	85,945
27	346,171	262,811	83,360
October			
4	354,351	265,856	88,495
11	352,619	266,024	86,595
18	354,470	267,669	86,801
25	355,011	267,643	87,368

Source:
The Football Trust.

PRIME MINISTER

European Council (Dublin)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals were put by Her Majesty's Government to the special Heads of Government European Council meeting in Dublin on 5 October; what was the response by the other Governments; and if he will place in the Library copies of all papers discussed at the Council. [231]

The Prime Minister: The Dublin European Council on 5 October was informal. There were no papers for discussion or Council conclusions. I set out British priorities for the intergovernmental conference and my belief that the IGC must focus on essential reform to help prepare for further enlargement and to tackle other significant challenges which Europe will face over the next few years.

Internet

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to open a web site for 10 Downing street. [897]

The Prime Minister: My Office will shortly be opening a Downing street World Wide Web site.

BSE and CJD

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Prime Minister if he will establish an independent judicial inquiry into bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. [842]

The Prime Minister: The Government receive independent expert scientific advice on BSE and CJD from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. Issues to do with BSE and CJD have recently been examined in detail by the Agriculture and Health Select Committees. I see no need for a judicial inquiry on this issue.

Engagements

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [997]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 29 October. [978]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

SCOTLAND

Dance and Drama Students

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make financial assistance available to dance and drama students living in Scotland, on a similar basis to the support currently available to students living in England; and if he will make a statement. [976]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The position of Scottish domiciled students attending dance and drama courses is being kept under review as the proposals currently being discussed between the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of National Heritage and the Arts Council of England develop. The Arts Council of England scheme does not come into force until September 1997.

WALES

Tourism Industry

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what considerations underlie his policy on a minimum wage in respect of the tourism industry. [88]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The determination of pay levels in the tourism industry is not a matter for the Government: it is for the industry to decide what is fair and reasonable and can be afforded. It is our objective to see the greatest growth of the tourism industry and tourism employment, not to see workers priced out of jobs by minimum wages that cannot be afforded.

Conwy Council (Finances)

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will ask the district auditor to investigate the finances of Conwy council. [215]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The district auditor has already been appointed to Conwy council and will be looking at the finances of the authority as part of the normal audit process.

DEFENCE

Spending Cuts (Jobs)

4. **Mr. Devlin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the effect on the number of jobs in the defence industry of reducing United Kingdom defence spending to the European average. [351]

Mr. Portillo: A reduction in UK defence expenditure to the current NATO European average would involve cuts of more than £4.5 billion per year. This would have a devastating effect on the capability of our armed forces and on jobs in the defence industry.

Army Bands

15. **Mr. Jessel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of British Army bands. [362]

Mr. Soames: Army bands make a superb contribution to sustaining the morale of service personnel. In addition to providing musical support for state, Army and other service functions, non-service functions, public relations and recruiting, they provide ready-trained in transit medical attendants in time of war.

Dartmoor National Park

16. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about his Department's environmental policy in relation to the Dartmoor national park. [363]

Mr. Soames: My Department is committed to the protection of the natural environment for all its estate, including national parks, by avoiding harm or nuisance while maintaining the operational effectiveness of our armed forces. We conduct our activities in accordance with the Government's overall environment policy.

Cadet Forces

17. **Mr. Mans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of membership of three services cadet forces on the future job prospects of young people. [364]

Mr. Soames: Membership of the cadet forces brings immense benefits to the education and development of the young people of this country. I believe that when cadets finish their education and seek jobs, the qualities that they have gained in the cadet forces will be highly valued by their employers.

RAF St. Athan

18. **Mr. Sweeney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the future prospects for RAF St. Athan. [365]

Mr. Arbuthnot: RAF St. Athan will continue to provide vital engineering support to the front line.

Army Strength

19. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the strength of the Army in 1990; and what will be the strength of the Army under current plans by the end of the decade. [366]

Mr. Soames: The total regular strength of the Army in 1990 was 152,800. The manpower planning target for 2000 is presently 115,000. Both figures include trainees, but exclude Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) personnel.

27. **Mr. Pope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the size of the shortfall in the strength of the Army as at 1 October. [376]

Mr. Soames: Figures for October are not yet available. The shortfall in the strength of the Army at 1 September 1996 was 5,350.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the total trained strength of the British Army in April 1997. [1061]

Mr. Soames: The estimated total trained strength of the British Army at 1 April 1997 is 101,000. This figure includes British and Gurkha trained personnel but excludes trained Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) troops.

Junior Leaders

20. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent consultations he has had over the issue of junior leaders. [367]

Mr. Soames: The Army is considering the possibility of reintroducing some form of junior entry scheme for 16-year-olds, but we must balance the likely benefits against the costs before arriving at the decision.

Army Recruitment

21. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the target for Army recruitment for the current year. [368]

Mr. Soames: The Army's recruitment targets for 1996–97 are:

Officers: 820

Soldiers: 15,100.

Telecommunications

22. **Mr. Robert Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to announce the contract for the defence fixed telecommunications system. [369]

Mr. Soames: We currently intend to announce the preferred contractor for the defence fixed telecommunications system in the next few weeks. We expect that the contract will be let in March 1997 subject to the outcome of negotiations with the preferred contractor.

Trident Programme

23. **Mr. John Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the progress of the Trident programme. [370]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The Trident programme is proceeding to time and within budget. HMS Vanguard and HMS Victorious are operational. The third submarine of the class, Vigilant, is being commissioned early next month and will enter service in 1998. The fourth vessel, Vengeance, is under construction at VSEL, Barrow in Furness, and will enter service around the turn of the century.

Small Arms Ammunition

24. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on defence procurement policy in respect of small arms ammunition. [371]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement of small arms ammunition is designed to meet the armed forces' requirements in a cost-effective manner. In seeking best value for money, competition remains the cornerstone of our policy.

Defence Spending

25. **Mr. Pawsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was spent on defence in *(a)* 1986 and *(b)* 1990; and what is the estimated amount for the current year. [372]

Mr. Soames: Defence spending was £18.4 billion in 1986–87 and £21.7 billion in 1990–91. The planned spending for the current financial year is £21.4 billion.

Recruitment (Ethnic Minorities)

26. **Mr. Hain:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of the United Kingdom armed forces is currently recruited from ethnic minorities. [374]

Mr. Soames: Approximately 1 per cent. of armed forces personnel are from ethnic minorities.

Army Training Regiment

28. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the present and future role of the Army training regiment. [377]

Mr. Soames: No changes are planned in respect of the role or location of the Army training regiment at Lichfield, or any of the other four ATRs, Bassingbourn, Pirbright, Winchester and Glencorse.

Low Flying

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons a military aircraft passed very low over Doncaster at 7.46 pm on 11 September. [446]

Mr. Soames: Since Doncaster is listed for avoidance by low flying military aircraft, the RAF police have been tasked to make inquiries into the alleged overflight. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence will write to the hon. Member when these inquiries are complete.

Land Mines

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of purchase of the US designed scatterable mine system due to enter service in 1999; and what on-going maintenance and testing costs will be associated with this system. [395]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement cost of the vehicle launched scatterable anti-tank mine system due to enter service in 1999 is some £90 million. The costs of maintenance and support for its planned 20-year life is estimated at £55 million.

Procurement

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on guidelines for partnership in Ministry of Defence procurement. [199]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Following discussions between my Department and the Confederation of British Industry, a joint guidance note has been published on "Partnering between MOD and its Suppliers". A copy will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the size of the reduction in the armed forces between 1 April 1990 and 1 April 1999 under his Department's current plans; and if he will make a statement. [503]

Mr. Soames: The total service strength of the regular armed forces at 1 April 1990 was 314,700. The estimated strength at 1 April 1999 under current plans is 213,500, representing a reduction of 32 per cent. Both figures include Gurkha strengths. The former excludes, however, the then Ulster Defence Regiment and the latter excludes the Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) force. The figures include an element for personnel undergoing training.

Argentinian Beef

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what purchases of Argentinian beef have been made by the British Army to feed Her Majesty's forces in the last year. [788]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement of food for the armed forces is contracted to the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes. My Department does not specify the source of origin from which NAAFI should obtain beef—or any other meat—but expects it to seek the best market price for the product. The majority of our requirements are for frozen beef which is not readily available from the British market and I understand that on cost grounds the majority of beef joints have been sourced from South America, predominantly Brazil and Uruguay. NAAFI indicates that in the last year approximately 12 tonnes of frozen beef was sourced from Argentina; this represents less than 1 per cent. of the annual frozen meat requirements for the armed forces. Additionally, a range of beef products including sirloin, foreribs, minced and diced beef are normally procured in the UK along with other meat and poultry produce.

Nuclear Submarines

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made towards removing the radioactive material form the nuclear submarines currently docked at the Rosyth naval base; and if he will make a statement. [858]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Of the seven decommissioned nuclear-powered submarines stored afloat at Rosyth, four have completed their defuel, de-equip and lay-up preparation—DDLP—process, one is nearing completion, and two have yet to commence. The DDLP process includes the removal of the spent fuel.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to store decommissioned nuclear submarines in the Holy loch on the Clyde; and if he will make a statement. [859]

Mr. Arbuthnot: We have no plans to store decommissioned nuclear submarines in the Holy loch.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has for the out of service nuclear submarines currently docked at the Rosyth naval base; and if he will make a statement; [860]

(2) what assessment he has made of the sites in the United Kingdom which are appropriate for the storage of decommissioned nuclear submarines; and if he will make a statement. [857]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The Government consider that it is appropriate for decommissioned nuclear-powered submarines to be stored safely afloat at the location where they are decommissioned, pending disposal. Decommissioned nuclear submarines are currently stored at Rosyth and Devonport.

Peacekeeping

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of British forces' contribution to peacekeeping operations worldwide. [979]

Mr. Soames: Our continuing contributions to peacekeeping operations around the world represent a substantial commitment, fully consistent with our position as a permanent Security Council member. Over 9,000 ground troops are serving with the NATO implementation force in Bosnia, supported by about 500 air and maritime personnel offshore and in Italy. Over 400 personnel are engaged in operations under UN command, and some 400 more in support of Security Council resolutions over Iraq.

Tanks

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the advantages of the leasing of tanks; and if he will make a statement. [1060]

Mr. Arbuthnot: No consideration has been given to the leasing of tanks under the private finance initiative. However, it is our policy that, subject to considerations of operational effectiveness and value for money, there are no "no go" areas for PFI in the MOD. PFI projects can reach close to the front line and impact directly on operational capability.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schools Budget

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is the current total for the national schools budget; [4]

(2) what proportion of the national schools budget is currently transmitted to schools; [7]

(3) what is the average amount currently deducted from the national schools budget by local education authorities; [6]

(4) what action she will take to reduce the amount of local education authority holdback. [5]

Mr. Robin Squire: The total amount of the general schools budget as recorded in the local management of schools budget statements produced by the local education authorities in England for 1996–97 is £15,383.6 million, exclusive of capital expenditure and capital financing costs. The proportion of this figure delegated to schools through the aggregated schools budget is 79 per cent. The 21 per cent. retained centrally by LEAs amounts to £3,226.4 million, an average of £27.1 million per LEA.

The Government's plans for requiring a further reduction in "LEA holdback" are set out in chapter 2 of the White Paper "Self-Government for Schools", Cm 3315.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people formerly in receipt of incapacity benefit who have signed on as unemployed during the year April 1995 to April 1996 have *(a)* been referred to placing, assessment and counselling teams, *(b)* taken up a place on a job club, *(c)* taken up a job interview guarantee, *(d)* taken up a place on a job plan workshop and *(e)* received assistance from the access to work scheme. [412]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Alan Howarth, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the number of people formerly in receipt of Incapacity Benefit who have signed on as unemployed during the year April 1995 to April 1996, and how many have subsequently been referred to various employment programmes. This falls within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

I have set out as much of the information you requested as we have available in the attached tables. It is not, however, possible to provide the figures you request for referrals to Placing, Assessment and Counselling Teams (PACTS), as prior to the current financial year these were not counted. Instead I have provided figures for the number of assessments undertaken for people with disabilities.

It may be helpful if I explain that the purpose of assessment is to help jobseekers identify a realistic work goal, and steps to achieve their goal. Assessment can consist of interviewing and counselling, occupational inventories, work samples and psychological tests, using whatever methods are appropriate to clients' needs. Assessment is delivered by Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), Occupational Psychologists and other internal and external specialists.

In addition, the figures for the number of people who have started on Job Interview Guarantee (JIG) in the current financial year, are included in "Numbers of Starting in Other Programmes". Access to Work starts are included in "Numbers starting on specialists programmes" in both financial year.

I hope this is helpful.

Summary of activity with ex-IB clients April 1995 to March 1996

Ex-incapacity benefit claims	*National cumulative*
Number of ex-IB making a claim for period ending 29 March	40,257
Number starting on:	
Jobplan	350
Jobclub	497
JIG	358
PWDs' assessments	9,380
PWDs' Numbers starting on specialist programmes[2]	455

[1] People with disabilities.
[2] Includes Supported Employment, Rehabilitation starts, Access to Work, Job Introduction.

Summary of activity with ex-IB clients month ending—April 1996

Ex-incapacity benefit clients	*National cumulative*
Number of ex-IB making a claim for period ending 26 April 1996	4,059
Number starting on:	
Jobplan	44
Jobclub	107
Other programmes[1]	67
PWDs[2]—referrals	1,316
PWDs[2]—assesments	1,149
PWDs[2]—starting on specialist programmes[2]	100

[1] Other programmes—BSS, Restart, Workwise, Jobsearch Plus, Job Search Seminar, Job Review Workshop, Job Interview Guarantee.
[2] People with disabilities.
[3] Includes Supported Employment, Rehabilitation starts, Access to Work, Job Introduction.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is her latest estimate of *(a)* the cost and *(b)* the number receiving assistance through the access to work scheme; and of these how many are (i) unemployed; (ii) employees and (iii) self-employed. [414]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Alan Howarth, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the estimated cost and numbers receiving assistance through Access to Work, and the numbers who are unemployed, employed and self-employed. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

For the period April to September 1996, £6.5m has been spent and a further £6m is already committed to be spent. During this period we helped 1,452 new beneficiaries of whom 666 were unemployed, 701 were employed and 85 were self employed. About 4,200 others continue to receive help agreed before April.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is her estimate of the cost of removing the employer and self-employed contributions payable under the access to work scheme. [415]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Alan Howarth, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the estimated cost of removing the cost sharing element of Access to Work. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

It is too early to say what expenditure on Access to Work will be this year and consequently what would be the effect of returning to a situation in which the Employment Service paid all approved costs.

However, the demand for Access to Work in 1995–96 was such that, in spite of restrictions from December 1995 on the help given to employed and self-employed people, expenditure exceeded the budget by some £6 million. Growth on this scale indicated that expenditure in 1996–97 would have exceeded the budget available leading to restrictions again having to be imposed on applications. Employed and self-employed people have been eligible for help since 1 June, and the introduction of cost sharing means that this year's allocation of £19 million will ensure that help continues to be available to those who most need it.

I hope this is helpful.

Jobfinder's Grant

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is her estimate of the cost of extending and jobfinder's grant to people receiving severe disablement allowance, incapacity benefit and income support at the time of their application. [413]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Alan Howarth, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the cost of extending Jobfinder's Grant to people receiving Severe Disablement Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Income Support. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Based on client information supplied by the Benefits Agency, and assuming a similar take up to that of our current target group, the maximum additional cost would be £14.3 million.

I hope that this is helpful.

School Equipment Survey

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for what reasons she has not published the results of the survey conducted by an Office for Standards in Education inspector into the link between the provision of books and equipment in schools and effective teaching; and if she will make a statement. [144]

Mr. Robin Squire: This is a matter for Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, who heads the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked Mr. Chris Woodhead to write to the hon. Member.

Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute

Mr. John Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total payment by the Further Education Funding Council to the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute in 1995–96; which courses were supported by the Further Education Funding Council; and what is the current estimate of likely grant by the Further Education Funding Council in 1996–97. [85]

Mr. Paice: In 1995–96 the Further Education Funding Council paid Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute recurrent funding of £125,992. The institute's recurrent funding for 1996–97 has yet to be finalised, but is likely to be around the same level as in 1995–96. Details of the courses for which the institute is funded are a matter for the FEFC. I am therefore asking the council's chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

National Curriculum

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list the provision in the national curriculum which enables the teaching of *(a)* citizenship, *(b)* social skills and *(c)* parenting; and if she will make a statement. [399]

Mrs. Gillan: There is scope for schools to cover citizenship, social skills and parenting under section 1 of the Education Reform Act 1988.

Citizenship can also be covered in religious education, and within national curriculum subjects such as history and English; and social skills and parenthood can be covered in sex education, provision for which is enshrined in sections 352 and 403 to 405 of the Education Act 1993.

Pupils (Expenditure)

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent per *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school pupil in each of the local education authorities in England in the most recent year for which figures are available, at constant prices. [964]

Mr. Robin Squire: The following table sets out for each local education authority in England the net institutional expenditure per pupil in LEA-maintained *(a)* pre-primary/primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools.

Net institutional expenditure 1994–95 (at 1995–96 per pupil prices)

	Pre-primary and primary £	*Secondary* £
Corporation of London	3,723	0
Camden	2,107	2,857
Greenwich	2,077	2,839
Hackney	2,303	3,214
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,542	3,396
Islington	2,105	2,722
Kensington and Chelsea	2,455	3,408
Lambeth	2,635	3,874
Lewisham	2,148	2,742
Southwark	1,944	2,746
Tower Hamlets	2,450	3,272
Wandsworth	2,323	3,127
Westminster	2,499	2,894
Barking and Dagenham	1,937	2,410
Barnet	1,805	2,473
Bexley	1,573	2,286
Brent	1,760	2,082
Bromley	1,673	2,285
Croydon	1,767	2,217
Ealing	2,016	2,516
Enfield	1,804	2,416
Haringey	2,356	3,058
Harrow	2,092	2,661
Havering	1,756	2,632
Hillingdon	1,820	2,688
Hounslow	1,977	2,644
Kingston upon Thames	1,772	2,579
Merton	1,978	2,728
Newham	1,752	2,686
Redbridge	1,719	2,615
Richmond upon Thames	1,930	2,431
Sutton	1,905	2,575
Waltham Forest	1,835	2,453
Birmingham	1,763	2,413
Coventry	1,746	2,477
Dudley	1,614	2,259
Sandwell	1,706	2,298
Solihull	1,643	2,279
Walsall	1,704	2,370
Wolverhampton	1,688	2,397
Knowsley	1,613	2,281
Liverpool	1,673	2,666
St. Helens	1,558	2,301
Sefton	1,523	2,281
Wirral	1,605	2,350
Bolton	1,685	2,316
Bury	1,528	2,081
Manchester	1,596	2,494
Oldham	1,660	2,349
Rochdale	1,590	2,279
Salford	1,543	2,203
Stockport	1,604	2,204
Tameside	1,482	2,095
Trafford	1,513	2,375
Wigan	1,509	2,182
Barnsley	1,587	2,153
Doncaster	1,478	2,074
Rotherham	1,761	2,274

Net institutional expenditure 1994–95 (at 1995–96 per pupil prices)

	Pre-primary and primary £	*Secondary* £
Sheffield	1,651	2,161
Bradford	1,722	2,090
Calderdale	1,691	2,155
Kirklees	1,646	2,311
Leeds	1,685	2,276
Wakefield	1,629	2,095
Gateshead	1,678	2,311
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,700	2,370
North Tyneside	1,675	2,197
South Tyneside	1,662	2,112
Sunderland	1,615	2,193
Isles of Scilly	2,530	4,592
Avon	1,652	2,392
Bedfordshire	1,715	2,284
Berkshire	1,669	2,292
Buckinghamshire	1,676	2,311
Cambridgeshire	1,578	2,213
Cheshire	1,566	2,229
Cleveland	1,541	2,225
Cornwall	1,654	2,256
Cumbria	1,578	2,083
Derbyshire	1,634	2,345
Devon	1,592	2,256
Dorset	1,547	2,111
Durham	1,799	2,174
East Sussex	1,733	2,416
Essex	1,776	2,377
Gloucestershire	1,305	1,984
Hampshire	1,685	2,230
Hereford and Worcester	1,682	2,113
Hertfordshire	1,759	2,319
Humberside	1,692	2,360
Isle of Wight	1,646	2,079
Kent	1,593	2,331
Lancashire	1,701	2,402
Leicestershire	1,651	2,329
Lincolnshire	1,626	2,441
Norfolk	1,639	2,399
North Yorkshire	1,615	2,233
Northamptonshire	1,657	2,320
Northumberland	1,565	1,991
Nottinghamshire	1,733	2,454
Oxfordshire	1,720	2,340
Shropshire	1,644	2,472
Somerset	1,701	2,164
Staffordshire	1,603	2,155
Suffolk	1,731	2,235
Surrey	1,786	2,288
Warwickshire	1,705	2,405
West Sussex	1,709	2,294
Wiltshire	1,585	2,176
England	1,702	2,325

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent per pupil in Staffordshire *(a)* in primary schools and *(b)* in secondary schools in each of the past 25 years, at constant prices. [966]

Mr. Squire: The following table shows net institutional expenditure in Staffordshire local education authority schools on *(a)* pre-primary and primary pupils combined, and on *(b)* secondary pupils from 1974–75 to 1994–95, the latest year for which figures are available. Equivalent figures prior to 1974–75 are not readily available centrally.

Staffordshire county council: unit costs (1995–96 prices)

	Pre-primary/primary £	*Secondary* £
1974–75	1,223	1,985
1975–76	1,230	2,050
1976–77	1,249	1,991
1977–78	1,193	1,868
1978–79	1,206	1,861
1979–80	1,221	1,821
1980–81	1,211	1,676
1981–82	1,281	1,748
1982–83	1,307	1,746
1983–84	1,352	1,802
1984–85	1,316	1,803
1985–86	1,308	1,861
1986–87	1,373	2,015
1987–88	1,448	2,159
1988–89	1,473	2,273
1989–90	1,483	2,296
1990–91	1,496	2,225
1991–92	1,561	2,285
1992–93	1,570	2,242
1993–94	1,599	2,166
1994–95	1,603	2,155

Teachers' Salaries

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the total schools budget was spent on teachers' salaries in each of the local education authorities in England in the most recent year for which figures are available. [968]

Mr. Forth: The following table sets out for each LEA in England the expenditure on teaching staff in LEA-maintained pre-primary/primary schools and secondary schools as a percentage of the net institutional expenditure in those schools for 1994–95, the latest year for which figures are available.

Teaching staff cost as a percentage of net institutional expenditure 1994–95

LEA	*A Teaching staff £000*	*B Net institutional expenditure £000*	*C A as a percentage of B Percentage*
Corporation of London	393	761	52
Camden	29,917	45,558	66
Greenwich	53,005	80,022	66
Hackney	41,934	61,450	68
Hammersmith and Fulham	23,059	39,150	59
Islington	38,116	52,089	73
Kensington and Chelsea	15,183	23,007	66
Lambeth	32,828	53,789	61
Lewisham	42,569	70,570	60
Southwark	36,489	56,949	64
Tower Hamlets	59,528	88,642	67
Wandsworth	26,992	44,548	61
Westminster	28,869	43,775	66
Barking and Dagenham	36,039	53,302	68
Barnet	42,769	62,711	68
Bexley	38,929	54,468	71
Brent	29,345	41,212	71
Bromley	33,921	47,754	71

Teaching staff cost as a percentage of net institutional expenditure 1994–95

LEA	A Teaching staff £000	B Net institutional expenditure £000	C A as a percentage of B Percentage
Croydon	43,465	64,026	68
Ealing	44,293	64,574	69
Enfield	50,372	70,250	72
Haringey	48,504	73,236	66
Harrow	38,516	59,215	65
Havering	41,685	62,394	67
Hillingdon	22,931	34,801	66
Hounslow	45,911	68,433	67
Kingston upon Thames	20,298	29,873	68
Merton	32,443	46,150	70
Newham	54,294	80,446	67
Redbridge	47,835	69,003	69
Richmond upon Thames	26,801	37,968	71
Sutton	22,582	34,667	65
Waltham Forest	41,086	57,824	71
Birmingham	198,844	299,100	66
Coventry	64,666	96,065	67
Dudley	51,962	74,189	70
Sandwell	61,672	89,880	69
Solihull	43,536	61,279	71
Walsall	52,699	74,372	71
Wolverhampton	51,229	72,576	71
Knowsley	32,247	47,919	67
Liverpool	97,870	152,282	64
St. Helens	37,573	52,318	72
Sefton	57,912	82,687	70
Wirral	67,920	92,474	73
Bolton	54,024	76,381	71
Bury	33,456	46,422	72
Manchester	84,064	125,365	67
Oldham	54,550	77,015	71
Rochdale	39,411	56,766	69
Salford	43,716	60,604	72
Stockport	52,705	75,189	70
Tameside	38,424	55,637	69
Trafford	35,487	50,174	71
Wigan	63,890	84,938	75
Barnsley	39,215	58,590	67
Doncaster	59,991	85,219	70
Rotherham	56,690	82,386	69
Sheffield	85,920	120,770	71
Bradford	105,450	147,243	72
Calderdale	32,136	45,139	71
Kirklees	79,714	112,252	71
Leeds	143,744	203,594	71
Wakefield	61,905	88,147	70
Gateshead	39,741	55,454	72
Newcastle upon Tyne	51,410	76,706	67
North Tyneside	39,621	56,391	70
South Tyneside	31,667	45,120	70
Sunderland	64,497	88,081	73
Isles of Scilly	599	951	63
Avon	174,342	254,603	68
Bedfordshire	103,541	130,184	69
Berkshire	130,566	184,166	71
Buckinghamshire	107,443	158,336	68
Cambridgeshire	97,683	143,907	68
Cheshire	185,568	269,048	69
Cleveland	122,215	171,315	71
Cornwall	88,972	127,950	70
Cumbria	78,726	104,588	75
Derbyshire	158,169	223,232	71
Devon	175,942	246,307	71
Dorset	95,134	132,396	72

Teaching staff cost as a percentage of net institutional expenditure 1994–95

LEA	A Teaching staff £000	B Net institutional expenditure £000	C A as a percentage of B Percentage
Durham	119,452	178,267	67
East Sussex	116,325	168,822	69
Essex	167,327	255,501	65
Gloucestershire	60,327	73,307	82
Hampshire	245,280	357,815	69
Hereford and Worcester	125,440	172,534	73
Hertfordshire	172,389	247,053	70
Humberside	178,187	267,171	67
Isle of Wight	24,097	33,036	73
Kent	210,551	307,126	69
Lancashire	284,712	401,335	71
Leicestershire	186,023	257,849	72
Lincolnshire	81,304	118,453	69
Norfolk	125,026	170,808	73
North Yorkshire	138,451	189,737	73
Northamptonshire	106,705	158,309	67
Northumberland	62,743	87,257	72
Nottinghamshire	201,726	298,237	68
Oxfordshire	104,125	151,317	69
Shropshire	76,006	102,278	71
Somerset	82,380	119,087	69
Staffordshire	191,671	285,103	67
Suffolk	132,302	179,721	74
Surrey	134,714	195,405	69
Warwickshire	88,426	125,563	70
West Sussex	126,221	180,190	70
Wiltshire	81,587	116,953	70
Total	8,543,883	12,311,558	69

Education Expenditure (Staffordshire)

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent in total on education in Staffordshire in each of the past 25 years, at constant prices. [965]

Mr. Robin Squire: The following table shows expenditure by Staffordshire local education authority from 1970–71 to 1994–95, the latest year for which figures are available. These figures have not been adjusted for any changes of function.

Staffordshire county council: gross education expenditure

	(1995–96 prices) £ million
1970–71	275.35
1971–72	291.34
1972–73	309.92
1973–74	333.83
1974–75	470.28
1975–76	483.36
1976–77	489.46
1977–78	470.16
1978–79	480.65
1979–80	470.35
1980–81	478.59
1981–82	486.32
1982–83	475.39
1983–84	480.80
1984–85	468.42
1985–86	459.04
1986–87	479.57
1987–88	492.50

Staffordshire county council: gross education expenditure

	(1995–96 prices) £ million
1988–89	502.03
1989–90	476.73
1990–91	485.20
1991–92	490.03
1992–93	534.49
1993–94	422.37
1994–95	419.82

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent in total on school education in Staffordshire in each of the past 25 years, at constant prices. [967]

Mr. Squire: The following table shows expenditure on pre-primary/primary and secondary education by Staffordshire local education authority from 1970–71 to 1994–95, the latest year for which figures are available. These figures have not been adjusted for any changes of function.

Staffordshire county council: expenditure on school education

	(1995–96 prices) £ million
1970–71	162.87
1971–72	172.68
1972–73	183.43
1973–74	199.27
1974–75	295.87
1975–76	302.13
1976–77	305.25
1977–78	290.23
1978–79	293.44
1979–80	288.70
1980–81	300.29
1981–82	304.77
1982–83	297.55
1983–84	300.07
1984–85	288.90
1985–86	286.02
1986–87	294.82
1987–88	304.27
1988–89	306.12
1989–90	314.16
1990–91	317.58
1991–92	308.52
1992–93	369.04
1993–94	303.01
1994–95	309.66

Higher Education Institutions

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list those higher education institutions which do not have cash reserves to cover 30 days of total expenditure. [790]

Mr. Forth: No. The information requested is commercially sensitive and, if published, could damage the financial health of individual universities and colleges.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list, by higher education institution, reductions in *(a)* academic and *(b)* non-academic staff in 1996. [791]

Mr. Forth: The higher education statistics agency collects data on academic and non-academic staff in higher education institutions. Information for 1995–96 is not yet available.

Schools (Religious Sects)

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list those independent schools run by religious sects that have applied for grant-maintained status. [792]

Mrs. Gillan: The following is a list of all the independent schools whose proposals to join the grant-maintained sector are currently under consideration:

Loreto RC grammar school, Altrincham, Cheshire;

St. Ambrose RC secondary school, Trafford;

Torah Temimah Jewish primary school, Brent;

Mount St. Mary's RC independent convent school, Exeter;

Virgo Fidelis RC convent school, Croydon;

Menorah Foundation Jewish primary school, Barnet;

John Loughborough school, Haringey (Seventh Day Adventist).

Student Governors

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list those further education colleges that have no student governor. [793]

Mr. Paice: This information is not held by the Department. It is for individual college corporations to determine whether to appoint a student governor.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sudan

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government are taking *(a)* directly and *(b)* through international agencies, to help relieve the position in the Sudan; and if he will make a statement on Government contacts with different factions in that country. [131]

Mr. Hanley: The UK has given over £100 million of humanitarian assistance to Sudan and Sudanese refugees since 1991. This aid is disbursed through non-governmental organisations and the UN's Operation Lifeline Sudan. Officials in London, Khartoum and Nairobi are in regular touch with the parties to the civil war and other Sudanese groups.

Montserrat

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Montserrat in respect of the recent volcanic eruptions; and if he will make a statement on the Montserrat Government's advice to local inhabitants. [665]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Montserrat experienced its latest volcanic eruption on 17 and 18 September 1996 affecting most southern parts of the island, which has been evacuated since April 1996 for all but essential business. There were no injuries. Scientists have warned that there

could be further explosions; however, they continue to believe that the north of Montserrat is safe from volcanic activity. We remain committed to helping the people of Montserrat, and to giving the highest priority to the safety of the islanders. The Governor, British administrators, and scientific experts continue to work closely with the Government of Montserrat on a comprehensive warning system, on the regular reviewing of areas deemed to be unsafe, and on associated contingency planning.

The Government of Montserrat have advised local inhabitants to remain alert for scientific reports which are issued twice daily and for announcements from the civilian authorities.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to require the Benefits Agency to revise the Benefits Agency code of practice regarding the structure of interviews and the range and type of questions to be put to unemployed people during interviews connected with the jobseeker's allowance. [472]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked for him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mrs. Ann Clwyd, dated 29 October 1996:

Your question to the Secretary of State for Social Security regarding the structure of interviews and the range and type of questions to be put to unemployed people under Jobseeker's Allowance has been passed to me for reply, as these are issues which are the responsibility of the Employment Service.

In response to the first part of your question, about the Benefits Agency Code of Practice (BA COP). I understand that BA have no plans to include specific guidance on interviewing unemployed people within it.

However, it may be helpful if I explain that as part of the work undertaken for the introduction of JSA, we in the Employment Service (ES) have produced a full set of procedural guidance for all our people, as they will be responsible for most of the interviewing connected with the Jobseeker's Allowance. This includes guidance on all aspects of the interviewing policy which is to be adopted. I have arranged for copies of these particular volumes to be sent to you at the House.

I hope this is helpful.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cattle Slaughter Scheme

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library a copy of the proposal by the EU Commission to reduce the payment rate for animals under the slaughter scheme which was agreed to by the beef management Committee. [193]

Mr. Baldry: Copies of the Commission regulation, EC No. 1974/96 of 15 October 1996, which will reduce the rate of payment from 1 ecu to 0.9 ecu per kg liveweight on eligible animals slaughtered under the over-30 month scheme, have been placed in the Library.

Organophosphates

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the level of use of organophosphates in *(a)* sheep dips and *(b)* farming in general in each year since 1970. [1018]

Mrs Browning: The Ministry does not hold this information for sheep dips. Figures for the use of organophosphate agricultural pesticides in Great Britain are available from 1975 but, up to 1993, only as the average of several years. The figures are:

1975 to 1979: 618 tonnes annually

1980 to 1983: 622 tonnes annually

1984 to 1989: 617 tonnes annually

1990 to 1993: 512 tonnes annually

1994: 703 tonnes

1995: 241 tonnes.

Fishing Catches

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many tonnes of fish have been landed in each of the last three years in Brixham; what is the estimated value of the catch; and if he will make a statement; [1070]

Mr. Baldry: The quantity and value of recorded landings by UK registered and licensed vessels into Brixham for the last three years are:

Year	*Quantity (thousand tonnes liveweight)*	*Value (£ million)*
1993	9.0	13.8
1994	9.2	14.8
1995	10.3	17.7

Decommissioning

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* beam trawlers and *(b)* other fishing vessels have been decommissioned in each of the last three years (i) nationally and (ii) in Brixham, south Devon; and how many fishing vessels he expects to be decommissioned in 1997. [1069]

Mr. Baldry: A total of 436 vessels were decommissioned under the 1993, 1994 and 1995 decommissioning schemes. Eighteen of these were beam trawlers. Fourteen vessels with Brixham as their administrative port have been decommissioned, none of which was a beam trawler. Definitive results for the 1996 scheme are not yet available as applicants have until 30 November to decommission their vessels. Decommissioning is an entirely voluntary scheme and I am unable to estimate the number of vessels which might be decommissioned under the 1997 scheme.

Animal Exports

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* sheep and *(b)* pigs were rejected as unfit to travel prior to export in each of July, August and September; and if he will make a statement. [798]

Mrs. Browning: Animals rejected as unfit for transport prior to export:

	July	*August*	*September*
Sheep	379	574	607
Pigs	62	27	42

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many consignments of live lambs and sheep have been exported since 5 July to each of the following destinations as declared under the terms of the Welfare of Animals During Transport Order 1994, *(a)* Loker in Belgium, *(b)* Zuilichem in the Netherlands, *(c)* Elst in the Netherlands, *(d)* Morkhoven in Belgium and *(e)* Pervijze in Belgium; and how many animals in total have been exported to each of the above destinations since 5 July. [797]

Mrs. Browning: Information gathered by the Ministry's staff monitoring exports at Dover during July, August and September shows:

	Animals	*Consignments*
Loker	56,286	110
Zuilichem	74,172	111
Elst	5,158	8
Morkhoven	21,874	38
Pervijze	5,782	7

Fishing Methods

Mr. David Porter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to have available for publication the results of the experiment his Department is conducting into trialing old fishing methods using the restored fishing smack Excelsior; and if he will make a statement. [177]

Mr. Baldry: The Excelsior trials have been postponed because she is undergoing a refit.

Plaice Quota

Mr. David Porter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has received from his officials about the fishing industry at Lowestoft about how long the 1996 plaice quota will last; and what steps he is taking to swap quotas elsewhere for plaice quota for Lowestoft until the end of 1996. [178]

Mr. Baldry: Quota allocations for North sea plaice and other stocks are issued annually to individual groups within the fleet, including fish producers' organisations, which are responsible for managing these allocations on behalf of their members. The rate of quota uptake will vary between different groups, reflecting factors such as the availability of fish and commercial decisions by the groups and their members. As at 24 October 1996, the Lowestoft Fish Producers' Organisation had taken 87.5 per cent. of its North sea plaice allocation for 1996, compared with 80.1 per cent. for the UK as a whole. It is open to the Lowestoft PO to seek to swap quota with other groups in order to obtain additional plaice, should the PO judge this to be necessary.

Mr. Porter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on why 360 tonnes of North sea plaice received from Norway in September were swapped with the Netherlands for other species; what consultations were undertaken with the fishing industry; and how the swap was administered under the 1996 quota management rules. [179]

Mr. Baldry: Earlier this year, the Commission secured an extra 1,250 tonnes of North sea plaice from Norway in exchange for 10,000 tonnes of EU blue whiting from areas Vb, VI and VII. The UK share of the extra plaice was some 360 tonnes. After careful consideration, and having regard to the 1996 quota management rules, it was decided to use the additional plaice to acquire a range of other stocks from the Netherlands. Specific consultation with the fishing industry was not necessary. The stocks obtained have been distributed proportionately to industry except for North area sole which is being allocated to the under-10m fleet in order to ensure that the fishery remains open into the autumn, having been closed for the first three months of 1996.

HEALTH

Health Authority Chairmen (Credit Cards)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many chairmen of NHS health authorities have been provided with regional corporate credit cards since 1993. [444]

Mr. Malone: Three chairmen of the former regional health authorities are known to have been issued with corporate credit cards by their authorities.

NHS Dentists' Pay

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in what location the administration of NHS dentists' pay is handled. [448]

Mr. Malone: National health service dentists' fees in England are administered and paid by the Dental Practice Board, Eastbourne.

Northern and Yorkshire Region

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arbitration on contracts between purchasers and providers has taken place in the Northern and Yorkshire health region since 1 April; which authorities and trusts were involved; when the arbitration guidance was issued and to which financial year it referred. [458]

Mr. Malone: One formal contract arbitration has taken place in Northern and Yorkshire region since 1 April 1996, between Leeds health authority and United Leeds Teaching Hospitals national health service trust.

For 1996–97, NHS executive Northern and Yorkshire sent guidance on contract arbitration to all health authorities and trusts in the Northern and Yorkshire region on 16 February 1996.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will amend the conditions for free prescriptions to include haemophiliacs whose spouses are in employment; and if he will make a statement. [140]

Mr. Malone: There are no plans to extend the groups entitled to free prescriptions to include any other group on the basis of either medical condition or income.

NHS Hospitality

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what authority members of NHS health authorities may provide themselves with free meals when attending meetings. [429]

Mr. Horam: National health service bodies are required to develop their own guidelines on the use of hospitality budgets, to ensure that such spending is not excessive and justifiable to the public and auditors.

Mental Health

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will seek to persuade the Royal College of Psychiatrists to act on the recommendation of the inquiry into the care and aftercare of Miss Sharon Campbell, Cm 440, 1988, and publish a document on good practice for discharge and aftercare procedures, after seeking a consensus with bodies representing nursing, social work, general practitioners, psychology and occupational therapy. [1030]

Mr. Burns: I refer the hon. Member to the reply the then Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Bowis), gave on 11 June 1996, *Official Report*, columns *109–10*.

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of their total budget is spent on mental health by each health authority. [263]

Mr. Burns: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Arachnoiditis

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research the NHS is undertaking into the causes of arachnoiditis. [795]

Mr. Horam: No such research has been commissioned centrally.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Arachnoiditis Trust about the difficulties that sufferers from arachnoiditis experience in seeking information about their condition from health authorities. [794]

Mr. Horam: None.

Social Workers

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many approved social workers have been registered for each of the last seven years. [260]

Mr. Burns: The information requested is not held centrally. The Department collected partial information for September 1993, which indicated there were then around 4,750 approved social workers in England. Data for England and Wales for 1994 and 1995 are given in the 1995 edition of the "Social Services Workforce Analysis" published by the Local Government Management Board on the basis of surveys it conducted. Copies of this document will be placed in the Library.

Supervised Discharges

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are on *(a)* supervised discharge and *(b)* supervision registers. [261]

Mr. Burns: Centrally held statistical returns on supervised discharge are incomplete and publication at this stage would be misleading. The number of people on supervision registers is about 3,500.

NHS Funding

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the percentage capitation target according to the weighted capitation allocation formula of each health authority. [262]

Mr. Horam: A table showing final 1996–97 health authority distance from targets in percentage terms has been placed in the Library.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the implications for his policy on bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease of the latest medical findings of Professor John Collinge. [841]

Mr. Horam: There are no implications for our policy on bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in Professor Collinge's latest findings.

Professor Collinge has provided the first experimental evidence to support the view that there may be a link between bovine spongiform encephalopathy and new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease—nvCJD. All the measures we have taken since 1989 to protect public health have been taken on the assumption that exposure to BSE could cause disease in humans and these latest findings do not change that.

Challenge Fund

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authorities which received challenge fund money, giving the amount. [264]

Mr. Burns: The table shows all health authorities which have been awarded funds.

Health authorities who have been awarded funds from the challenge fund

	£ thousand
Avon	
Out of Hours Crisis Service	350
Inner City Day Resource Service	120
Barnet	
Dual Registered Home	224
Birmingham	
Afro Caribbean CMHT project	305
Assertive Outreach team	105
Brent and Harrow	
Crisis Intervention Service (Brent)	114
Crisis Intervention Service (Harrow)	114
Harefield Lodge Rehabilitation Service	75
Camden and Islington	
Crisis Support Service	167
Psychiatric Liaison Service	99
East London and Newham	
Community services package	692
City	
Enhancing Forensic Services	177
East Sussex	
Rapid Response Service	162
Home Support Service	67
Isle of Wight	
Crisis Intervention Service (+ 24 hour beds)	305
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	
High Support Housing	705
Low Secure Move-on	331
Haven Care	382
Leeds	
24-hour support accommodation	136
Assertive outreach team	158
Community Rehabilitation Unit	160
Leicestershire	
Respecified 24 hour unit	20
Supported accommodation	25
Structured activity scheme	50
Community integration scheme	45
Information officer	10
Liverpool	
Home Support scheme	166
CMHT extended service	179
Extended Day Hospital	130
Manchester	
North Manchester community services	150
Central Manchester intensive community service	180
South Manchester community services	250
Asian services	25

Cancelled Operations

Ms Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library figures by health authority of the number of operations cancelled on the day of, or the day after, admission to hospital and the number of those patients not readmitted within a month for the first quarter of 1995–96. [265]

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations were cancelled in *(a)* each district health authority and *(b)* each region on the day of or day after admission to hospital; and how many of those patients were not readmitted within a month, for the first quarter of 1996. [981]

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations were cancelled on the day of admission or after admission to hospital by each health authority in each of the first two quarters of 1996 and in each quarter of 1995 and 1994. [1127]

Mr. Horam: The latest information has been placed in the Library.

Ian Greer Associates

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital trusts have made payments to Ian Greer Associates; and what was the value of these payments. [1121]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

TRANSPORT

Helicopter and Aircraft Noise

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the redress in law available to people who are disturbed by low-flying helicopters in the early hours of the morning when the helicopters were operating under permission issued by the Civil Aviation Authority for filming purposes. [3]

Mr. Bowis: Under section 76 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, no action may lie in respect of trespass or nuisance because of overflight, provided that the conditions referred to in section 76(1) have been duly complied with. Subsection (2) sets out the circumstances under which damages in respect of material loss or damage may be recoverable. Legislation similar to section 76 has been in force since the early days of aviation, and comparable laws exist in other countries.

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to make changes to section 76 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982. [1]

Mr. Bowis: No.

Vehicle Registration Office (Stoke-on-Trent)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the implications for people in north Staffordshire of the closure of the Stoke-on-Trent vehicle registration office; and if he will reconsider his decision. [43]

Mr. Bowis: The decision to close Stoke-on-Trent vehicle registration office was taken following a detailed review of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's need for local offices. It was concluded that future needs could be met by a network of 41 offices giving customers an accessible local service within about 30 miles. This reduction will enable the agency to make significant efficiency savings on running costs.

It also takes account of a reduction in work load which will accrue from a project which enable dealers to register and licence new cars without having to visit a vehicle registration office so frequently.

Heathrow Airport

Mr. Jessel: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the average daily number of takeoffs and landings at Heathrow airport in the first nine months of 1996; what was the average daily number of night flights in the same period; and what were the corresponding figures for the first nine months of 1995. [87]

Mr Bowis: I understand from National Air Traffic Services that the average daily number of takeoffs and landings at Heathrow airport in the first nine months of 1996 was 1,210 (605 arrivals and departures each) compared with 1,198 (599 arrivals and departures each) in 1995. The average daily number of night flights (2300 to 0700 hours local time) in the time period was 51 (43 arrivals and eight departures) in 1996, compared with 54 (45 arrivals and nine departures) in 1995. Of these, 15 (14 arrivals and one departure) were in the night quota period (2300 to 0600), compared with 16 (15 arrivals and one departure) in 1995.

Shipping Register

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the number of ships on the British register for each of the last 10 years. [24]

Mr. Bowis: The number of United Kingdom registered trading vessels of 500 gross tons and over for the last 10 years are listed in table 3.5 of "Merchant Fleet Statistics 1995". The information is as follows:

United Kingdom registered trading vessels 500 gross tons or over 31 December 1986 to 31 December 1995

Tonnage in thousand

	Number	*Gross tonnage*	*Deadweight tonnage*
1986	482	7,024	10,349
1987	410	4,877	6,234
1988	375	4,532	5,619
1989	361	4,236	5,193
1990	337	3,697	4,213
1991	321	3,433	3,812
1992	291	3,329	3,749
1993	273	3,327	3,722
1994	282	3,637	3,889
1995	271	3,729	3,981

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action he has undertaken to increase the number of ships on the British register; and if he will make a statement. [23]

Mr. Bowis: The Government have adopted a range of targeted measures to improve the attractiveness of the Red Ensign. These have included: simplification of registration and other technical procedures; provision of substantial assistance for seafarer training; liberalisation of outdated officer nationality requirements; and the introduction of roll-over tax relief for replacing aging tonnage.

Highways Agency Staff

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many senior staff in the Highways Agency have taken early retirement in each of the last five years. [58]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question asking how many senior staff in the Highways Agency have taken early retirement in each of the last five years.

The numbers are as follows:

1992: Nil

1993: Nil

1994: 2

1995: 7

1996: 2.

Jubilee Line Extension

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the original budget for the Jubilee line extension; and what is his Department's latest estimate of the cost. [201]

Mr. Bowis: In 1993, the budget for the construction of the Jubilee line extension, together with the upgrading of the existing Jubilee line, was approximately £2.1 billion at outturn prices.

I understand that London Transport now estimates that the final outturn cost will be approximately £2.6 billion.

These figures include the impact of inflation.

Driving Tests

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action he is taking to reduce the waiting times for driving tests. [18]

Mr. Bowis: The Driving Standards Agency has recruited some 170 contract examiners and delayed the planned retirement of existing examiners. The agency has targeted those centres where demand is greatest and has made more tests available on Saturday and weekday evenings.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimates he has made of the current incidence of impersonation in respect of driving test. [17]

Mr. Bowis: Since 1 January 1996, some 150 cases of possible candidate impersonation at the practical driving test have been reported to the police, although none of these cases has yet resulted in conviction. There have been no reported cases of suspected impersonations at the driving theory test.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take further action to enforce legislation that ensures that candidates undertaking driving tests are allowed to do so only after producing a signed driving licence. [16]

Mr. Bowis: Driving test candidates are required to present their signed driving licence at the beginning of their theory or practical driving test. When the licence is unsigned, the candidate must sign it before the test starts. From 1 March 1997, candidates will be required to produce photographic identification with their licence at both theory and practical tests.

Motorways (Slow Vehicles)

Mr. William O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport at what speed vehicles are classified as slow moving on motorways; and if he will make a statement. [835]

Mr. Watts: As there is no minimum speed limit on motorways, there is no specified speed at which vehicles are classified as slow moving. However, vehicles must be able to attain a speed of 25 mph when unladen and not drawing a trailer before being permitted to use motorways. Motorists may be prosecuted if they drive in an inconsiderate, careless or dangerous manner.

Mr. O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what guidelines he has issued to the police for cautioning drivers on motorways for travelling too slowly. [834]

Mr. Watts: None. Individual chief officers of police are responsible for the policing of motorways in their respective areas.

Rail Safety

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for transport what is his policy regarding the release of information relating to matters affecting rail safety which are of public concern. [115]

Mr. Watts: The Department of Transport, the Health and Safety Commission and the Health and Safety Executive's railway inspectorate's policy is to make information on railway safety available, in line with the code of practice on access to Government information.

Comprehensive information on railway safety is published in Her Majesty's railway inspectorate's annual report on the safety record of the railways in Great Britain.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many railway passengers riding in *(a)* mark I carriages and *(b)* carriages of later design and manufacture were killed in train accidents as defined by Her Majesty's chief inspector of railways in 1986 and in each year since then. [762]

Mr. Watts: The number of passengers killed, in mark I rolling stock and carriages of later design, in train accidents since 1986 is set out in the following table:

	Mark I	*Later design*
1986	8	—
1987	3	—
1988	34	—
1989	6	—
1990	0	—
1991	4	—
1992	0	—
1993	0	—
1994	3	—
1995	0	1
Total	58	1

Working Hours

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will lift the exemptions relating to transport workers to allow them to comply with EC regulations limiting the working week to 48 hours; and if he will make a statement. [21]

Mr. Watts: Article 1(3) of the working time directive states that the directive shall apply to all sectors of activity "with the exception of air, rail, road, sea, inland waterway and lake transport, sea fishing, other work at sea and the activities of doctors in training."

The European Commission is considering bringing forward proposals for working time controls in the sectors excluded from the directive. However, the Government are challenging the directive in the European Court of Justice on the ground that it is not a genuine health and safety measure and should not, therefore, have been adopted under article 118A of the treaty, and remain opposed to any extension of its provisions to the excluded sectors.

Traffic Growth

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the latest available figures for the average daily traffic flow and the annual rate of traffic growth for *(a)* motorways, *(b)* urban non-motorway trunk roads, *(c)* rural non-motorway trunk roads, *(d)* urban principal roads, *(e)* rural principal roads, *(f)* urban classified roads, *(g)* rural classified roads, *(h)* urban unclassified roads and *(i)* rural unclassified roads. [241]

Mr. Watts: The estimated average daily motor vehicle flow, measured in thousand vehicles per day, for Great Britain in 1995 is:

Motorway: 60 9
Trunk built-up: 19.2
Trunk non-built-up: 15.5
Principal built-up: 15.0
Principal non-built-up: 7.2
Minor: 1.4.

The estimated annual rate of traffic growth in 1995 for Great Britain by road class is:

Motorway: 6.3 per cent.
Trunk built-up: 9.5 per cent.
Trunk non-built-up: 2.5 per cent.
Principal built-up: –0.2 per cent.
Principal non-built-up: 1.9 per cent.
Minor: 1.6 per cent.

Source:
National Traffic Census.

The figures provided have been derived from the national traffic census, the results of which are published in the transport statistics report "Road Traffic Statistics Great Britain: 1996 Edition".

For the purposes of the national traffic census, the terms built-up/non-built-up are used for the urban/rural distinction. Built-up roads are defined as those with a speed limit of 40 mph or less.

Air Traffic Control

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the amount spent on *(a)* lawyers, *(b)* accountants, *(c)* consultants and *(d)* other professionals in consultation relating to privatisation of National Air Traffic Services in the last three months. [12]

Mr. Bowis: The Department of Transport spent about £4,000, plus VAT, on legal fees in connection with this issue, with no expenditure under the other sub–headings. In addition, the Civil Aviation Authority spent approximately £125,000, plus VAT, on other consultants.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is his policy in respect of a two-centre air-traffic control strategy. [59]

Mr. Bowis: In air traffic control matters, the Government are advised by the Civil Aviation Authority, which is the competent national body. The strategy of concentrating en route air traffic control services on two main centres was drawn up by National Air Traffic Services, now a wholly owned subsidiary of the CAA, early in the 1990s and the Government have supported the policy since then. The CAA is now reviewing the assumptions underlying the two–centre strategy in the light of technological and other developments and we await its recommendations.

Traffic Congestion Maps

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will now update the maps of current congestion, and projection of future congestion which were placed in the Library in February and include detailed forecasts of congestion for trunk roads in London, and key links on the motorway network in and around the capital. [1072]

Mr. Watts: I refer the hon. Member to my reply to the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner), *Official Report*, columns *1100–101*.

Trust Ports (Privatisation)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the amount spent by his Department on *(a)* accountants, *(b)* consultants, *(c)* lawyers and *(d)* other professionals in relation to the privatisation of the trust ports. [69]

Mr. Bowis: Spending for the six trust ports already privatised under the Ports Act 1991 and the spending to date on the prospective privatisation of the ports of Tyne and Ipswich, are as follows:

	£
(a) accountants	1,101,768
(b) consultants	nothing in addition to sums shown for a, c and d
(c) lawyers	8,817
(d) other professionals	38,295

Electric Power-assisted Bicycles

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he made of the impact of departmental proposals for relaxing the definitions of vehicles to exclude electric power-assisted bicycles on the figures for *(a)* fatalities and *(b)* injuries from road accidents; and what account he took of studies conducted by the Transport Research Laboratory (i) on his behalf and (ii) for any other agency or body. [1013]

Mr. Bowis: Road accidents involving electric power-assisted bicycles are currently collected in the road accident data reporting system, but are not separately identifiable from bicycles in general. Accidents involving electric power-assisted bicycles will continue to be collected even if there is a change of vehicle definition. The Department has received the Transport Research Laboratory report which is being considered by a working group of Government Department and manufacturing representatives. After consideration by the working group, any restrictions proposed will be taken into account.

Strategic Rail Network

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport to what extent his Department will be involved in future decisions about the development of the strategic rail network, with special reference to the use of the Tonbridge-Redhill-Clapham route for freight between London and the channel tunnel and the upgrading of the west coast main line to accommodate piggyback traffic. [1049]

Mr. Watts: Once Railfreight Distribution—the channel tunnel freight business—is in the private sector, the privatisation of BR's freight operations will have been completed and it will be for Railtrack, in consultation with the freight train operating companies, to weigh up the opportunities for further investment in the network. The Government will continue to consider applications for freight grants on their merits, including any related to piggyback traffic. Decisions on future investment in the network south of London to accommodate channel tunnel freight trains will be a matter for Railtrack and the new owners of RFD.

M66

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is his estimate of the delay in starting work on the final contract for construction of the M66 motorway resulting from the engineering difficulties encountered with building the A62 bridge. [969]

Mr. Watts: None.

M65–M6 Link

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the M65–M6 link is due to be completed; and what estimate he has made of traffic flows at Colne on completion of the link. [892]

Mr. Watts: The Blackburn southern bypass is expected to be complete in November 1997. It is expected that traffic on the M65 will rise by just over 10 per cent. when

the road is complete. It is possible that this increase will extend to the east of Blackburn, but no specific estimates for traffic flows at Colne have been made.

Buses

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what current proposals from the European Commission purport to change the standards that apply to buses. [200]

Mr. Bowis: There are no current European Commission proposals affecting the standards that apply to UK buses, but we expect a Commission proposal for a type approval directive shortly.

Local Transport Capital Expenditure

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each eligible local authority in England the bids made for local transport capital expenditure approval under the categories *(a)* major highway schemes eligible for transport supplementary grant, *(b)* major highway scheme not TSG eligible, *(c)* structural maintenance on carriageways, *(d)* structural maintenance on bridges, *(e)* major public transport projects, *(f)* minor works: packages, *(g)* minor works: non packages, *(h)* minor works: local safety schemes and *(i)* total bids. [242]

Mr. Watts: The bids for 1997–98 are given in the table.

Transport policy and programme submissions 1997–98 Local authority bid for local transport capital expenditure

Authority	(a) Maj h[1]	(b) maj n[2]	(c) sm rds[3]	(d) sm bdg[4]	(e) maj t[5]	(f) mw pk[6]	(g) mw npk[7]	(h) mw lss[8]	(i) total[9]
City of London	0	0	0	1,038	0	0	975	0	2,013
Barking	0	0	226	167	0	0	565	500	1,458
Barnet	0	0	500	420	0	0	1,254	1,365	3,539
Bexley	4,386	0	3,100	675	0	0	3,002	800	11,963
Brent	0	0	1,123	1,852	0	500	6,545	2,750	12,770
Bromley	400	15	680	310	0	13,807	937	250	16,399
Camden	0	0	2,090	3,540	0	0	2,739	1,128	9,497
Croydon	0	0	1,622	325	0	400	2,923	1,293	6,563
Ealing	50	0	183	200	0	1,220	1,560	600	3,813
Enfield	694	0	2,876	2,675	0	0	809	1,059	8,113
Greenwich	8,171	0	627	717	0	0	1,625	803	11,943
Hackney	0	0	497	1,631	0	0	632	809	3,596
Hammersmith	0	0	955	1,195	0	1,791	1,400	700	6,041
Haringey	1,360	0	597	1,405	0	0	2,526	425	6,313
Harrow	4,697	0	570	1,150	0	0	1,402	350	8,169
Havering	0	0	148	1,492	0	0	2,138	438	4,216
Hillingdon	893	0	394	1,720	0	0	784	412	4,173
Hounslow	990	0	1,595	1,805	0	450	2,435	723	7,998
Islington	0	0	1,671	733	0	0	5,638	943	8,985
Kensington	1,140	0	301	746	0	0	1,904	640	4,731
Kingston	11,733	0	1,000	5,736	0	0	1,414	384	20,267
Lambeth	400	0	1,829	814	0	0	3,725	390	7,158
Lewisham	0	0	885	802	0	0	3,118	750	5,555
Merton	44	0	200	180	0	0	3,358	1,080	4,862
Newham	860	1,559	837	4,714	0	0	1,717	810	10,497
Redbridge	0	0	954	150	0	0	1,882	545	3,531
Richmond	0	0	805	285	0	2,265	977	288	4,620
Southwark	269	0	1,500	1,405	0	0	1,759	500	5,433
Sutton	400	0	215	1,400	0	0	2,819	1,010	5,844
Tower Hamlets	995	0	0	17	0	0	2,576	564	4,152
Waltham FOrest	842	0	400	1,221	0	450	1,375	650	4,938
Wandsworth	0	0	400	975	0	0	4,834	1,145	7,354
Westminster	1,000	2,047	282	5,986	0	0	2,854	813	12,982
Isle of Wight	0	0	900	560	0	0	3,200	420	5,080
Bath and North East Somerset	1,857	0	1,176	1,636	1,270	2,057	0	202	8,198
Bristol	3,412	0	550	2,307	250	3,158	0	485	10,162
North Somerset	1,258	0	760	474	0	1,543	0	358	4,393
South Gloucestershire	9,510	0	730	548	250	2,678	0	345	14,061
Hartlepool	3,308	0	470	45	0	453	0	90	4,366
Middlesbrough	0	0	337	1,050	0	2,110	0	670	4,167
Redcar and Cleveland	3,047	0	1,312	680	0	1,815	0	315	7,169
Stockton	7,549	0	794	702	0	796	0	200	10,041
East Riding	1,243	0	2,301	692	0	200	896	258	5,590
Hull	3,090	430	300	1,000	0	2,590	0	400	7,810
North East Lincoln	6,020	0	1,500	250	0	0	1,396	309	9,448
North Lincoln	0	0	1,050	848	0	0	660	146	2,704
York	977	0	510	344	0	1,025	0	200	3,056
Luton	1,762	0	588	460	2,300	1,465	0	1,000	7,575
Milton Keynes	238	0	500	424	0	0	1,407	300	2,869
Derby	0	0	286	411	0	1,345	150	324	2,516
Bournemouth	0	0	75	297	0	1,290	307	312	2,281
Poole	0	0	300	135	0	1,590	300	95	2,420
Darlington	0	2,280	200	270	0	537	120	180	3,587
Brighton and Hove	1,810	0	1,180	695	0	1,570	280	597	6,132
Portsmouth	0	0	1,390	1,647	0	1,173	102	427	4,739

Transport policy and programme submissions 1997–98 Local authority bid for local transport capital expenditure

Authority	(a) Maj h[1]	(b) maj n[2]	(c) sm rds[3]	(d) sm bdg[4]	(e) maj t[5]	(f) mw pk[6]	(g) mw npk[7]	(h) mw lss[8]	(i) total[9]
South Hampton	2,506	1,100	1,750	1,296	0	2,555	0	250	9,457
Leicester City	0	0	450	1,733	0	0	0	755	2,938
Rutland	184	0	202	142	0	0	177	74	779
Stoke on Trent	1,200	0	2,100	1,000	0	2,350	0	500	7,150
Thamesdown	0	0	516	612	0	1,627	703	397	3,855
Bolton	0	0	1,215	3,299	0	1,380	0	527	6,421
Bury	0	0	1,050	1,450	0	2,133	30	378	5,041
Manchester	6,415	0	2,041	3,461	0	9,563	1,897	1,450	24,827
Oldham	2,000	0	1,478	2,505	0	1,794	0	814	8,591
Rochdale	0	0	726	1,078	0	1,220	0	281	3,305
Salford	9,045	0	1,526	1,399	0	2,055	0	873	14,898
Stockport	2,436	0	1,906	3,143	0	1,631	0	814	9,930
Tameside	2,130	0	1,305	1,065	0	1,679	0	350	6,529
Trafford	10,747	0	914	1,671	0	1,110	2,000	414	16,856
Wigan	700	0	1,260	823	0	2,778	0	230	5,691
Knowsley	3,200	0	4,150	398	0	2,990	0	400	11,138
Liverpool	1,900	0	2,083	1,947	0	4,900	0	1,259	12,089
St. Helens	1,623	0	350	1,353	0	2,019	0	200	5,545
Sefton	2,500	0	542	1,235	0	3,064	0	470	7,811
Wirral	270	0	594	935	0	2,545	0	600	4,944
Barnsley	17,411	0	2,025	1,637	0	2,156	808	400	24,437
Doncaster	9,313	0	1,304	999	450	2,990	0	640	15,696
Rotherham	850	0	1,370	1,489	0	970	1,597	185	6,461
Sheffield	5,972	0	3,925	5,188	150	4,685	6,270	510	26,700
Gateshead	0	0	955	1,132	0	1,320	0	400	3,807
Newcastle	8,957	0	2,503	3,103	0	2,304	0	300	17,167
North Tyneside	1,070	0	1,500	692	0	1,926	2,520	300	8,008
South Tyneside	100	0	353	1,279	0	1,091	0	398	3,221
Sunderland	850	0	2,485	900	100	1,860	43	777	7,015
Birmingham	8,420	1,748	3,948	3,980	0	0	0	0	18,096
Coventry	5,241	0	520	500	0	0	0	0	6,261
Dudley	20,200	0	1,718	1,970	0	0	0	0	23,888
Sandwell	1,703	0	2,104	4,117	0	0	0	0	7,924
Solihull	400	0	300	155	0	0	0	0	855
Walsall	2,558	0	3,060	3,780	0	0	0	0	9,938
Wolverhampton	6,228	0	4,508	3,729	0	0	0	0	14,465
Bradford	2,940	0	2,500	9,513	0	3,883	0	1,000	19,836
Calderdale	100	0	3,655	1,713	796	1,437	150	350	8,201
Kirklees	1,800	0	3,898	1,400	50	1,986	0	1,005	10,139
Leeds	21,009	0	3,000	4,732	0	5,353	8,313	1,375	43,782
Wakefield	4,278	8	2,026	1,800	0	1,741	2,610	615	13,078
West Midland Joint	0	0	0	0	0	36,051	0	4,629	40,680
Bedfordshire	3,400	0	1,537	3,248	10	3,151	1,635	1,245	14,226
Berkshire	5,591	0	2,105	2,201	0	3,008	4,154	1,984	19,043
Buckinghamshire	12,937	0	1,600	1,985	0	590	3,115	931	21,158
Cambridgeshire	3,650	0	3,990	5,315	0	4,020	2,385	3,200	22,560
Cheshire	19,349	1,735	8,990	7,657	0	793	2,900	1,190	42,614
Cornwall	6,326	0	3,219	4,120	0	788	3,107	1,143	18,703
Cumbria	2,320	0	2,500	2,500	0	1,105	2,170	500	11,095
Derbyshire	210	0	1,903	2,081	5,903	315	3,551	1,706	15,669
Devon	3,011	1,249	6,055	6,260	0	4,744	5,993	1,717	29,029
Dorset	5,110	0	670	2,133	0	180	3,463	29	11,585
Durham	2,869	2,524	1,930	4,140	0	1,559	2,691	930	16,643
East Sussex	10,632	0	3,015	3,283	0	1,040	3,199	596	21,765
Essex	5,749	182	5,500	5,794	0	6,546	7,736	4,074	35,581
Gloucestershire	–667	0	3,317	2,924	0	2,866	1,892	1,071	11,403
Hampshire	12,490	1,110	8,669	2,375	0	3,499	2,590	2,000	32,733
Herefordshire/Worcestershire	13,628	0	4,050	2,432	0	1,813	2,703	589	25,215
Hertfordshire	5,763	0	5,000	4,750	0	2,932	6,675	2,500	27,620
Kent	89,250	1,000	10,000	5,945	0	2,087	4,392	1,956	114,630
Lancashire	5,641	300	3,600	3,606	1,187	4,602	4,146	2,732	25,814
Leicestershire	6,115	0	2,160	743	3,243	5,920	1,597	1,124	20,902
Lincolnshire	5,844	0	3,150	3,573	0	1,300	4,396	750	19,013
Norfolk	3,688	22	11,026	7,166	0	6,639	3,787	2,472	34,800
Northamptonshire	1,318	31	4,200	2,140	0	1,135	1,350	1,500	11,674
Northumberland	3,800	0	5,000	5,000	0	0	2,335	1,000	17,135
North Yorkshire	7,118	0	9,713	6,600	0	842	3,167	1,884	29,324
Nottinghamshire	3,553	166	3,749	4,429	4,353	3,989	2,579	1,550	24,368
Oxfordshire	1,426	0	2,185	1,701	0	2,842	2,315	2,801	13,270
Shropshire	6,281	0	3,859	2,208	0	2,702	2,145	551	17,746
Somerset	4,676	870	2,750	4,371	0	30	3,160	992	16,849
Staffordshire	17,914	0	6,970	5,000	0	2,547	5,144	800	38,375
Suffolk	1,395	800	5,000	5,000	0	5,600	6,611	1,380	25,786
Surrey	8,210	0	10,319	7,555	0	2,636	5,090	9,469	43,279
Warwickshire	579	0	3,190	4,566	0	1,631	2,090	1,601	13,657
West Sussex	1,844	2,138	2,121	757	0	868	3,986	1,179	12,893

Transport policy and programme submissions 1997–98 Local authority bid for local transport capital expenditure

Authority	(a) Maj h[1]	(b) maj n[2]	(c) sm rds[3]	(d) sm bdg[4]	(e) maj t[5]	(f) mw pk[6]	(g) mw npk[7]	(h) mw lss[8]	(i) total[9]
Wiltshire	1,638	0	2,962	3,240	0	3,314	1,572	1,008	13,734
Greater Manchester PTE	0	0	0	0	16,467	13,730	0	0	30,197
Mersey PTE	0	0	0	0	6,225	17,903	5,289	0	29,417
South Yorkshire PTE	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,150	0	1,150
Tyne and Wear PTE	0	0	0	0	2,207	1,965	740	0	4,912
West Midlands PTE	0	0	0	0	48,581	0	0	0	48,581
West Yorkshire PTE	0	0	0	0	5,000	2,170	330	0	7,500
Totals	533,289	21,314	276,090	284,007	98,792	288,825	237,440	116,624	1,856,381

[1] maj h = Bid for major highway schemes eligible for TSG.
[2] maj n = Bid for major highway schemes not eligible for TSG.
[3] sm rds = Bid for structural maintenance on carriageways.
[4] sm bdg = Bid for assessment, strengthening and other structural maintenance on bridges.
[5] maj t = Bid for major public transport projects.
[6] mw pk = Bid for minor works: packages (highways and public transport).
[7] mw npk = Bid for minor works: non-package (highways and public transport).
[8] mw lss = Bid for minor works: local safety schemes.
[9] total = Total bids.

New En Route Centre, Swanwick

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what compensation will be payable to the Civil Aviation Authority by the NERC contractors as a result of the delays to the project to build the new en route centre at Swanwick; and if he will make a statement; [171]

(2) what is his assessment of the level of risk associated with the remedial measures proposed by the contractors on the new en route centre at Swanwick; and what are his contingency plans should the project fail. [169]

Mr. Bill Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when and at what level of functionality the Civil Aviation Authority will determine what penalties are to be levied on the NERC contractor. [250]

Mr. Bowis *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* I refer the hon. Members to my hon. Friend's reply of 24 June 1996, *Official Report*, column 29, to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody).

Mr. Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list hon. Members, senior officials and journalists who have visited the NERC in the last 18 months; and who invited them. [251]

Mr. Bowis *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* I have asked the chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority to write to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what will be the costs of upgrading and keeping in service the London air traffic control centre, including its military cell, until the new en route centre at Swanwick becomes operational; and if these costs will be borne by the NERC contractors. [168]

Mr. Bowis *[holding answer 18 October 1996]:* The NERC contractors are liable only for additional costs required to complete the Swanwick centre. The total cost to National Air Traffic Services of the delay in opening this centre will be in the order of £15 million; this includes the costs of upgrading the London air traffic control centre, but does not include the cost of the military cell as this is not due to move to NERC in the first phase.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Industrial Tribunals

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will give for each industrial tribunal region for each of the last three years the number of successful claims for *(a)* unfair dismissal and *(b)* redundancies from those employed under the single regeneration budget programme; and if he will give details of the awards made. [34]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The information requested is given in the tables.

Number of successful claims for (i) unfair dismissal; and (ii) redundancy payment
1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996

Region	Unfair dismissal	Redundancy payment
Bedford	300	118
Birmingham	228	120
Bristol	251	195
Cardiff	216	212
Leeds	420	186
London North	509	214
London South	411	181
Manchester	695	244
Newcastle	228	113
Nottingham	200	124
Southampton	345	156

1 April 1994 to 31 March 1995

Region	Unfair dismissal	Redundancy payment
Bedford	365	163
Birmingham	346	180
Bristol	243	164
Cardiff	194	249
Leeds	428	171
London North	509	190
London South	499	207
Manchester	729	352
Newcastle	249	183
Nottingham	271	166
Southampton	376	218

1 April 1993 to 31 March 1994

Region	Unfair dismissal	Redundancy payment
Bedford	504	302
Birmingham	529	230
Bristol	381	267
Cardiff	276	253
London North	469	243
London South	703	238
Manchester	814	376
Newcastle	379	201
Nottingham	430	217
Southampton	455	327

Breakdown of financial awards for unfair dismissal
1993–1994

Award in pounds	Basic	Per cent.	Basic and compensatory	Per cent.	Compensatory	Per cent.
1–99	83	4.44	18	0.87	26	1.06
100–149	90	4.81	27	1.01	47	1.92
150–199	91	4.87	39	1.45	60	2.46
200–299	173	9.26	88	3.32	108	4.42
300–399	185	10.43	85	3.17	82	3.36
400–499	189	10.11	86	3.17	75	3.07
500–749	292	15.61	176	6.56	172	7.04
750–999	184	9.84	148	3.32	122	4.99
1,000–1,499	181	9.67	237	8.84	219	8.96
1,500–1,999	118	6.31	165	6.15	187	6.84
2,000–2,499	72	3.85	179	8.88	145	5.94
2,500–2,999	62	2.78	155	5.78	149	6.1
3,000–3,999	78	4.17	242	9.03	195	7.98
4,000–4,999	44	2.35	188	7.01	147	6.02
5,000–5,999	18	0.96	138	5.15	138	5.65
6,000–6,999	10	0.63	131	4.88	105	4.3
7,000–7,999	0	0	98	3.66	63	3.4
8,000–8,999	0	0	81	3.02	80	3.27
9,000 and over	0	0	400	14.73	323	13.22
Total	1,870	100	2,681	100	2,443	100

1994–1995

Award in pounds	Basic	Per cent.	Basic and compensatory	Per cent.	Compensatory	Per cent.
1–99	72	4.65	8	0.38	17	0.9
100–149	57	3.68	18	0.85	35	1.85
150–199	59	3.81	20	0.94	30	1.59
200–299	117	7.56	68	3.2	83	4.4
300–399	108	6.98	52	2.45	62	3.29
400–499	131	8.47	54	2.54	61	3.23
500–749	263	17	146	6.87	148	7.84

1994–1995

Award in pounds	*Basic*	*Per cent.*	*Basic and compensatory*	*Per cent.*	*Compensatory*	*Per cent.*
750–999	161	10.41	119	5.6	107	5.67
1,000–1,499	204	13.19	210	9.89	168	8.9
1,500–1,999	117	7.56	153	7.2	134	7.1
2,000–2,499	55	3.56	131	6.17	121	6.41
2,500–2,999	51	3.3	129	6.07	84	4.45
3,000–3,999	58	3.75	182	8.57	165	8.74
4,000–4,999	30	1.94	159	7.49	128	6.78
5,000–5,999	24	1.55	111	5.23	96	5.09
6,000–6,999	9	0.58	93	4.38	69	3.66
7,000–7,999	3	0.19	68	3.2	61	3.23
8,000–8,999	3	0.19	62	2.92	42	2.23
9,000 and over	25	1.61	341	16.05	276	14.64
Total	1,547	100	2,124	100	1,887	100

1995–1996

Award in pounds	*Basic*	*Per cent.*	*Basic and compensatory*	*Per cent.*	*Compensatory*	*Per cent.*
1–99	61	4.47	12	0.66	21	1.39
100–149	62	4.54	20	1.14	22	1.45
150–199	56	4.1	28	1.59	36	2.37
200–299	130	9.52	57	3.24	70	4.62
300–399	108	7.91	45	2.56	39	2.57
400–499	100	7.32	35	1.99	54	3.56
500–749	202	14.79	120	6.82	116	7.65
750–999	154	11.27	108	6.14	97	6.4
1,000–1,499	172	12.59	205	11.65	159	10.49
1,500–1,999	105	7.69	147	8.35	126	8.31
2,000–2,499	57	4.17	130	7.39	108	7.12
2,500–2,999	32	2.34	84	4.77	65	4.29
3,000–3,999	53	3.88	161	9.15	126	8.31
4,000–4,999	46	3.37	104	5.91	78	5.15
5,000–5,999	23	1.68	104	5.91	75	4.95
6,000–6,999	4	0.29	72	4.09	52	3.43
7,000–7,999	1	0.07	50	2.84	44	2.9
8,000–8,999	0	0	44	2.5	38	2.51
9,000 and over	0	0	234	13.3	190	12.53
Total	1,366	100	1,760	100	1,516	100

Domestic Accidents

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make it his policy to require local authorities to liaise with other authorities and the voluntary sector to reduce accidents in the home; and if he will make a statement. [36]

Mr. John M. Taylor: There are no plans to require local authorities to liaise with other authorities and the voluntary sector. However, my Department makes a wide range of free home safety literature available to local authorities, and now also encourages them to carry forward home safety initiatives via a newsletter outlining the Department's home safety. My Department also provides a grant in aid to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which is used to support four regional home safety officers who work closely with accident prevention staff in local authorities.

Fireworks

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received concerning the deregulation of fireworks; and if he will make a statement. [80]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My Department receives many representations each firework season on many issues associated with fireworks including the availability of fireworks to the general public, the great variety and power of fireworks now available, the inappropriate use of fireworks and sales to the under-16s. For these reasons, I announced on 28 March 1996 that a review of the statutory and voluntary controls of fireworks would be undertaken. A discussion document was issued on 31 July and comments invited by 11 October. These are now being analysed.

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what guidance he has introduced in respect of fireworks and firework safety; and if he will make a statement. [31]

Mr. Taylor: My Department has provided 5 million safety advice leaflets aimed at those buying fireworks, distributed to the point of sale with the help of the fireworks industry, backed up by 5,000 posters at sites throughout the country. In addition, we have circulated thousands of leaflets to help display organisers and make shopkeepers aware of the law on selling fireworks. Finally, television publicity has been produced and a video on firework safety made available to primary schools on request.

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what restrictions relate to the sale of category 4 display fireworks; and if he will make a statement. [30]

Mr. Taylor: British standard 7114:1988 makes it clear that category 4 fireworks are not suitable for use by the general public and should carry a warning to that effect. The General Product Safety Regulations 1994, for which BS 7114 is a relevant standard for assessing the safety of fireworks, make it an offence to supply products, such as category 4 fireworks, to persons in whose hands they are likely to be unsafe.

Mahogany

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many cubic metres of Brazilian mahogany have been imported into the United Kingdom since the listing of the product in appendix III of the convention on international trade in endangered species. [828]

Mr. Nelson: Brazilian mahogany—Swietenia macrophylla—was listed in appendix III of CITES on 16 November 1995. Between then and 25 October 1996, CITES imports permits received and verified by HM Customs and Excise indicate that 10,141 cu m have been imported into the UK.

Wirral Business Link

Ms Eagle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the nature of the financial irregularities in respect of the sacking of the managing director of Wirral business link. [1059]

Mr. Page: Business links are independent organisations not owned by Government. The decision in relation to the dismissal of the chief executive of Wirral business link is a matter for its board of directors. I have, though, asked the board of directors to keep me closely informed of developments.

Ms Eagle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the sacking of the managing director of Wirral business link; and what were the reasons for this action. [1058]

Mr. Page: Business links are independent organisations not owned by Government. The personnel arrangements in Wirral Business Link are a matter for the board of directors.

Coal Production

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total production of coal in the United Kingdom from *(a)* deep mines *(b)* opencast mining for each quarter since the first quarter of 1992; and what forecasts relating to production his Department has evaluated. [877]

Mr. Page: The information requested is given as follows:

UK coal production: deep-mined

Thousand tonnes

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Quarter 1	18,404	15,515	8,870	8,397	9,006
Quarter 2	16,484	11,852	7,734	8,637	8,721
Quarter 3	15,129	11,527	7,290	8,674	—
Quarter 4	15,783	11,563	7,960	9,442	—
Total	65,800	50,457	31,854	35,150	—

UK coal production: opencast

Thousand tonnes

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Quarter 1	4,819	4,475	3,693	3,938	4,319
Quarter 2	4,743	4,053	4,114	4,173	4,021
Quarter 3	4,242	4,073	4,329	4,070	—
Quarter 4	4,384	4,406	4,669	4,188	—
Total	18,187	17,006	16,804	16,369	—

Source:
Energy Trends.

The Department of Trade and Industry does not make forecasts of coal production. However, Energy Paper 65, "Energy Projections for the UK" which was published by my Department in March 1995, suggested that by the year 2000 solid fuel demand would be around half its 1990 level. Although the report did not split this demand between imports and domestic production, most of the demand is expected to be met by domestic production.

Cosmetics Testing

Mr. Morley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many representations have been received by the Minister for Consumer Affairs relating to the recent campaign by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals against cosmetics testing on animals; and if he will make a statement. [796]

Mr. John M. Taylor: So far, I have received 2,100 representations to which my officials are responding.

I have written to the RSPCA informing it that the Government are fully committed to the cessation of animal testing, and fully support the use of non-animal alternatives, wherever possible.

Fishermen (Redundancy)

Mr. Steen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many fishermen have been made redundant in each of the last three years *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Brixham, south Devon; and what have been the equivalent figures as a percentage of total work force in other major industrial sectors. [1068]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Statistical tables of redundancies, including by industry, are published regularly in *Labour Market Trends*, formerly the *Employment Gazette*, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. Information specific to the Brixham area is not, however, available.

Outward Investment

Mr. Wareing: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the volume of United Kingdom outward investment in each year since 1979; and what percentage change this represented in each year. [479]

Mr. Greg Knight *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* Information on the volume of United Kingdom outward investment is not available. The level of outward investment, by value, is given in current prices in the following table.

United Kingdom outward investment

	Value (£ million, current prices)			*Percentage change on previous year*		
	Direct	*Portfolio*	*Total*	*Direct*	*Portfolio*	*Total*
1979	5,889	887	6,776			
1980	4,867	3,310	8,177	-17.4	273.2	20.7
1981	6,005	4,467	10,472	23.4	35.0	28.1
1982	4,091	7,565	11,656	-31.9	69.4	11.3
1983	5,417	7,350	12,767	32.4	-2.8	9.5
1984	6,042	9,755	15,797	11.5	32.7	23.7
1985	8,430	16,754	25,184	39.5	71.7	59.4
1986	11,649	22,288	33,937	38.2	33.0	34.8
1987	19,147	-5,324	13,823	64.4	n/a	-59.3
1988	20,863	11,209	32,072	9.0	n/a	132.0
1989	21,503	36,524	58,027	3.1	225.8	80.9
1990	10,490	17,206	27,696	-51.2	-52.9	-52.3
1991	9,056	29,157	38,213	-13.7	69.5	38.0
1992	10,850	27,346	38,196	19.8	-6.2	0.0
1993	17,026	84,828	101,854	56.9	210.2	166.7
1994	18,363	-17,968	395	7.9	n/a	-99.6
1995	25,546	40,327	65,873	39.1	n/a	16576.7

Source:

United Kingdom Balance of Payments, The Pink Book, Office for National Statistics.

Defence Diversification (Scotland)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what public expenditure has been invested in defence diversification in Scotland and the United Kingdom in the current year. [373]

Mr. Greg Knight: In the UK, defence diversification is addressed specifically through the European Community initiative, Konver. One hundred and thirty-six mecu, £113 million, from the European structural funds has been allocated to the UK and Gibraltar Konver II programme, which runs until 1999, having recently been extended by two years.

Up to the end of September, some £16.6 million in structural funds grants were approved in the UK this year, of this, £4.3 million is for Scotland. This figure will be fully matched by national public expenditure.

Scientific Institutions

Mr. Wareing: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy on the future of United Kingdom public sector scientific institutions. [480]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The Government's policy on the future of the public sector research establishments was set out in the Government response to the multi-departmental scrutiny of public sector research establishments, Cm 2991, which my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade presented to the Library of the House in September 1995. This detailed a range of measures to ensure that the research establishments are able to respond to the changing needs of their customers, and to maintain the reputation for excellence for which they are renowned.

The measures include a programme of prior options reviews of research establishments. My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade announced the timetable for these reviews in January 1996, and the initial results in May 1996. Further announcements will be made as decisions are taken. The intention is that the major part of the work should be completed by the end of December 1996.

Defence Exports (Indonesia)

Mr. Michael Brown: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what mechanisms the Government have put in place to ensure that defence and defence-related goods are not exported from the United Kingdom to Indonesia. [375]

Mr. Lang: The export of military, paramilitary, police and security goods is controlled under the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended, and as such require an export licence. Export licence applications are subject to careful scrutiny against established criteria and internationally agreed guidelines to which we are committed, together with other Government Departments.

These guidelines were placed in the Library of the House in July this year.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 30 October 1996

TREASURY

Fuel Duty

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue was raised from fuel duty in 1995–96; and how much revenue from fuel duty is estimated for each year to 2000 in *(a)* cash and *(b)* 1996–97 prices. [134]

Mr. Oppenheim: In 1995–96 the revenue raised from fuel duty was £15.7 billion. In the 1996 "Summer Economic Forecast" receipts for 1996–97 were forecast to be £17.5 billion. Forecasts for later years are not published.

Incomes

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the change in real personal disposable income each year since 1970 in the United Kingdom and each European Union state and in the United States of America and Japan. [1010]

Mr. Jack: The change in real personal disposal income each year since 1970 for all OECD countries can be calculated from figures available in various editions of "OECD National Accounts, Vol. II", which are available in the House of Commons Library.

ENVIRONMENT

Workplace Assaults

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many people were assaulted at work, by industry, for each of the last 10 years; and what plans the Government have to improve the protection of people at work from such attacks. [761]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995, amended with effect from 1 April 1996, now require serious injuries to people caused by non-consensual physical acts of violence, and arising out of or in connection with work, to be reported. The figures for such reported incidents will not be available until next year, when they will be published by the Health and Safety Executive.

The HSE has recently published new guidance for employers on dealing with violence at work, as well as producing sector specific guidance in areas of increased risk—these include retail, the health services, the education sector and banks and building societies.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the number of inspections carried out by Health and Safety Executive inspectors. [659]

Sir Paul Beresford: The following table shows the number of inspections carried out by Health and Safety Executive inspectors in each of the last 10 years.

Year	*Inspections*[1]
1986–87	164,098
1987–88	159,641
1988–89	159,550
1989–90	171,580
1990–91	169,346
1991–92[2]	175,070
1992–93	162,815
1993–94	157,032
1994–95	147,160
1995–96	124,869

[1] Inspections are planned preventive inspections by HSE's inspectorates, and site visits to monitor nuclear site licences by the nuclear safety division. They do not include reactive work such as investigation of accidents and complaints about workplace conditions.

[2] Figures for 1991–92 and beyond include inspections of the railway and offshore industries which became the responsibility of HSE on 3 December 1990 and 1 April 1991 respectively.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the number of enforcement notices issued by *(a)* the Health and Safety Executive's field operations division inspectorates and *(b)* local authority inspectors. [470]

Sir Paul Beresford: The total number of enforcement notices issued by HSE's field operations directorate and local authority inspectors between 1986–87 and 1994–95 is as follows:

Enforcement notices issued by field operations directorate

	Number of notices issued
1986–87	[1]9,374
1987–88	[1]11,158
1988–89	[1]11,054
1989–90	[2]11,857
1990–91	[2]12,653
1991–92	[2]12,330
1992–93	[2]11,825
1993–94	[2]10,516
1994–95	[2]10,639
1995–96	[3,4]8,674

[1] Combined number of notices issued by HM agricultural inspectorate and HM factory inspectorate. Source HSC annual report 1988–89.

[2] Number of notices issued by HSE's field operations division. Source Health and Safety Statistics 1994–95.

[3] Number of Notices issued by HSE's field operations division. Source Health and Safety Commission annual report 1995–96.

[4] Provisional.

Enforcement notices issued by local authority inspectors

	Number of notices issued
1986–87	8,100
1987–88	9,520
1988–89	10,070
1989–90	10,220
1990–91	13,030
1991–92	21,680
1992–93	26,980
1993–94	20,660
1994–95	11,790

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the number of field inspectors employed by the Health and Safety Executive, indicating the proportion of them with less than two years experience. [658]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information available is as follows for health and safety inspectors—factory, agricultural, quarries, mines and railways—working from area offices. Nuclear, offshore, and specialist inspectors are excluded, as are inspectors currently assigned to headquarters.

Year (1 April)	*Inspector numbers*	*Proportion with less than two years' experience (per cent.)*
1987	757.5	13
1988	712.5	14
1989	724	14
1990	750.5	21
1991	789	24
1992	826	24
1993	834	19
1994	841.5	14
1995	783.3	7
1996	807.5	5

Single Regeneration Budget

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will give details, by region, for the amount of funding awarded for each round of SRB funding and give in each case the number of jobs created and directly funded as a result of the SRB programme; and, of those, what percentage of fixed-term contracts have waivers in place in respect of redundancy costs. [39]

Sir Paul Beresford: The SRB challenge fund provides support for between one to seven years for regeneration schemes by locally based partnerships. Funds awarded by region in the first two bidding rounds of the challenge fund and the number of jobs expected to be created or safeguarded as a result are set out in the table:

	Round 1 *£ million*	*Round 2* *£ million*	*Round 1 Plans: Jobs created/ safeguarded (000s)*	*Round 2 Plans: Jobs created/ safeguarded (000s)*
London	316.7	230.0	55	39
South East	31.8	78.6	12	9
Eastern	20.7	35.3	4	9
South West	34.1	37.9	11	13
East Midlands	55.9	56.8	24	21
West Midlands	156.7	147.1	37	40
Merseyside	78.0	87.5	15	11
North West	143.3	133.2	71	22
Yorks and the Humber	202.2	152.3	62	16
North East	80.7	159.9	11	20

It is for the partnerships themselves to determine the terms and conditions of any staff they employ directly. Partnerships have, however, been advised that they should include the waivers referred to in fixed-term contracts as any redundancy costs incurred by them as a result of the absence of such waivers would not be met from the SRB challenge fund. My Department does not collect information about the number of staff directly employed by partnerships on fixed-term contracts.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his estimate of the cost of rights to claims for unfair dismissal and redundancies in respect of those employed under SRB funding. [81]

Sir Paul Beresford: The SRB challenge fund provides support for between one to seven years for regeneration schemes by locally based partnerships. It is for the partnerships themselves to determine how many staff they employ and on what terms and conditions.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will review his decision to require fixed-term contracts under SRB projects to contain waivers of rights to claims for unfair dismissal and redundancies; and if he will make a statement. [33]

Sir Paul Beresford: The SRB challenge fund provides support for between one to seven years for regeneration schemes by locally based partnerships. It is for the partnerships themselves to determine the terms and conditions for any staff they employ directly. However, it is Government policy that fixed-term contracts should contain waivers of right to claims for unfair dismissal and redundancy, as provided under section 197 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

The employee's agreement to the waiver means that protection against unfair dismissal does not apply to a dismissal from employment under a contract for a fixed term of one year or more if the dismissal consists only of the expiry of that term without its being renewed. The waiver does not affect employees' rights to claim for unfair dismissal or redundancy payments in other circumstances.

Partnerships involved in SRB challenge fund schemes have been advised that any claims for unfair dismissal or redundancy costs incurred by them as the result of the absence of such waivers will not be eligible for grant assistance where staff were employed on fixed-term contracts after the advice was issued to them.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what representations he has received in respect of fixed-term contracts under SRB contracts. [32]

Sir Paul Beresford: Following the issue to SRB challenge fund partnerships of advice on waivers by employees on fixed-term contracts, a handful of SRB partnerships have sought further clarification of the costs which will be eligible for grant assistance from the challenge fund.

Occupational Diseases

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment which occupational diseases are not required to be reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995; and what proportion they constitute of all incidents of occupational disease. [656]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 require reports to be made of diseases listed in schedule 3 to the regulations when a case has been diagnosed in writing by a doctor and the person concerned is currently employed in an associated work activity. Cases not meeting these criteria are not required to be reported. Information on what proportion they constitute of all occupational disease is not available.

The most recent analysis and discussion of occupational and work-related disease statistics, including reports made under these regulations, can be found in "Health and Safety Statistics 1995/96", published by the Health and Safety Commission, on 23 October 1996, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects all the arrangements for the landfill tax and environmental trusts to be fully developed and in place. [1149]

Mr. Clappison: All the arrangements for the landfill tax and environmental trusts have been fully developed and are already in place.

The primary law on landfill tax is contained in the Finance Act 1996, which received Royal Assent on 29 April 1996. The more detailed implementation aspects of the landfill tax are set out in the Landfill Tax Regulations 1996 (SI 1996 No.1527) which came into force on 1 August 1996. In addition, the Landfill Tax (Contaminated Land) Order 1966 (SI 1996 No.1528), setting out the provisions for exempting from tax waste from clearing historically contaminated land, came into force on 1 August 1996 and the Landfill Tax (Qualifying Material) Order (SI 1996 No.1528), defining the categories of waste to which the lower rate of tax applies, came into force on 1 October 1996.

Provisions for environmental trusts are contained in the Landfill Tax (Regulations) 1996 (SI 1996 No.1527). On 15 October 1996 the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise approved the Environmental Trust Regulatory Body Limited, trading under the name "ENTRUST" to act as the regulatory body for the purposes of the environmental trust scheme. ENTRUST is responsible for enrolling and monitoring the operation of environmental trusts.

Marine Wild life and Habitats

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what biological and physiological parameters are monitored by his Department, in order to assess the cumulative impacts of discharges from offshore oil and gas installations on marine wildlife and habitats. [504]

Mr. Clappison: My Department, the Scottish Office and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food all maintain extensive programmes of marine monitoring, including the impact of human activities on the marine environment. In addition, the three country nature conservation agencies monitor the status of marine habitats and species in the United Kingdom waters. The Department of Trade and Industry is responsible for the overall regulation of the offshore oil and gas industry.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Patrick Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he proposes to issue a consolidation of the 1990 local authority capital finance regulations. [1737]

Mr. Curry: A draft consolidation of these regulations is being issued this week to local authorities and other interested parties. A copy is being placed in the House Library. I am inviting comments on the draft by the end of January. The new regulations will come into effect next April and will supersede the 1990 regulations.

Vacant Offices

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the policy of his Department in respect of the future of *(a)* 25 Southampton buildings, *(b)* the Patent Office and *(c)* the Office of Fair Trading following vacation of these premises. [441]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I have been asked to reply.

I have asked the chief executive of the Patent Office to write direct to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. C. Octon to Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours, dated 30 October 1996:

I am replying for the Patent Office in the absence of the Chief Executive to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for the Environment about 25 Southampton Buildings.

The Patent Office is only a minor user of 25 Southampton Buildings and as such has no policy responsibility for the building. That now rests with the Department of National Heritage with which we have made arrangements for the accommodation of our remaining London staff. While these arrangements are helpful the future presence of the Patent Office in London is not totally dependent upon them. If the need arose we would be able to seek appropriate alternatives.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Nursery Vouchers

Sir Ralph Howell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what considerations led her to decide not to make it her policy to ensure that every provider accepting Government nursery vouchers registers its under-fives provisions under the Children Act 1989 and associated guidance. [763]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Children Act 1989 requires all day care providers to register with their local authority. Maintained primary and nursery schools and independent schools have always been exempt from the registration requirement. My right hon. Friend does not consider it necessary or appropriate to remove this exemption, as these other providers are separately covered by education legislation.

Teachers

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers were *(a)* employed and *(b)* employed in grant-maintained schools in each local education authority in England in the most recent year for which figures were available; and what were the figures in the previous six years. [1027]

Mr. Forth: The information is given in the following table:

Full-time equivalent teachers employed by local education authorities and grant-maintained (GM) schools in the nursery, primary and secondary sectors: January 1990 to January 1993

Local education authority area	1990		1991		1992		1993	
	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only
ILEA	18,525	81	—	—	—	—	—	—
Corporation of London	—	—	14	—	11	—	15	—
Camden	—	—	1,196	—	1,299	—	1,273	—
Greenwich	—	—	2,196	—	2,234	—	2,033	—
Hackney	—	—	1,715	—	1,604	—	1,550	—
Hammersmith and Fulham	—	—	1,045	79	1,033	83	1,024	88
Islington	—	—	1,310	—	1,338	—	1,533	—
Kensington and Chelsea	—	—	689	41	795	42	696	45
Lambeth	—	—	1,453	—	1,541	39	1,549	55
Lewisham	—	—	1,818	—	1,411	—	1,777	19
Southwark	—	—	1,714	31	1,695	34	1,705	33
Tower Hamlets	—	—	2,115	—	2,118	56	2,232	59
Wandsworth	—	—	1,725	—	1,730	186	1,754	314
Westminster	—	—	1,154	—	1,147	—	1,188	—
Barking and Dagenham	1,325	—	1,267	—	1,322	—	1,353	—
Barnet	2,539	130	2,415	131	2,595	139	2,597	224
Bexley	1,783	—	1,745	—	1,711	—	1,753	20
Brent	2,014	—	2,023	63	2,032	64	2,030	147
Bromley	1,996	—	1,958	58	1,938	383	2,080	720
Croydon	2,551	—	2,548	—	2,486	50	2,397	57
Ealing	2,309	—	2,202	—	2,143	—	2,130	349
Enfield	2,250	—	2,264	—	2,292	—	2,324	—
Haringey	1,618	—	1,553	—	1,605	—	1,589	—
Harrow	1,389	—	1,450	—	1,570	—	1,581	—
Havering	2,079	—	2,011	—	2,049	—	2,009	—
Hillingdon	1,776	—	1,754	60	1,770	422	1,843	609
Hounslow	1,813	—	1,928	—	1,891	—	1,869	—
Kingston-upon-Thames	1,094	—	1,035	—	988	—	1,051	60
Merton	1,244	—	1,311	—	1,268	—	1,297	—
Newham	2,105	—	2,070	—	2,039	45	1,972	43
Redbridge	1,699	—	1,698	—	1,796	—	1,858	—
Richmond-upon-Thames	987	—	1,016	—	1,135	—	1,029	—
Sutton	1,347	48	1,345	50	1,299	152	1,266	254
Waltham Forest	2,158	—	1,917	—	1,976	67	1,903	71
Birmingham	9,095	107	9,125	165	9,343	311	9,548	335
Coventry	2,820	—	2,745	—	2,795	—	2,752	—
Dudley	2,659	42	2,727	43	2,781	43	2,670	45
Sandwell	2,965	—	2,949	—	2,921	50	2,959	53
Solihull	1,906	—	1,860	—	1,795	—	1,857	27
Walsall	2,845	—	2,744	—	2,619	—	2,575	154
Wolverhampton	2,525	—	2,582	40	2,636	122	2,467	120
Knowsley	1,563	—	1,481	—	1,398	—	1,351	—
Liverpool	4,604	69	4,470	65	4,221	69	4,185	69
St. Helens	1,846	—	1,713	—	1,656	—	1,679	—
Sefton	2,397	—	2,433	—	2,479	—	2,515	—
Wirral	3,031	—	3,099	—	2,924	—	2,963	—
Bolton	2,678	45	2,550	47	2,496	50	2,517	71
Bury	1,515	—	1,484	—	1,461	—	1,457	—
Manchester	4,234	—	4,254	—	3,974	—	4,044	—
Oldham	2,194	—	2,196	—	2,253	—	2,256	—

Full-time equivalent teachers employed by local education authorities and grant-maintained (GM) schools in the nursery, primary and secondary sectors: January 1990 to January 1993

Local education authority area	1990		1991		1992		1993	
	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only
Rochdale	2,233	—	1,934	—	1,987	—	1,851	10
Salford	2,175	—	2,147	—	2,052	—	2,000	—
Stockport	2,405	—	2,340	—	2,332	—	2,362	—
Tameside	2,010	45	2,042	47	2,085	49	2,036	49
Trafford	1,722	—	1,763	—	1,611	—	1,616	—
Wigan	3,161	—	2,972	—	3,015	—	3,096	—
Barnsley	1,953	—	1,760	—	1,714	—	1,696	—
Doncaster	2,835	—	2,753	—	2,691	—	2,760	—
Rotherham	2,474	—	2,522	—	2,464	—	2,335	—
Sheffield	4,123	—	4,043	—	3,937	—	3,866	4
Bradford	4,952	—	5,012	—	5,093	66	5,004	66
Calderdale	1,859	—	1,791	—	1,806	89	1,827	96
Kirklees	3,761	59	3,701	62	3,590	70	3,632	71
Leeds	6,514	—	6,320	—	6,300	—	6,010	—
Wakefield	2,882	—	2,909	—	2,748	—	2,741	—
Gateshead	1,784	—	1,750	—	1,731	—	1,707	—
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	2,412	—	2,346	—	2,285	—	2,212	—
North Tyneside	1,896	—	1,826	—	1,768	—	1,765	—
South Tyneside	1,496	—	1,410	—	1,385	—	1,325	—
Sunderland	2,751	—	2,681	—	2,692	—	2,651	—
Isles of Scilly	25	—	29	—	27	—	28	—
Avon	7,282	—	7,401	51	7,996	96	7,612	99
Bedfordshire	4,891	45	4,909	44	4,959	51	4,983	194
Berkshire	5,866	—	5,892	41	5,892	360	6,080	540
Buckinghamshire	5,079	—	5,136	150	4,973	217	5,215	299
Cambridge	5,419	—	5,377	—	5,419	10	5,667	367
Cheshire	7,863	26	7,956	30	7,968	34	8,072	42
Cleveland	5,538	—	5,536	—	5,546	—	5,560	—
Cornwall	3,855	—	3,751	—	3,697	—	3,647	—
Cumbria	4,347	—	4,191	—	4,154	102	4,211	341
Derbyshire	8,411	—	8,490	127	7,910	139	8,098	285
Devon	7,190	29	7,133	31	7,076	33	7,229	90
Dorset	4,604	—	4,476	56	4,512	168	4,389	374
Durham	4,965	—	4,845	—	5,007	—	5,239	—
East Sussex	4,571	—	4,524	—	4,673	—	4,908	—
Essex	12,407	—	12,274	—	12,251	205	12,033	1,665
Gloucestershire	4,213	—	4,349	187	4,042	186	4,090	828
Hampshire	11,675	—	11,415	44	11,593	190	12,037	394
Hereford and Worcester	5,141	—	5,413	—	5,451	—	5,441	—
Hertfordshire	8,530	—	8,248	165	8,155	305	8,280	411
Humberside	7,624	—	7,722	—	7,680	4	7,740	5
Isle of Wight	987	—	1,008	—	1,021	—	997	—
Kent	11,923	29	11,674	30	11,724	828	11,980	1,709
Lancashire	11,756	46	11,761	106	11,733	225	11,922	281
Leicestershire	7,886	—	7,764	21	7,830	24	7,570	25
Lincolnshire	4,612	105	4,869	185	4,748	479	4,808	935
Norfolk	5,840	—	5,564	65	5,687	102	5,791	474
North Yorkshire	5,590	—	5,656	—	5,803	—	5,594	—
Northamptonshire	5,094	—	5,337	39	5,458	222	5,466	602
Northumberland	2,809	—	2,736	—	2,791	—	2,677	—
Nottinghamshire	8,572	—	8,383	—	8,530	—	8,508	20
Oxfordshire	4,167	—	4,042	—	4,150	—	4,206	—
Shropshire	3,671	—	3,634	30	3,712	31	3,563	31
Somerset	3,669	—	3,585	—	3,558	34	3,595	46
Staffordshire	8,681	—	8,862	—	8,798	—	8,357	55
Suffolk	4,911	—	4,949	—	5,277	—	5,276	—
Surrey	6,690	—	6,625	47	6,511	276	6,677	590
Warwickshire	4,005	—	3,984	—	3,904	88	3,961	206
West Sussex	4,935	—	4,855	—	5,210	—	5,319	—
Wiltshire	4,402	—	4,513	—	4,559	34	4,596	112
England	398,542	906	394,945	2,430	394,874	7,121	396,331	15,353

1. Exclude sixth form colleges.

2. All FTEs rounded to whole numbers.

Full-time equivalent teachers employed by local education authorities and grant-maintained (GM) schools in the nursery, primary and secondary sector: January 1994 to January 1996

Local education authority area	1994		1995		1996	
	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only
ILEA	—	—	—	—	—	—
Corporation of London	14	—	16	—	15	—
Camden	1,321	160	1,346	165	1,437	173
Greenwich	1,984	—	1,939	11	1,981	13
Hackney	1,459	—	1,429	7	1,401	7
Hammersmith and Fulham	977	86	941	82	916	85
Islington	1,627	—	1,360	—	1,374	—
Kensington and Chelsea	670	65	674	78	702	76
Lambeth	1,575	303	1,680	390	1,701	421
Lewisham	1,809	23	1,863	21	1,892	22
Southwark	1,739	236	1,687	237	1,751	243
Tower Hamlets	2,309	57	2,250	59	2,250	56
Wandsworth	1,625	478	1,561	485	1,572	474
Westminster	1,160	—	1,121	—	1,145	—
Barking and Dagenham	1,375	—	1,446	—	1,487	—
Barnet	2,596	649	2,638	720	2,765	732
Bexley	1,781	202	1,836	261	1,808	262
Brent	1,962	595	1,971	803	2,066	882
Bromley	2,179	745	2,181	871	2,195	1,034
Croydon	2,326	266	2,409	544	2,518	562
Ealing	2,077	444	2,097	460	2,119	463
Enfield	2,273	362	2,358	371	2,412	376
Haringey	1,719	—	1,730	—	1,894	—
Harrow	1,566	33	1,576	37	1,561	40
Havering	1,907	236	1,891	249	1,828	240
Hillingdon	1,814	875	1,870	911	1,898	907
Hounslow	1,880	128	1,890	134	1,979	131
Kingston upon Thames	1,066	202	1,057	208	1,038	205
Merton	1,255	—	1,269	51	1,215	54
Newham	1,916	43	1,968	44	2,162	41
Redbridge	1,927	72	1,937	74	1,984	76
Richmond upon Thames	1,040	—	1,052	—	1,081	—
Sutton	1,292	443	1,354	452	1,372	456
Waltham Forest	1,718	127	1,706	140	1,674	159
Birmingham	9,452	922	9,366	1,087	9,584	1,103
Coventry	2,747	—	2,657	—	2,710	—
Dudley	2,534	303	2,576	318	2,643	325
Sandwell	2,828	48	2,689	109	2,664	111
Solihull	1,836	26	1,845	25	1,828	25
Walsall	2,668	390	2,560	465	2,607	462
Wolverhampton	2,447	164	2,377	166	2,331	173
Knowsley	1,354	44	1,446	46	1,429	48
Liverpool	4,191	147	4,194	204	4,289	230
St. Helens	1,637	—	1,635	—	1,575	—
Sefton	2,484	—	2,546	—	2,550	—
Wirral	2,885	129	2,927	132	3,026	216
Bolton	2,445	202	2,467	202	2,438	204
Bury	1,395	10	1,420	10	1,462	10
Manchester	3,631	—	3,587	—	3,640	22
Oldham	2,215	—	2,202	—	2,193	—
Rochdale	1,789	101	1,819	189	1,840	193
Salford	1,802	27	1,821	30	1,866	32
Stockport	2,170	—	2,185	—	2,232	—
Tameside	1,791	137	1,842	139	1,815	141
Trafford	1,621	192	1,694	205	1,686	265
Wigan	2,728	—	2,754	—	2,715	—
Barnsley	1,721	—	1,704	—	1,668	—
Doncaster	2,732	—	2,703	—	2,654	70
Rotherham	2,403	—	2,440	—	2,347	—
Sheffield	3,797	136	3,719	182	3,803	186
Bradford	5,103	342	4,779	400	4,761	413
Calderdale	1,814	298	1,769	530	1,780	607
Kirklees	3,443	77	3,373	79	3,339	85
Leeds	5,839	75	5,759	71	5,913	71
Wakefield	2,630	—	2,704	—	2,711	—
Gateshead	1,759	—	1,715	—	1,687	—

Full-time equivalent teachers employed by local education authorities and grant-maintained (GM) schools in the nursery, primary and secondary sector: January 1994 to January 1996

Local education authority area	1994		1995		1996	
	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only	All schools including GM	GM only
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,112	—	2,104	—	2,051	—
North Tyneside	1,649	—	1,639	11	1,630	11
South Tyneside	1,342	—	1,340	—	1,320	—
Sunderland	2,744	—	2,728	—	2,638	—
Isles of Scilly	27	—	26	—	27	—
Avon	7,504	107	7,677	118	7,675	115
Bedfordshire	4,808	586	5,008	629	4,991	626
Berkshire	6,149	614	6,171	729	6,203	753
Buckinghamshire	5,236	689	5,310	770	5,291	740
Cambridge	5,501	1,005	5,573	1,029	5,505	1,035
Cheshire	7,922	177	8,013	185	8,074	191
Cleveland	5,243	—	5,189	—	5,207	—
Cornwall	3,561	—	3,675	—	3,658	—
Cumbria	4,078	612	4,016	849	4,005	911
Derbyshire	7,861	1,069	7,555	1,185	7,528	1,259
Devon	7,358	304	7,437	319	7,454	379
Dorset	4,330	587	4,393	651	4,397	663
Durham	5,105	—	5,117	—	5,070	—
East Sussex	4,779	—	4,899	—	4,904	—
Essex	11,616	4,407	11,771	5,165	12,237	5,228
Gloucestershire	4,195	1,234	4,258	1,616	4,259	1,655
Hampshire	11,394	1,147	11,871	1,348	11,713	1,277
Hereford and Worcester	5,256	202	5,329	207	5,247	207
Hertfordshire	8,510	1,256	8,725	1,719	8,707	1,736
Humberside	7,229	13	7,394	19	7,378	22
Isle of Wight	1,013	—	999	—	994	—
Kent	12,224	3,110	12,552	3,724	12,655	4,085
Lancashire	12,051	455	12,088	485	11,581	499
Leicestershire	7,832	193	7,810	194	7,711	187
Lincolnshire	4,876	1,344	4,877	1,507	4,990	1,612
Norfolk	5,808	706	5,898	763	5,840	801
North Yorkshire	5,844	—	5,774	2	5,953	2
Northamptonshire	5,376	767	5,624	796	5,477	785
Northumberland	2,644	42	2,672	45	2,657	44
Nottinghamshire	8,376	120	8,354	121	7,920	154
Oxfordshire	4,363	5	4,426	5	4,155	4
Shropshire	3,352	243	3,384	330	3,319	327
Somerset	3,653	49	3,665	76	3,483	81
Staffordshire	8,263	267	8,245	279	8,343	283
Suffolk	5,391	—	5,466	—	5,380	—
Surrey	6,206	816	6,529	1,218	6,938	1,369
Warwickshire	4,017	311	4,027	327	3,875	363
West Sussex	5,208	—	5,230	17	5,320	18
Wiltshire	4,604	759	4,698	1,053	4,602	1,134
England	390,430	33,794	392,910	39,941	393,334	41,732

1. Exclude sixth form colleges.
2. All FTEs rounded to whole numbers.

Schools Budget

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list local education authorities in rank order by the proportion of the potential schools budget held back in the most recent year for which figures are available. [1025]

Mr. Robin Squire: The following table sets out in rank order, for each LEA in England, the proportion of the potential schools budget not delegated to schools. These figures are derived from LEAs' local management of schools budget statements for 1996–97, incorporating any amendments notified to the Department by 30 September 1996.

Rank	Local education authority	Percentage of PSB not delegated
1.	Dudley	3.9
2.	Brent	5.4
3.	Solihull	5.6
4.	Waltham Forest	6.1
5.	Islington	6.1
6.	Sunderland	6.2
7.	Leeds	6.3
8.	Hertfordshire	6.4
9.	Berkshire	6.5
10.	Isles of Scilly	6.7
11.	Rochdale	6.7
12.	Greenwich	6.9
13.	Knowsley	6.9
14.	Staffordshire	7.0

Rank	Local education authority	Percentage of PSB not delegated
15.	Northamptonshire	7.1
16.	Wigan	7.1
17.	Liverpool	7.3
18.	Suffolk	7.4
19.	Bury	7.5
20.	Bedfordshire	7.6
21.	Wolverhampton	7.8
22.	Havering	7.9
23.	North Tyneside	8.0
24.	Oxfordshire	8.0
25.	Redbridge	8.1
26.	Bexley	8.1
27.	Shropshire	8.2
28.	Manchester	8.2
29.	Sutton	8.6
30.	Croydon	8.7
31.	Birmingham	8.7
32.	Cumbria	8.7
33.	Richmond	8.7
34.	Cheshire	8.7
35.	Gloucestershire	8.8
36.	Hammersmith/Fulham	8.8
37.	Devon	8.8
38.	Norfolk	8.8
39.	Somerset	8.8
40.	Stockport	8.8
41.	Hampshire	8.9
42.	Northumberland	8.9
43.	Coventry	9.1
44.	Kingston	9.2
45.	Oldham	9.3
46.	Bristol	9.3
47.	Wirral	9.3
48.	Kensington/Chelsea	9.3
49.	Salford	9.4
50.	North Yorkshire	9.5
51.	Barking/Dagenham	9.5
52.	Surrey	9.5
53.	Ealing	9.5
54.	Stockton on Tees	9.6
55.	Hereford/Worcester	9.7
56.	Enfield	9.8
57.	Hillingdon	9.8
58.	Essex	9.9
59.	Harrow	9.9
60.	East Sussex	9.9
61.	Hounslow	10.0
62.	Wiltshire	10.0
63.	St. Helens	10.1
64.	Walsall	10.1
65.	Tameside	10.1
66.	Corporation of London	10.1
67.	North East Lincolnshire	10.2
68.	Isle of Wight	10.2
69.	Hull	10.2
70.	Warwickshire	10.2
71.	Lewisham	10.2
72.	South Gloucestershire	10.2
73.	Bath and North East Somerset	10.3
74.	Bradford	10.3
75.	Dorset	10.3
76.	Merton	10.3
77.	East Riding	10.4
78.	Rotherham	10.4
79.	North Somerset	10.4
80.	Tower Hamlets	10.5
81.	Cambridgeshire	10.5
82.	Wandsworth	10.5
83.	Barnet	10.6
84.	Westminster	10.6
85.	Hackney	10.6
86.	Sefton	10.6
87.	Southwark	10.7
88.	Lincolnshire	10.7
89.	Derbyshire	10.8
90.	West Sussex	10.8
91.	Sandwell	10.8
92.	Calderdale	10.9
93.	Buckinghamshire	10.9
94.	Hartlepool	10.9
95.	Newcastle	11.0
96.	Kirklees	11.0
97.	Kent	11.0
98.	York	11.0
99.	Redcar and Cleveland	11.1
100.	Nottinghamshire	11.1
101.	South Tyneside	11.1
102.	Lancashire	11.1
103.	North Lincolnshire	11.2
104.	Barnsley	11.3
105.	Durham	11.4
106.	Bolton	11.5
107.	Trafford	11.5
108.	Cornwall	11.7
109.	Camden	11.8
110.	Middlesbrough	12.0
111.	Leicestershire	12.0
112.	Doncaster	12.1
113.	Lambeth	12.6
114.	Sheffield	12.6
115.	Wakefield	12.8
116.	Bromley	13.1
117.	Gateshead	13.2
118.	Haringey	13.6
119.	Newham	14.9

Pupil Exclusions

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will make a statement on her Department's policy towards exclusions of disruptive pupils from schools; what factors underlay the restrictions on exclusions in the Education Act 1993; and what factors underlie the current legislative proposals. [878]

Mr. Forth: It is unacceptable for a minority of ill-behaved pupils to disrupt the education of the majority and undermine standards. Schools must have the right, as a last resort, to exclude severely disruptive pupils. The Department issued detailed guidance to schools and local authorities on "Exclusion from School" in May 1994.

The Education Act 1993 abolished indefinite exclusion and limited head teachers' power to impose fixed-term exclusions up to a maximum of 15 school days per term. There was clear evidence that indefinite exclusion led to some pupils being left in educational limbo for long periods with nothing being done to get them back into school.

Our current legislative proposals on exclusions would:

(a) allow greater flexibility in the use of fixed-term exclusions by substituting a limit of 45 days in a school year - thereby increasing the opportunity for headteachers to make effective arrangements for the reintegration of the excluded pupil; and

(b) require that, as far as practicable, independent committees hearing appeals against permanent exclusions meet when all the parties are available to attend, that these committees have regard to the discipline policy of the excluding school, and

that they take account of the interests of other pupils - thereby seeking to ensure that full and balanced consideration is given to each case.

Surplus School Places

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many surplus school places there were, and what was their cost, in each local education authority in England in the most recent year for which figures are available. [1026]

Mr. Robin Squire: For the number of surplus school places in each local education authority, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that my hon. Friend gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) on Tuesday 19 March 1996, *Official Report*, columns *113–18*. At a national level, the average premises-related cost of maintaining a surplus place is estimated to be £182 a year for a primary school and £303 a year for a secondary school at 1995–96 prices. The actual cost and the scope for realising savings from the removal of surplus places in practice in each local education authority will depend on local circumstances.

Unemployment Benefit

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people who were disqualified from unemployment benefit, and what percentage of those in dispute with the Employment Service, won the right to benefit on appeal in the last year for which figures are available. [1146]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Ian McCartney, dated 30 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the number of people who were disqualified from unemployment benefit and what percentage of these won the right to benefit on appeal, in the last year for which figures are available. This falls within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

Unfortunately we do not hold information on the number of successful appeal outcomes. The only information held on appeals is: the number received, the number reviewed and revised by an adjudication officer and the number submitted for determination by a Social Security Appeal Tribunal.

This information, together with statistics on the number of adjudication officers's decisions, and disallowance rates, is contained in a published document entitled "Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions". This provides information on all the main entitlement questions arising on claims, as well as disqualifications. Copies of this document are held in the Library of the House. The latest available information relates to the quarter year ending 30 June 1996.

I hope this is helpful.

HEALTH

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the extra cost to haemophiliacs arising from the imposition of VAT on drugs; and if he will make a statement. [141]

Mr. Horam: There is no extra cost to haemophiliac patients receiving treatment under the national health service arising from the imposition of value added tax on drugs.

Health Authority Deficits

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities and trusts had deficits approved in the financial year 1995–96. [394]

Mr. Horam: The latest year for which audited accounts are available is currently 1994–95. The audited information for 1995–96 will not be available until late November.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities and trusts have been given approval to incur deficits in the present financial year; and on what date such approvals were given. [390]

Mr. Horam: The forecast financial positions of health authorities and trusts are discussed with the national health service executive regional offices as part of a cycle of planning and regular monitoring reviews. These outturn positions are therefore subject to revision as a result of any action agreed at these reviews. The specific approval of deficits does not therefore arise.

NHS Trusts (Admissions)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts that on 30 September had restricted admissions for financial reasons. [473]

Mr. Horam: This information is not held centrally.

Health Authority Administrative Costs

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the administrative cost of running each health authority in 1995–96; and if he will give the percentage of the total funds available that represents. [428]

Mr. Horam: The provisional 1995–96 annual accounts for health authorities are not expected to be available until the end of November. The information requested will be placed in the Library when it becomes available.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will give the reasons for not making the administrative costs of health authorities part of the annual review and for not reporting on such costs in the annual review letter. [427]

Mr. Horam: Regional offices determine the content of annual reviews with their health authorities in the light of the most important current issues locally and nationally. Regional offices would discuss a health authority's performance against its cost target in an annual review. Where warranted by poor performance against these targets, or where meeting the targets has significant repercussions on the provision of services, the matter would be included as an issue in the review letter. Health authority costs are published by the national health service executive annually.

Good Health Channel

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to establish a good health channel on television in co-operation with the NHS and cable companies. [738]

Mr. Horam: There are no plans at present to establish a health channel. However, the development of the NHSnet, a secure national network developed for the NHS, will offer a number of opportunities to discuss new communications techniques for disseminating information.

NHS Trusts (Bed Linen)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts in the south-eastern region in which relatives are required to bring in basic items of bed linen for in-patients. [449]

Mr. Horam: I am unaware of any case where a national health service trust has asked patients or their relatives to bring in bed linen during a stay in hospital. Basic items of bed linen should always be provided by the NHS for its in-patients.

Royal Oldham Hospital

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will name the companies invited by the North West regional health authority in 1992 to tender for the contract to construct a waste incinerator at the Royal Oldham hospital. [14]

Mr. Horam: This information is not held centrally.

Genetically Engineered Food

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people in the United Kingdom who have contracted illnesses as a direct result of eating genetically engineered food in each of the last five years. [1022]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected. However, genetically modified foods undergo rigorous safety assessments by the independent Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes and if there were any concern about possible adverse health effects, food safety clearance would not be granted.

Acute Beds

Sir George Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the number of acute beds in NHS hospitals blocked by patients awaiting discharge into retirement or nursing homes within the area of each health authority or board on the most recent date for which figures are available; [844]

(2) if he will list the number of acute beds in NHS hospitals blocked by patients awaiting discharge into retirement or nursing homes within the area of each local government social services department on the most recent date for which figures are available. [845]

Mr. Burns: This information is not available in the form requested.

TRANSPORT

MV Derbyshire

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what inquiries he has made in respect of possible financial vested interest arising from the outcome of investigations into the sinking of the MV Derbyshire; and if he will make a statement. [29]

Mr. Bowis: If the actions of any of the commercial interests associated with the MV Derbyshire were found to have resulted in the ship's loss, these could give rise to potential liabilities. The possible existence of any such liabilities has no bearing on the conduct of the current investigation into the loss of the ship.

Helicopter and Aircraft Noise

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to give the Civil Aviation Authority obligations in law to consider environmental factors in areas other than aerodrome licensing. [2]

Mr. Bowis: My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Defence have given directions to the Civil Aviation Authority under section 72(2) of the Civil Aviation Act 1982. These require the CAA to collaborate in ensuring that air navigation services are, subject to securing the safe operation of aircraft, planned, provided and operated so as to take account—among other things—of the need to mitigate as far as possible the environmental impact of civil aircraft operations and, in particular, the disturbance to the public arising from aircraft noise, vibration and pollution.

Rail Services

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many levels of service were higher under British Rail than the levels which have been specified in the passenger service requirement set out by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising. [1048]

Mr. Watts: The minimum level of service required of British Rail on any route is one train per week. In practice much more extensive services have been provided. All PSRs provide higher levels of service than the minimum required of British Rail.

A more specified answer could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Boeing 737 Aircraft

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action is being taken by his Department in response to recommendations made by the United States National Transportation Safety Board concerning the rudder and the yaw damper system on Boeing 737 aircraft. [1047]

Mr. Bowis: The US National Transportation Safety Board has made a number of recommendations to the US Federal Aviation Administration following the investigation of an accident involving a US-registered Boeing 737. The Civil Aviation Authority is monitoring the situation and will decide on what action, if any, is appropriate in the UK once the FAA has responded.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many Boeing 737 aircraft are registered in the United Kingdom; and if he will list which airlines use them. [1040]

Mr. Bowis: There are currently 109 Boeing 737 aircraft on the UK aircraft register. These aircraft are used by the following airlines:

Air UK
British Airways
British Midland Airways
Easy Jet Airline Company
GB Airways
Maersk Air
Monarch Airlines
Sabre Airways

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many accidents involving Boeing 737 aircraft have been recorded in this country in each of the last 10 years. [1046]

Mr. Bowis: The number of accidents involving Boeing 737 aircraft in this country in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

1986: 1
1987: 0
1988: 0
1989: 2
1990: 2
1991: 1
1992: 4
1993: 7
1994: 3
1995: 1

These figures are based on the International Civil Aviation Organisation definition of accidents and include accidents where aircraft are damaged, or passenger or crew are injured, while aircraft are on the ground at airports. All but two of the accidents listed fall into this category.

Leyburn to Hawes Railway Service

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received concerning the feasibility of reopening the railway from Leyburn to Hawes; and if he will make a statement. [891]

Mr. Watts: My right hon. Friend has received no direct representations on this matter. The Department of the Environment and the Rural development Commission have received a bid from the Wensleydale Railway Association for funds to reopen part of the Wensleydale railway line—between Northallerton and Castle Bolton—under their rural challenge scheme 1996. The bid is currently under consideration. Both Leyburn and Hawes are situated on that line.

Acton Rail Stations

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what studies (i) he and (ii) other bodies responsible for planning of public transport made of the advantages of electrifying the half mile of railway between Acton main line station and Action Wells junction, with particular reference to *(a)* public transport to and from Heathrow airport, *(b)* orbital passenger services in London and *(c)* rail freight movement. [1062]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* None. The consultant engaged by the Department to carry out the London airports access study—LASAS—did, in examining various schemes to improve rail access to Heathrow, consider a rail link from Heathrow to the west coast main line, via acton Wells which would have required electrification of this part of the network. Although the WCML link was not one of the schemes shortlised by the LASAS consultants, there is nothing to prevent a promoter from pursuing the proposal if he believes that there is sufficient demand.

The electrification of this part of the network would be an operational matter for Railtrack, which, as owner of the infrastructure, is responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the rail infrastructure.

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Delegations (Europe)

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Prime Minister if he has nominated a new leader of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union. [1489]

The Prime Minister: Following the sudden death earlier this month of Lord Finsberg, who served with great distinction as leader of the United Kingdom delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of the Western European Union from 1987, I have today appointed the hon. Member for Reading, West (Sir A. Durant) as the new leader of the delegation.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

European Parliament

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if he will make it his policy that information be collected in respect of United Kingdom Members of the European Parliament with regard to *(a)* attendance at Parliament and Committees, *(b)* declarations of interests and *(c)* speeches in Parliament and Committees. [100]

Mr. Waller: I have no responsibilities in connection with recording the activities or interests of United Kingdom Members of the European Parliament. The Library does, however, receive documentation about the proceedings of the European Parliament and I have asked the Librarian to write to the hon. Member.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Released Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of prisoners released early from each London prison due to the Prison Service miscalculating their release dates. [148]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 30 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the number of prisoners serving consecutive sentences who were released early from each London prison following the issue of guidance on the application of remand time in sentence calculation.

The information is set out in the table below.

Establishment	*Number of prisoners released*
Belmarsh	2
Brixton	0
Downview	4
Feltham	11
Highdown	1
Holloway	0
Latchmere House	1
Pentonville	7
Wandsworth	12
Wormwood Scrubs	4
Total	42

Bouncers

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to regulate or license bouncers or the security companies which employ them. [404]

Mr. Maclean: We encourage the regulation of door supervisors through local registration schemes in which training and criminal record checks on door supervisors are a condition of obtaining a local authority entertainment licence. The Government published guidance on the operation of registration schemes in January this year.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned, *(b)* undertaken and *(c)* completed on possible links between doormen and bouncers and the sale of drugs to young people at pubs, clubs and fast food outlets. [406]

Mr. Sackville: No such research has been commissioned by the Home Office. But we have been informed by the police and other agencies that drug dealers often target clubs and similar venues frequented by young people and that staff, particularly those on the door, can condone or be a part of organised drug dealing carried out on the premises.

My right hon. and learned Friend announced on 8 October a proposal to make possible the revocation of public entertainment licences and closure of premises, with immediate effect, in cases where there is clear evidence of a serious problem relating to the supply or consumption of controlled drugs on or near the premises.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the subject of regulating doormen and bouncers. [405]

Mr. Maclean: Over the past 12 months, we have received a total of eight representations specifically calling for the regulation of door supervisors.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the chief constable of Nottinghamshire on the sale of drugs by doormen and bouncers to young people. [407]

Mr. Maclean: No. It is an operational matter for individual chief officers how they deal with such problems. Nottinghamshire constabulary, like other forces, is committed to effective action to fight drug misuse and drug-related crime.

Drug Abuse Resistance Education

Mr. Allen : To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the change in the level of youth cautions in Mansfield since the introduction of the DARE–drug abuse resistance education—programme; and if he will make a statement. [764]

Mr. Maclean: The police force's area is the smallest geographical unit for statistics on cautioning available centrally. The readily available information is given in the table.

Persons aged 10 to 13 cautioned in the Nottinghamshire police force area, by type of offence, sex and period

	Type of offence[1]			
	Indictable		*Summary*	
Period	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
1994				
January–March	210	130	44	6
April–June	188	119	81	3
July–September	176	87	45	3
October–December	218	127	57	8
1995[2]				
January–March	183	130	65	5
April–June	220	120	106	18
July–September	172	63	59	20
October–December[3]	190	85	66	13

[1] Excluding motoring offences.
[2] Provisional.
[3] Nottinghamshire Constabulary have been running a pilot of the drug abuse resistance education programme across all nine of its divisions since September 1995.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will instruct the police to take action to limit the activities of Hizb-ut-Tahrir; [63]

(2) what action he has taken against the Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisation. [62]

Mr. Kirkhope: Enforcement of the law is an operational matter for chief officers of police. The Government have sought to ensure that the police have full powers to deal with racially motivated crime.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is (i) the purchase cost of a closed circuit television camera, (ii) the annual cost of running it in a fully monitored system and (iii) the average amount his Department is providing in grant per camera in the current year. [143]

Mr. MacLean: The Government do not collect systematic data on the costs of closed circuit television systems or hardware. The purchase cost of CCTV cameras varies widely according to their specification and their operational requirements. Running costs also vary widely for the same reason. Most of the costs associated with CCTV systems are taken up by cabling and monitoring arrangements.

The last CCTV challenge competition disbursed £17,138,047 to 259 winning partnerships. If all the schemes go ahead as planned, this will help to fund 3,277 cameras. The total cost of all the schemes is £40,156,993. Using these figures, the cost per camera is £12,254, to which the Government have contributed £5,230 per camera.

Motor Cycle Theft

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department is taking to reduce the theft of motor cycles. [204]

Mr. Maclean: The Government are well aware of the misery suffered by the victims of motor cycle theft and is tackling this problem through a multi-agency approach as part of its overall vehicle crime reduction strategy.

One of the key ways in which the Government are trying to reduce theft is by educating motor cycle owners on the need to take practical security precautions. The Home Office security advice leaflet specifically for motor cyclists is entitled "Putting the Brakes on Bike Theft" and it offers basic security advice on locking up, parking and parts marking. We shall be revising this leaflet shortly and will be looking to the motor cycle organisations for advice on the main messages which need to be conveyed.

Advice for motor cycle owners is also included in the Home Office's crime prevention handbook "Your Practical Guide to Crime Prevention". The Home Office has received requests for over 2 million copies of this booklet.

The Home Office is represented on the Motorcycle Theft Action Group on which members of the motor cycle industry and all others with an interest in crime reduction also sit. The group's work is aimed at achieving a co-ordinated and effective approach to tackling motor cycle theft.

Home Office research into the theft of motor cycles during the 12-month period October 1994 to September 1995 was presented to the group, and the findings are being used by members to target vulnerable areas and focus initiatives where they are most needed.

Prisons (Costs)

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average annual cost of keeping a person detained in prison. [15]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr Chris Davies, dated 30 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the average annual cost of keeping a person detained in prison.

In 1995–96 the net operating cost was £24,200 per place.

Child Murders

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the number of child murders by strangers in each year since 1966. [150]

Mr. Maclean: The available information was published in table 4A of "Criminal Statistics, England and Wales, 1994". A copy of this publication is in the Library.

Police Costs

Mr. William O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what guidelines are issued by his Department for the recovery of costs by a police force employing personnel to carry out routine checks in the area of a neighbouring police area; and if he will make a statement; [99]

(2) what *(a)* protocols and *(b)* guidelines govern the deployment of county police force resources in the area of a metropolitan police force to carry out routine checks on civilian drivers; and if he will make a statement. [98]

Mr. Maclean: Guidance on the financial arrangements for mutual aid between police forces is contained in Home Office circular No. 38/89, a copy of which is in the Library. There is no central guidance on the deployment of officers of one force to assist another. This is a matter for the chief officers concerned.

Fireworks

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were prosecuted in 1995 for offences in connection with the misuse of fireworks. [94]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested is not available centrally.

Prisons (Repair and Maintenance)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent circulars have been issued to prison works departments in respect of the buying in of materials for repair and maintenance work. [666]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr A. J. Beith, dated 30 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about whether any recent circulars have been issued to prison works departments in respect of the buying in of materials for repairs and maintenance work.

I recently issued a note to governors introducing a freeze on discretionary expenditure and stating that expenditure should only be incurred in respect of essential items of work. This included expenditure on maintenance and minor works other than work which is already contractually committed, mandatory/statutory items, health and safety items, emergency work and work to prevent loss of places or core facilities. It has been necessary to introduce this freeze on discretionary expenditure because of recent financial pressures but we will keep the position under review.

Crimes (Rehabilitation Periods)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a list of the rehabilitation periods for each criminal offence or category of offences listed in his paper "On the Record". [152]

Mr. Maclean: The White Paper "On the Record", Cm 3308, sets out the proposed new arrangements for access to criminal records. It does not list categories of criminal offences. Annexe A to the White Paper sets out the categories of occupations or posts which are exceptions to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 and which it is intended will be eligible for full criminal record vetting checks.

It is not possible to list the rehabilitation periods for individual offences. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 relates to sentences rather than to offences, and provides that after varying periods of time specified in the Act, offenders are regarded as having become rehabilitated and their conviction(s) spent. The key determinant of when a conviction becomes spent is the type of sentence passed in each case, not the offence itself. When a conviction becomes spent, it does not have to be disclosed other than in certain specified circumstances. Sentences of over two and half years imprisonment can never become spent.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. John Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of claims for asylum for each month in *(a)* 1995 and *(b)* in 1996. [239]

Mr. Kirkhope: The information requested is in the table.

Number of applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, by month, January 1995–September 1996

Month of application	*Number of applications*
1995	
January	3,570
February	3,030
March	3,310
April	2,810
May	3,450
June	3,630
July	3,415
August	3,890
September	4,020
October	4,595
November	4,715
December	3,540
1996	
January	3,310
February	2,850
March	3,145
April	2,070
May	1,755
June	1,730
July	2,515
August	2,140
September	2,010

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five.

Prisons (Building Costs)

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the projected cost through the private finance initiative of *(a)* building all new prisons and detention centres and *(b)* payments made to the private sector for all new prisons and detention centres for the first five years of their existence. [53]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. Chris Davies, dated 30 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about projected costs of building new prisons and detention centres through the private finance initiative and payments made to the private sector for all new prisons and detention centres for the first five years of their existence.

Under the Private Finance Initiative the Prison Service will be paying for the building and operation of new prisons as a single package. The cost of the total service (net present value) over 25 years for the three new prisons either under construction or where construction is expected to commence shortly, is £643 million, comprising £247m for Fazakerley; £266m for Bridgend; and £130m for Lowdham Grange. While we are unable to provide information about building costs only, the estimated values of the contractors' overall project costs are £77m each for Fazakerley and Bridgend and £37m for Lowdham Grange.

The anticipated payments for the first five years of their operation are estimated as follows:

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Fazakerley	1.75	24.95	25.70	26.05	26.05
Bridgend	1.75	22.75	24.95	25.65	25.65
Lowdham Grange	0.70	13.75	12.50	12.55	12.55
Total	4.20	61.45	63.15	64.25	64.25

The 1997–98 estimated payments are based on the following opening dates: Fazakerley, December 1997; Bridgend, December 1997; and Lowdham Grange, January 1998. The estimated payments for 1998–99 have been re-priced up to 2000–01. The costs stated for 2001–02 are at 2000–01 prices as the year 2001–02 is outside the PES period.

Firearms

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many notifiable offences were recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used in Wales in 1993 and 1994; and if he will make a statement. [46]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested is published annually in table 3.1(A) of "Criminal Statistics, England and Wales, Supplementary tables". A copy of this publication is in the Library.

Murders

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistics he has collated on the proportion of murders which are committed by people who are known to their victims since 1980. [147]

Mr. Maclean: Statistics on the proportion of homicide offences which are committed by people who are known to their victims are contained in the following table:

Proportion of offences currently recorded as homicide in England and Wales where a suspect has been identified who was known to the victim

Year	*Percentage of all currently recorded homicides*
1980	64
1981	75
1982	73
1983	74
1984	76
1985	73
1986	67
1987	65
1988	66
1989	67
1990	67
1991	68
1992	69
1993	66
1994	63

Figures as at 4 August 1995.

Home Safety

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has issued in respect of home safety work undertaken by local authorities. [35]

Mr. Maclean: The Home Office does not issue guidance on home safety work undertaken by local authorities. On fire safety, however, the Home Office works closely with fire brigades and other publicly funded bodies to promote community fire safety, and produces for their use a range of publicity and information leaflets giving specific advice on fire safety in the home. Similar advice leaflets on home security and crime prevention are also produced by the Home Office and are circulated widely.

Fire Authorities

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the standard spending assessment for each fire authority in England and the actual spend for 1995–96. [893]

Mr. Sackville: The fire standard spending assessments for 1995–96 are set out in the Local Government Finance Report (England) which was published on 30 January 1995. Particulars of actual spending in respect of each brigade for that year are not yet held centrally.

Fire Fighters

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many retained fire fighters there are in each fire authority in England; and what was the number in 1992. [895]

Mr. Sackville: Information on the position in each fire authority at 1 January 1996 has been placed in the Library. The equivalent figures for 1 January 1992 were published in the report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services for England and Wales for 1991, Cm 2008—appendix 4 on page 55.

Immigration (Carriers Liability) Act

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total amount of liability incurred by all carriers under the Immigration (Carriers Liability) Act 1987: how much of that total liability has been paid; how much has been waived; and how much is outstanding. [883]

Mr. Kirkhope: A total of £97.59 million has been incurred by carriers since the Act came into force. Of that sum, £59.17 million has been paid, £20.74 million waived, and £17.68 million is currently outstanding.

Donations (Political Parties)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what restrictions are imposed by each member state of the EU on donations to political parties from foreign sources ineligible to vote in their elections. [896]

Mr. Sackville: Information on the practice in other member states of the European Union with regard to donations of this kind is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. In the United Kingdom, there are no restrictions on political parties receiving such donations, but each of the major political parties has adopted a voluntary code of practice which prohibits acceptance of donations from foreign Governments or rulers.

Magic Mushrooms

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what circumstances magic mushrooms are classed as illegal drugs. [990]

Mr. Sackville: The magic mushroom—psilocybe semilanceata—is not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, but it contains the substance psilocin and its derivative psilocybin, both of which are class A controlled drugs. Under the 1971 Act, any preparation or other product containing psilocin or psilocybin is also a class A controlled drug.

Persons have been held by the courts to be in possession of controlled drugs where they have in some way altered the natural state of the mushroom—for example, by drying—so as to constitute a preparation or other product.

Blakenhurst Prison

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with United Kingdom Detention Services concerning the contracts with Her Majesty's prison, Blakenhurst. [256]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. George Howarth, dated 30 October 1996.

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the contract held by United kingdom Detention Services (UKDS) for the operation of Blakenhurst prison.

The Prison Service has one contract with UKDS for the operation of Blakenhurst prison. As part of the ongoing management of that contract, there has been and continues to be regular contact with UKDS in discussion and correspondence on a broad range of issues.

SCOTLAND

Offshore Oil and Gas

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what biological and physiological parameters are monitored by the Scottish Office Agriculture and Fisheries Department, in order for the Department of the Environment to assess the cumulative impacts of discharges from offshore oil and gas installations on marine wildlife and habitats. [505]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The Scottish Office marine laboratory in Aberdeen has a wide-ranging programme of environmental monitoring in the seas around Scotland. This includes monitoring of offshore oil and gas operations designed to establish the distribution and concentration of contaminants, mainly hydrocarbons, in sediments and water. The biological effects of operational discharges, including possible cumulative effects, are also under continuing study. The marine laboratory publishes all its findings in a series of reports. The annual review describes the full range of scientific activities of the laboratory and the recently published report on "Environmental Monitoring of the Seas around Scotland 1970–1993" contains data associated with offshore operations. I have placed copies of these documents in the House of Commons Library.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are the minimum, maximum and average times taken to reach a decision on compulsory purchase orders during each of the past five years. [249]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

WALES

Beef Industry

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will implement a temporary guaranteed price system to restore confidence in the beef industry in Wales. [25]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Government have committed £2.5 billion to various measures to support the beef industry. We have no plans to introduce a price guarantee which would do nothing to support the industry in the medium to longer term.

Casualty Animals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received relating to the reluctance of contractors to pick up bulls as casualty animals; and if he will make a statement. [467]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: None.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he will take to alleviate problems arising from casualty stock via the over-30-months scheme; and if he will make a statement. [26]

Mr. Evans: The Intervention Board executive agency has allocated additional slots at designated abattoirs for casualty animals.

Cattle Cull

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he proposes to remove the backlog in the cattle culling scheme; and if he will make a statement. [27]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Government have provided an additional £16.6 million to enable the backlog to be cleared by Christmas. We are on target for a throughput of 55,000 animals a week under the scheme.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will restore the compensation rate in the cattle culling scheme of 1 ecu/83.3p/kg. [28]

Mr. Evans: This is a matter for the EU Beef Management Committee.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list all capital and current expenditure on each grant-maintained school in each year since incorporation. [213]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information is set out in the following tables.

Capital and current expenditure on grant–maintained schools

School	1991–92		1992–93		1993–94	
	Current	Capital	Current	Capital	Current	Capital
Bryn Elian	—	—	—	—	485,753	6,285
Derwen	—	—	—	—	187,104	8,447
Eirias	—	—	—	—	1,437,715	18,655
Emrys Ap Iwan	—	—	675,534	7,695	2,572,873	1,502,114
Maelor	—	—	—	—	1,299,960	776,172
Pen–y–Bryn	—	—	—	—	262,174	9,228
Brynmawr	—	—	786,883	156,068	1,357,858	1,440,649
Cwmcarn	517,899	—	857,744	60,944	911,486	405,620
St. Albans	—	—	—	—	411,915	5,610
Caergeiliog	—	—	—	—	435,543	15,360
Llanerfyl	—	—	—	—	66,572	6,837
Mary Imm.	—	—	—	—	—	—
St. Cyres	—	—	—	—	808,996	9,610
Stanwell	—	—	—	—	2,222,422	1,159,664
Bishop Vaughan	583,235	—	2,220,813	292,260	2,523,603	827,650
Our Lady and St. Michael's	—	—	—	—	128,140	3,850

School	1994–95		1995–96	
	Current	Capital	Current	Capital
Bryn Elian	1,732,891	206,362	1,877,757	1,081,488
Derwen	266,160	102,787	274,091	881,548
Eirias	2,388,784	373,047	2,613,405	819,437
Emrys Ap Iwan	2,600,799	414,467	3,032,015	289,606
Maelor	1,256,667	488,972	1,339,382	214,604
Pen-y-Bryn	407,051	77,024	455,242	152,397
Brynmawr	1,393,197	792,903	1,484,537	325,191
Cwmcarn	956,162	341,197	1,074,650	27,895
St. Albans	1,448,247	643,674	1,510,876	44,795
Caergeiliog	409,665	301,131	440,645	101,376
Llanerfyl	76,979	63,217	76,254	56,673
Mary Imm.	1,472,931	42,429	1,490,579	36,900
St. Cyres	3,192,764	458,758	2,975,336	635,539
Stanwell	2,474,180	2,119,709	2,511,062	598,389
Bishop Vaughan	2,416,363	683,754	2,716,334	515,345
Our Lady and St. Michael's	376,413	239,847	394,915	190,503

Disabled People (Grant Aid)

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list all bids made in the former county of Clwyd which received grant aid for the disabled. [217]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The support for people with disabilities grant scheme gave funding to projects supporting people with physical and sensory disabilities in 1994–95 and 1995–96. A list of all such bids approved for the former county of Clwyd under this scheme during these years has been placed in the Library of the House.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Compliance Cost Assessments

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list those compliance cost assesaments published during the latest six-month period. [1738]

Mr. Freeman: Since April 1993, the Government have required Departments to prepare and publish compliance cost assessments with all proposed legislation presented to Parliament to assess the impact on business costs. This includes a special test of the impact on small businesses. Since January 1996, the responsible Minister has had to certify that he has seen the compliance cost assessment and is satisfied that the regulatory proposal strikes an appropriate balance between cost and benefit.

I have presented to Parliament today a Command Paper listing 105 CCAs published between 1 January 1996 and 30 June 1996 plus three CCAs published between 1 July 1995 and 31 December 1995 which were omitted from the previous Command Paper. Copies of the CCAs listed are available in the House Libraries. This is the fifth such Command Paper and further papers listing CCAs published in the preceding six-month period will be published at six-monthly intervals.

Government Policy

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what consultation his Department has had with Conservative central office concerning the co-ordination and presentation of Government policy. [905]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) on 21 March 1996, *Official Report*, column 277.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his Department's estimate of the cost to business to enable computer systems to be millennium compliant. [451]

Mr. Ian Taylor: I have made no such estimate. The figure will be more substantial the later industry leaves its remedial action plan.

Mr. Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the progress report made to him in September of the joint task force referred to in his answer of 24 July 1996, *Official Report*, column 476, on the effect of the century date change of computer systems. [1134]

Mr. Taylor: The task force has made good progress towards its objective of achieving 100 per cent. awareness and commitment from main board level executives by end March 1997. The issue is receiving considerable attention from the news media but there is still considerable work to be done ensuring all firms check their systems and take the necessary action soon. The CBI and some trade associations are actively involved in alerting their members.

Task Force 2000

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total budget for his Department's task force 2000; what is his Department's contribution to it; and what progress has been made to date to obtain the balance from the private sector. [450]

Mr. Ian Taylor: Task force 2000 was set up by the private sector, not by the Department although with its encouragement. Its budget and funding are matters for them as it is for the private sector to address the date change problem from its own resources. The Department has offered initial funding of up to £170,000 as seed corn and task force directors are negotiating with private sector companies for further funds. The task force's objective is to raise awareness of the year 2000 problem, and has already received sponsorship for a London conference.

Wage Levels

Mr. Spearing: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what statutory provisions govern the objectives of sustaining a living and just level of wages. [236]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Pay is a matter to be determined between employers and employees in light of their particular circumstances without Government intervention. Statutory wage fixing undermines competitiveness, distorts the labour market and costs jobs.

Coal-burning Power Stations

Mr. Meacher: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many coal-burning power stations are operating in *(a)* each European Union state, *(b)* the United States of America and *(c)* Japan; and what percentage is equipped with flue gas desulphurisation. [1011]

Mr. Page: The power stations operating in each European Union state and in the United States of America and Japan, and the percentage that are equipped with flue gas desulphurisation units, are shown in the table.

Country	*Total number of coal-fired units*[1]	*Number of units with flue gas desulphurisation*[1]	*Percentage with flue gas desulphurisation*
Austria	11	11	100.0
Belgium	25	0	0.0
Canada	69	0	0.0
Denmark	33	9	27.3
Finland	32	13	40.6
France	37	4	10.8
Germany	288	201	69.8
Greece	18	0	0.0
Ireland	8	0	0.0
Italy	39	8	20.5
Netherlands	9	8	88.9
Portugal	9	2	22.2
Spain	40	4	10.0
Sweden	29	17	58.6
United Kingdom	108	10	9.3
Total European	755	287	38.0
USA	1,175	244	20.8
Japan	95	52	54.7

Source:

IEA Coal Research Database (1996).

Note:

[1] A coal-fired power station comprises one or more electricity generating units.

Launch Aid

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total level of support paid to industry under the launch aid programme since its inception. [992]

Mr. Greg Knight: Under the Civil Aviation Act 1982, launch aid may be allocated to the UK aerospace industry for the design and development of civil aeronautics projects. Launch aid had been allocated to the industry under previous legislation. A total of £968.1 million was allocated between the 1961–62 and 1995–96 financial years. Earlier figures are not readily available.

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what have been the total receipts from the launch aid programme since its inception. [993]

Mr. Knight: A total of £597.7 million was received by Government between the 1961–62 and 1995–96 financial years in repayment of launch aid for civil aeronautics projects.

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the last project supported by his Department under the launch aid programme; when this took place; and what was the level of the support. [991]

Mr. Knight: In 1995–96 Short Brothers plc of Belfast was allocated launch aid of £16.4 million towards its contribution to the Learjet 45 executive jet. This project is still current and a further £1.32 million of remains to be allocated to the company.

Human Genetics Advisory Committee

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he expects to announce the membership of the Human Genetics Advisory Committee. [906]

Mr. Ian Taylor: We will make an announcement as soon as possible when consents have been forthcoming from candidates.

Offshore Oil and Gas Installations

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what are the dates or estimated dates *(a)* on which he proposes to announce the call for nominations in relation to the blocks to be offered in the 18 offshore licensing round for UK oil and gas exploration, *(b)* between which he proposes to conduct the consultation for the nomination of blocks to be offered in the 18 offshore licensing round for UK oil and gas exploration, *(c)* on which he proposes to announce which blocks are to be offered in the 18 offshore licensing round for UK oil and gas exploration, and *(d)* on which he proposes to announce the winning bids in relation to the 18 offshore licensing round for UK oil and gas exploration; [514]

(2) if an environmental impact assessment will be required of applicants in relation to the 18 offshore licensing round for UK oil and gas exploration; [515]

(3) what further rounds are planned for UK offshore oil and gas exploration licensing; and over what period he intends to conduct each of those rounds. [516]

Mr. Page: No decisions have been taken about the timing and scope of the 18th round of offshore licensing nor any subsequent rounds.

I hope that it will be possible, however, to hold a round in 1997 and further rounds at regular intervals thereafter in order to ensure that the United Kingdom continental shelf remains an attractive investment location for oil and gas companies until well into the next century.

Decisions about the need for environmental impact assessments in relation to an 18th round will take account of relevant legislation, international obligations and the advice provided to me by statutory and other advisers during the consultation process preceding the offer of blocks.

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action is taken by Government Departments to ensure that the level of use and discharge of chemicals in water and in drilling muds from offshore oil and gas installations remains within agreed limits for each installation. [509]

Mr. Page: The discharge of chemicals from offshore installations is currently regulated by a voluntary scheme. This scheme will be replaced by an internationally agreed mandatory scheme in the near future which will also regulate use of chemicals.

I refer the hon. Member to my previous replies to similar questions on 4 June 1996, *Official Report,* columns *307-8* and 3 July 1996, *Official Report,* column *458.*

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what regulatory action is undertaken by the Government to ensure that the cumulative effects of discharges to the environment from offshore oil and gas installations are maintained below levels which cause damage to marine wildlife and habitats. [508]

Mr. Page: Exemptions from the Prevention of Oil Pollution Act are given to offshore installations at levels which are agreed in international fora as not likely to cause cumulative damage to marine wildlife and habitats.

I refer the hon. Member to my previous replies to similar questions on 4 June 1996, *Official Report* columns *307–8* and 3 July 1996, *Official Report,* column *458.*

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what arrangements are in place for Government officials to undertake field inspections to assess the quality and quantity of polluting discharges other than oil spills and produced water from offshore oil and gas installations. [510]

Mr. Page: My officials make use of transport systems provided by the industry in order to undertake field inspections to assess the quality and quantity of polluting discharges. It is understood that this practice mirrors that undertaken in other nations.

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what cumulative impacts of discharges from offshore oil and gas installations on marine wildlife and habitats are taken into account when agreeing limits for the discharge and use of chemicals for each installation. [507]

Mr. Page: My Department is advised by the Ministry of Fisheries and Food and the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department on the impacts of discharges to the marine environment. I refer the hon. Member to the replies given today by my hon. Friends, the Parliamentary Under Secretaries at MAFF and the Scottish Office to her questions on this topic.

Arms Embargo (Argentina)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade for what reason the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Mr. Oppenheim), omitted the reassessments of arms embargos against Argentina since January 1991 in his answer of 13 June 1996, *Official Report,* column *263.* [787]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* In his answer, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley stated that the policy on the application of the embargo on defence sales is kept under regular review. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Pentlands, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, told the House on 24 October 1996, *Official Report,* column 141, should the Government decide to implement any relaxation of the embargo, this will be announced to Parliament.

Enterprise Britain Initiative

Mr. Hoon: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the constituencies to be visited under the enterprise Britain initiative; and what is the estimated cost of the exercise. [70]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The detailed programme is currently being arranged. The cost will depend on the number and size of the events.

Mr. Hoon: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what will be the cost to those attending enterprise Britain events. [163]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* There will be no charge for those attending the events.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

British Library

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is her estimate of the proportion of internationally available scientific literature and patent collections available in conditions of open access at each of the British library's reading rooms. [459]

Mr. Sproat: The British library's science reference and information service acquires some 1 million patent specifications annually, which it estimates to constitute some 99 per cent. of the world's published output of such specifications. Sixty-one per cent. of the material held by the science reference and information service in this category is available either on open access, or is accessible to those users holding a vault pass. Of the total estimated 81,000 scientific periodicals published world-wide, the British library estimates that the science reference and information service currently receives 20,000 research titles. Material in English published during the last 10 years, and material published in other languages during the last two to three years, is held on open access, representing some 26 per cent. of the total research periodicals held by the science reference and information service. It is not possible to estimate the total number of scientific monographs published throughout the world. The science reference and information service receives some 4,500 new scientific monograph titles at research level published in the UK each year through legal deposit, and acquires foreign titles in line with the acquisition funds available.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is the total value of properties which have been sold from the British library estate. [440]

Mr. Sproat: The library sold its freehold in 14 Store street, London WC1, for £5.5 million on 19 August 1991. I understand that no other property held by the British library has been sold.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what leaseback arrangements have been registered in the use of properties in the British library estate. [439]

Mr. Sproat: None.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what has been the total number of voluntary and compulsory redundancies at each of the branches of the British library in the last five years. [460]

Mr. Sproat: No British library staff have been subject to either voluntary or compulsory redundancy prior to March 1996. Forty-nine employees of the British library accepted the terms of a voluntary redundancy programme which was offered in March 1996, 13 of whom have already left the library's employment and a further 12 of whom will do so during the remainder of the present financial year.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what estimates she has of the value of the two British library related assets in Tooks court, London WC2. [438]

Mr. Sproat: The premises at 25 Southampton buildings, London WC2, adjoin Tooks court, and house part of the British library's science reference and information service. The property, part of which is leased by the British library, was valued at £6 million as at 13 November 1995.

National Lottery

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) if he will list the total amounts of the lottery funding awards to date in respect of each parliamentary constituency in England and Wales, indicating for each the amounts awarded in the last quarter for which figures are available and listing constituencies in descending rank order by total amounts; [519]

(2) if she will list the total amounts of the lottery funding awards to date in respect of each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland indicating for each the amounts awarded in the last quarter for which figures are available and listing constituencies in descending rank order by total amounts; [987]

(3) if she will list the total amounts of lottery funding awards to date in respect of each parliamentary constituency in Scotland indicating for each the amounts awarded in the last quarter for which figures are available and listing the constituencies in descending rank order by total amounts. [988]

Mr. Sproat: A full list of all awards up to 30 September, broken down by each parliamentary constituency, has been placed in the House of Commons Library today, on computer disc. The Secretary of State wrote to all members of the House on 18 October with an update of awards made in their constituencies during the last quarter. At present, the figures cannot be ranked as requested without disproportionate costs.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Housing Council (Visit to Japan)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors led to the visit to Japan by members of the Northern Ireland Housing Council; what is the estimated cost of the visit; and if he will make a statement. [47]

Mr. Moss: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised me that the Northern Ireland Housing Council was represented at the International Federation for Housing and Planning congress in Japan by its chairman. The congress was a follow-up to the highly successful IFHP congress held in Belfast in September 1995 which the Housing Council was instrumental in bringing to Northern Ireland. The IFHP congress provides an opportunity for the exchange of information and experience on housing and planning issues and also the development of international housing contacts. The estimated cost of attendance is approximately £3,000.

Drumcree Incident

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the cost

of the damage to property caused by the incident at Drumcree and subsequent events during July and August 1996. [139]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Compensation Agency under its chief executive, Mr Denis Stanley. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from D. A. Stanley to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to reply, on behalf of the Compensation Agency, to your recent Question regarding the estimated cost of damage to property caused by the incident at Drumcree and subsequent events during July and August 1996.

The Agency estimates that criminal damage amount to £20 million occurred throughout Northern Ireland during the period 9–14 July. Claims with an estimated value of £9 million have been received for incidents for the period of 15 July onwards. These estimates are based on the Agency's loss adjusters' current valuation of individual claims and may, of course, change as the claims proceed to settlement.

Harbours

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the last financial year what was the contribution of each of the harbours at *(a)* Portavogie, *(b)* Ardglass and *(c)* Kilkeel to the income of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority; and what was the capital expenditure by the authority at each of these fishing ports in the same financial year. [45]

Mr. Ancram: The following table provides details of the authority's income and expenditure in 1995–96:

	Ardglass £	*Kilkeel* £	*Portavogie* £
Operating income	101,109	311,421	235,292
Capital works expenditure	315,692	548,111	154,526

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many claims were made for compensation as a result of (i) damage to property and (ii) injury to persons as a result of the incident at Drumcree and subsequent events in July and August 1996. [138]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Compensation Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Denis Stanley. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from D. A. Stanley to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to reply, on behalf of the Compensation Agency, to your recent Question regarding the number of claims made for compensation in respect of damage to property and injury to persons as a result of the incident at Drumcree and subsequent events during July and August 1996.

The Agency has received a total of 2,665 criminal damage claims and 2,431 criminal injury claims for incidents that occurred during the months of July and August. Prior to July, the number of criminal damage claims being received each month was around 100 and the number of criminal injury claims was around 900 each month. Therefore 2,465 additional criminal damage claims and 631 additional criminal injury claims have been received so far for the months of July and August.

Portavogie Harbour

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the production of ice at Portavogie harbour; how many reports he has received of fishing boats from Portavogie going to Ardglass harbour to get ice because of inadequate production; what plans there are to increase ice production at Portavogie harbour; and if he will make a statement. [48]

Mr. Ancram: On 19 September 1996, the compressor on the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority's main ice plant at Portavogie broke down and had to be replaced. Only a small amount of ice was available for the Portavogie fleet during the rest of that week. Two Portavogie boats obtained ice from the authority's new plant at Ardglass, and the authority organised the delivery of ice from Ardglass to the other Portavogie boats. Ice production was back to normal on 25 September. The authority has commissioned the Sea Fish Industry Authority to undertake an in-depth assessment of the ice production and storage needs at Portavogie, and to advise on the various options by which these can best be met.

Casualty Animals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received relating to the reluctance of contractors to pick up bulls as casualty animals; and if he will make a statement. [466]

Mr. Ancram: No such representations have been received.

Children

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many children in Northern Ireland will be aged *(a)* three and *(b)* four in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999. [1176]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Statistics and Research Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Edgar Jardine. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from E. F. Jardine to Ms Majorie Mowlam, dated 30 October 1996:

You recently tabled a parliamentary question asking the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many children in Northern Ireland will be aged (a) three and (b) four in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999. I have been asked to reply in my capacity as Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Projections of the population of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom are produced by the Government Actuary's Department (London). The information requested is shown in the table below. The figures represent the projection for the age group in question at the mid-year period (30 June).

Year	*3-year-olds*	*4-year-olds*
1996	25,015	26,279
1997	24,545	25,015
1998	24,233	24,535
1999	23,884	24,219

I trust this information is sufficient and if I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Social Security Agency

Mr. Thomason: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Social Security Agency for the current financial year. [1811]

Mr. Moss: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to him on 30 April 1996, *Official Report,* columns *455–56.* However, contrary to that answer, there is no secondary target for unemployment benefit claims clearance of 85 per cent. in 53 days, but only a single target of 75 per cent. in 12 days.

Electoral Officer's Report

Mr. Thomason: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will publish the report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland of 1995–96. [1812]

Sir Patrick Mayhew: The Chief Electoral Officer's annual report has been laid before Parliament today. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Survey

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to receive the results of the disability survey being carried out by his Department; and when he will publish the survey. [126]

Mr. Burt: We expect to receive the data from the disability survey in summer 1997, shortly after completion of field work. The disability survey is a follow-up to the family resources survey and analysis will require data from the two surveys to be merged; we expect to have a combined dataset by the end of 1997. Plans are currently being made for the analysis of this large and complex dataset, but no date for publication has been decided as yet. Details will be included in the Department's research programme announcement next year.

Audit Commission (Fraud Investigations)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what new powers his legislative proposals to counter fraud will provide to the Audit Commission which would avoid the use of powers specified in sections 28 and 29 of the Local Government Finance Act 1982; what legal advice he has taken concerning the use of these powers by the Audit Commission with respect to its current fraud activities; and what limitations on the commission's work in this area were indicated by that advice. [210]

Mr. Heald: We shall be bringing forward legislative proposals to counter fraud shortly.

Voluntary Unemployment Deductions

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate of the numbers of people who have received a voluntary unemployment deduction in the current financial year; and what is the total amount of money deducted. [416]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at November 1995 it is estimated that some 30,000 income support claimants had a deduction from their income support payment for voluntary unemployment. The estimated average amount being deducted was £16.08 per week which equates to £25.3 million per year.

Notes:

1. Rates of deduction for voluntary unemployment are at 20 per cent. or 40 per cent. of the personal allowance.
2. Sample size 5 per cent.
3. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand.
4. The average amount deducted for voluntary unemployment was estimated using the deduction amount recorded on the income support computer system.
5. In a small number of cases, the amount to be deducted was greater than the award of income support. In such cases the latter was used as the "actual" amount deducted.
6. The total amount of money deducted was estimated by multiplying the average weekly deduction by the number of cases with a deduction by 52. This figure was then rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry November 1995.

Incapacity Benefit (Medical Tests)

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish evaluation studies of the standards of medical tests conducted on claimants for incapacity benefit seen by doctors of the Benefits Agency medical service. [757]

Mr. Burt: The performance of Benefits Agency medical service doctors is continuously monitored under local management arrangements to ensure that agreed standards of medical advice are maintained. A major study looking at the consistency of application of the all work test was recently carried out, and a report is being prepared for publication.

War Pensions (Mustard Gas)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the outcome of his Department's investigation started in 1986 into whether casualties contaminated by mustard gas at Bari harbour, Italy, in 1943 should be awarded back-dated war pensions; and if he will make a statement. [743]

Mr. Heald: This investigation was undertaken following the exceptional decision to backdate the payment of war disablement pension to an individual who had been exposed to mustard gas while serving in the Royal Navy at Bari harbour in 1943. He had claimed a war pension in 1983 and contended that he would have claimed earlier had he been aware of the precise nature of the substance with which he had been contaminated.

The purpose of the special exercise was to identify other casualties of the incident in order to establish whether similar action was appropriate in their cases. A press notice announcing the exercise was issued and as a result of this 87 new claims for war pension were received, of which 33 were successful. In addition, 97 claims which had been made previously were reviewed. In total, of the 184 claims, 105 were successful.

The exercise confirmed that all but one were aware at the time of the incident that they had been exposed to mustard gas.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he plans to make in respect of measures to counter fraud to ensure that claimants do not suffer damage or distress as a result of the matching of personal data which *(a)* are inaccurate, irrelevant or out of date or *(b)* relate to other individuals with the same or similar names; and if he will make a statement. [208]

Mr. Heald: The Department has considerable experience in matching data held on different computer systems. The detailed criteria to be matched in each exercise are tightly defined to ensure that they are relevant to the benefit concerned and could not properly belong to more than one individual. Where anomalies are revealed, they are fully checked to eliminate inaccuracies before any further investigation is carried out. All data matching activities are conducted under secure conditions to ensure confidentiality.

Social Fund

Mr. Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications to the social fund were turned down on the grounds of ability to pay in 1995–96 in *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* east London and *(c)* Newham; and what percentage of the total applying this figure represented in each case. [982]

Mr. Roger Evans: The administration of the social fund is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Stephen Timms, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many applications to the Social Fund were turned down on the grounds of ability to pay in 1995–96 in (a) Great Britain, (b) East London and (c) Newham; and what percentage of the total applying this figure represented in each case.

The information for East London and Newham is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

I have provided at Annex A the national information.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Annex A: number of refusals on the grounds of inability to repay and as a percentage of all applications for the period April 1995 to March 1996

	Inability to repay	*Percentage of total applications*
National	10,411	0.4

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Income Support

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to align the rules for calculating earnings, provided for by the Social Security Benefit (Computation of Earnings) Regulations 1978, with the rules used to calculate earnings in the income support scheme. [1341]

Mr. Roger Evans: I have today laid the Social Security Benefit (Computation of Earnings) Regulations 1996 before Parliament. The regulations will align, as far as possible, the rules for calculating a person's earnings for the purposes of contributory benefits, non-contributory benefits, increases for dependants and benefits for industrial injuries—except industrial injuries and diseases, old cases—with the rules used in the income support scheme. The change will remove a number of inconsistencies between benefits and reduce complexity in the social security scheme. In a small number of cases the changes may result in either benefit loss or gain.

War Widows Pension

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will make it his policy that widows of Japanese prisoners of war will not have their pensions reduced because their late husbands may have died from smoking-related illnesses; [907]

(2) how many widows have been affected by changes in the regulations controlling the level of pensions for widows of Japanese prisoners of war; [908]

(3) how many widows of Japanese prisoners of war are currently receiving pensions; how many are receiving pensions which *(a)* have and *(b)* have not been reduced by the change in regulations related to death due to smoking-related illnesses; and how many are receiving a reduced pension as a result of those changes. [909]

Mr. Heald: Contrary to news reports, there has been no change in rules regarding pensions for war widows whose husbands died of smoking-related diseases.

A war widow's pension may be awarded where the late husband's death was due to, or is substantially hastened by, any service in the armed forces. There is no automatic entitlement to a war widow's pension because the late husband was a war pensioner.

The war pensions scheme was never intended to compensate for the effects of a personal habit such as smoking. Policy on this has not changed. Over more than 40 years that has been the policy of successive Governments; it has applied to all those who served in the armed forces, including those who were prisoners of the Japanese during world war two.

The law does however provide for awards in respect of smoking-related conditions where there was a severely disabling mental condition—itself attributable to service and assessed for war pension purposes at a minimum of 50 per cent.—which rendered the late husband incapable of exercising personal choice and prevented him giving up the habit.

Additionally, if there was more than one cause of death, one being smoking related and the other not smoking related but still linked to service, a war widow's pension will still be payable.

Information on the numbers of war widows pensions in payment to the widows of former prisoners of the Japanese is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Female Workers

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to produce a report on female workers similar to the one entitled "Male Earnings Mobility in the Lifetime Labour Market Database". [1129]

Mr. Burt: Analyses of earnings movements among women will be undertaken as part of the Department's current programme of work from the lifetime labour market database. Analyses of female earners were previously hindered by a lack of comprehensive data identifying women who take a career break to look after children; this problem has been largely removed in the most recent version of the lifetime labour market database.

Invalidity and Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people (i) claimed and (ii) received *(a)* sickness benefit for each year since 1990, *(b)* invalidity benefit for each year since 1990, *(c)* incapacity benefit short-term lower rate since its introduction, *(d)* incapacity benefit short-term higher rate since its introduction and *(e)* incapacity benefit long-term rate with invalidity allowance but without additional pension since its introduction. [744]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the tables.

Table A: sickness and invalidity benefit

Date	Sickness benefit		Invalidity benefit	
	Claimants	Beneficiaries	Claimants	Beneficiaries
31 March 1990	309,000	103,000	1,209,000	1,209,000
30 March 1991	372,000	140,000	1,306,000	1,306,000
4 April 1992	458,000	138,000	1,439,000	1,439,000
3 April 1993	534,000	147,000	1,580,000	1,580,000
2 April 1994	568,000	127,000	1,681,000	1,681,000
12 April 1995	639,000	127,000	1,767,000	1,767,000

Source:
1 per cent. sample of all sickness and invalidity benefit claimants at date specified.

Table B: incapacity benefit (IB)

	Claimants at 31 May 1996	Beneficiaries at 31 May 1996
IB short term lower	711,000	117,000
IB short term higher	106,000	105,000
IB long term	1,580,000	1,572,000
IB long term with invalidity allowance and no additional pension	n/a	141,000
IB long term with invalidity allowance and additional pension	n/a	395,000

Source:
5 per cent. sample from the incapacity benefit computer system. Excludes a small number of cases not held on the system.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate his Department has made of the savings accruing from the abolition of the additional invalidity benefit; [732]

(2) what factors underlay the abolition of the additional invalidity benefit following the introduction of incapacity benefit in April 1995. [730]

Mr. Burt: The additional pension component of invalidity benefit was abolished because it was poorly targeted and did not represent value for money for the taxpayer. As additional pension was earnings-related, those with the highest earnings prior to receipt of benefit gained most and were also more likely to be in receipt of other income such as an occupational pension. The cost of additional pension was projected to rise to almost £2 billion by the year 2000–01.

Estimates for net savings from the abolition of AP are in the table.

Year	Net savings (£ million)
1995–96	105
1996–97	275
1997–98	425

1. Estimates are in cash terms and based on Government Actuary Department forecasts and family expenditure data.
2. Savings are net of any income-related benefit offsets.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the annual cost to his Department of incapacity benefit for each of the five years before its abolition. [731]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the table.

£ million

Year	Expenditure			
	Sickness benefit (SB)	Invalidity benefit (IVB)	Administration costs (SB and IVB)	Total
1990–91	216	4,431	208	5,071
1991–92	274	5,485	275	6,034
1992–93	364	6,210	322	6,896
1993–94	365	7,068	359	7,792
1994–95	342	7,705	347	8,394

1. All figures except for sickness benefit and invalidity benefit expenditure for 1994–95 are from successive departmental reports.
2. Expenditure figures for sickness benefit and invalidity benefit in 1994–95 are from the national insurance fund accounts and supersede those in the current departmental report.
3. Sickness and invalidity benefits were replaced by incapacity benefit from 13 April 1995.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Middle East Peace Process

15. **Sir Robert Hicks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the United Kingdom and its EU partners are taking to persuade Israel to implement the Oslo accords as they relate to Hebron. [698]

17. **Mrs. Jane Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next plans to meet the Foreign Minister of Israel to discuss developments in the peace process. [700]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary is due to visit Israel and Gaza on 3 November. We have made it clear on a number of occasions that implementation of those provisions of the interim agreement which relate to Hebron is an essential and urgent step in the middle east peace process.

26. **Mr. Canavan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the middle east peace process. [711]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave in the House today to the hon. Member for Elmet (Mr. Batiste).

Taiwan

16. **Mr. Michael Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the Government's policy with regard to the formal independence of Taiwan. [699]

Mr. Hanley: It is our view that the status of Taiwan is a matter for the Chinese Government and authorities in Taiwan to resolve between themselves.

19. **Mr. Pawsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last discussed Taiwan and Hong Kong with the Chinese Government. [704]

Mr. Hanley: I discussed Taiwan with Vice-Foreign Minister Wang Yingfan on 2 September in Peking.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed Hong Kong with the Vice-Premier Qian Qichen on 26 September in New York.

22. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Taiwan. [707]

Mr. Hanley: We enjoy good commercial and cultural relations with Taiwan. We see great potential for the promotion of UK exports and inward investment; the attraction of tourism and educational links.

NATO

18. **Mr Harry Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the accession of Poland and other states to the EU and NATO. [701]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We are firmly committed to the enlargement of the European Union and NATO.

25. **Mr. Wareing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Russian counterpart in respect of NATO plans for expansion into central and eastern Europe; and if he will make a statement. [710]

Mr. David Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has met the Russian Foreign Minister three times in the past five months. He has explained to Mr. Primakov NATO's response to the central Europeans' strong bids for membership, along with NATO's wish for a new relationship with Russia.

28. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence concerning the enlargement of NATO. [713]

Mr. Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary is in frequent contact with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to ensure that all aspects of NATO enlargement have been properly addressed.

English Language

21. **Mr. Renton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he proposes to take in order to encourage the use, understanding and teaching of the English language abroad. [706]

Mr. Hanley: Our language is a great national asset and we continue to encourage the use, understanding and teaching of British English abroad through the medium of British organisations, goods and services. We have first-class institutions engaged in English language teaching and training, and activities of the British Council, BBC World Service, educational institutions, publishers and suppliers all serve to promote our long-term political, economic and commercial interests worldwide. The British Council-led English 2000 project, launched last year, brings all sectors together to promote the teaching and use of English into the next century.

BBC World Service

23. **Mrs. Maddock:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ensure that next year's funding for the BBC World Service will be adequate to prevent reduction in the level or number of language services. [708]

34. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future financial arrangements for the World Service. [719]

Mr. Hanley: Funding for the BBC World Service will be determined following the current public expenditure survey round.

Dependent Territories (Government Employees)

24. **Dr. Marek:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in which dependent territories where personnel issues are reserved for the decision of the Governor, Government employees of any category have to resign if they become pregnant. [709]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: No Government employees in any of the dependent territories are required to resign on becoming pregnant. However, in Bermuda personnel issues are not reserved to the Governor, who is obliged to act in accordance with the advice of the Public Service Commission.

Economic and Monetary Union

27. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many civil servants in his Department are currently working on issues relating to economic and monetary union. [712]

Mr. David Davis: No FCO official is assigned exclusively to EMU, which is dealt with alongside other EU policy issues. It bears on the responsibilities of a number of FCO departments, including European Union department (internal), economic relations department and economic advisers.

Independence

29. **Mr. Welsh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many countries have gained independence from the United Kingdom since 1966; and if he will make a statement. [714]

Dr. Liam Fox: Since 1966, the United Kingdom Parliament has granted independence to 24 countries. The last was Brunei in 1984.

Monetary Gold (Restitution)

30. **Mr. Rooker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Her Majesty's Government will initiate a new discussion in the Tripartite Commission for the Restitution of Monetary Gold and claimant countries regarding the residue of gold and its possible distribution to individuals. [715]

Mr. David Davis: The tripartite commission, at our request, has already discussed this subject: it is now being considered by the member Governments—the UK, France and the US.

Afghanistan

31. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. [716]

Dr. Liam Fox: The situation in Afghanistan is still very fluid. We are concerned about the escalation in fighting over the last month. We urge all parties to cooperate fully with the efforts of the UN special mission to Afghanistan to find a peaceful settlement.

Intergovernmental Conference

32. **Mr. David Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his most recent discussions at the IGC about employment matters with his counterparts in the European Union. [717]

Mr. David Davis: Employment was one of the subjects discussed at the ministerial meeting of the intergovernmental conference on 1 October.

Royal Family (Overseas Visits)

33. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total cost to his Department arising from visits abroad by members of the royal family in 1995–96. [718]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The total cost, to this Department, of official visits overseas by members of the royal family in 1995–96 was £440,092.47.

Argentina

35. **Mr. Austin-Walker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had recently with the Government of Argentina; and if he will make a statement. [720]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary met the Argentine Foreign Minster in New York on 25 September. They had a very positive discussion covering a number of bilateral issues.

Gibraltar

36. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Spanish Government in respect of failures to keep traffic flowing freely on the Gibraltar-Spanish border. [721]

Mr. David Davis: The delays have improved recently but traffic is still not flowing freely. There are at times extended delays. This is unacceptable. We have taken this up vigorously with the Spanish authorities to remind them of their obligations. We will continue to do so.

United Nations Charter

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will state for each of articles 1 and 2 of the charter of the United Nations the relevant articles of the treaties of the European Union which incorporate its stated objectives. [235]

Mr. David Davis: The objectives of the European Union and the European Communities are not comparable with the purposes and principles of the United Nations. The objectives of the European Union are described in the preamble to the treaty on European Union and its opening articles, in particular articles A, B and F. The objectives of the European Communities are likewise set out in the preambles to the treaties establishing them and in their opening articles, in particular articles 2 and 3 of the EC treaty, articles 2 and 3 of the European Coal and Steel Community treaty, and articles 1 and 2 of the Euratom treaty.

Northern Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit the occupied area of northern Cyprus during his forthcoming visit to the Republic of Cyprus. [962]

Mr. David Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary will hold talks with President Klerides and also with Mr. Denktas in his capacity as leader of the Turkish Cypriot community. Timings and venues for the talks are to be arranged.

International Criminal Court

Sir David Knox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the preparatory committee of the United Nations General Assembly on the establishment of an international criminal court, indicating whether Her Majesty's Government will provide financial support to help to create such an institution. [963]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We have participated actively in the work of the preparatory committee. While much has been achieved, an enormous amount remains to be done. We therefore supported the recommendation of the preparatory committee at its last session that up to nine more weeks were required for further preparatory work. We also believe that we should set a date in 1998 for a conference to consider the statute of such a court. At the next session of the General Assembly, we shall need to review the progress made by the preparatory committee in its sessions in 1997.

The preparatory process is founded out of the UN regular budget to which we contribute.

Turkey (Human Rights)

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to prevent human rights abuses against Christians in Turkey. [1097]

Mr. David Davis: We remain concerned about the human rights situation in Turkey and its effect on all people, including the Christian minorities. We will continue to raise our concerns with the Turkish authorities. Our embassy officials also pay regular visits to Christian communities in Turkey. The next visit is planned for November.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next plans to meet representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka to discuss the situation of the Tamil community. [266]

Dr. Liam Fox: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has regular meetings with representatives of the Sri Lankan Government to discuss the ethnic conflict. Most recently, he saw the Sri Lanka Foreign Minister in London on 14 October.

United Nations (Payment of Dues)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made by the United Kingdom Government to that of the USA concerning payment of dues to the United Nations. [702]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We firmly believe that all UN member states, including the US, must pay their UN dues promptly, in full and without conditions. We take every opportunity to urge the US to pay its UN dues, including its arrears, in accordance with its legal obligation to do so. The EU proposals for UN financial reform include penalties for member states that fail to pay their dues.

Western Sahara

Mr. Fatchett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the future role of the United Nations in the Western Sahara. [801]

Mr. Hanley: We support the UN Secretary–General and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara—MINURSO—the UN operation in the region, in their efforts to bring about an end to this long–running conflict.

Sudan

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimates he has assessed relating to the numbers of Sudanese civilians that have been killed as a result of warfare since 1991, indicating where possible, the ethnic group of casualties. [678]

Mr. Hanley: No detailed figures are available. But the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Sudan suggested in his most recent report, February 1996, that 1.2 million people had died since 1983 as a result of the Sudan civil war.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth affairs what measures his Department intends to take to encourage the Government of Sudan to *(a)* conduct a referendum on the independence of southern Sudan and *(b)* bring about a ceasefire; and what discussions are planned with the Government of Sudan. [679]

Mr. Hanley: We continue to make clear to the Government of Sudan that we look to them to move towards a negotiated end to the civil war by declaring a ceasefire and that its continuing prosecution of the civil war stands in the way of an improvement in bilateral relations with the UK. The British ambassador in Khartoum sees members of the Government there frequently. The need for an end to the civil war is always high on the agenda.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of state for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department intends to take to encourage the Government of Sudan to repatriate the Sudanese who have been displaced by civil war. [680]

Mr. Hanley: The return of Sudanese displaced by the civil war to their local regions is not possible while the civil war continues.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which British diplomats have visited the Nuer lands of Upper Nile state in southern Sudan since Dr. Riek Machar signed the "political charter" with the Sudan Government in April 1996 to assess popular support and the support of traditional leaders (i) for him and (ii) for his signing of the charter; and what were those assessments. [994]

Mr. Hanley: The embassy has an active programme of visits to all parts of Sudan but has not visited the Nuer lands since July 1995.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will conduct a review of British Government policy towards the Sudan. [986]

Mr. Hanley: We keep British policy towards Sudan, and, in particular, what we can usefully do to help the situation in the south, under constant review.

DEFENCE

Porton Down

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how long the chemical and biological defence establishment, Porton Down, aims to take to reply to letters from individuals who took part in the service volunteers programme at the establishment when they request details of their experiments. [741]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the length of time taken to respond to letters from those who took part in studies at Porton Down. The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) at Porton Down is now part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) for which I am responsible as Chief Executive.

Staff at Porton Down aim to reply to all letters from former volunteers within 10 days. Where this is not possible, we seek to send an interim reply inside this timescale.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many individuals took part in the service volunteers programme at the chemical and biological defence establishment during *(a)* 1994 and *(b)* 1995. [726]

Mr. Soames: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) which now includes the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment (CBDE), I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the numbers of volunteers who participated in the service volunteer programme at Porton Down in 1994 and 1995.

The volunteer records show that ninety six individuals came to Porton Down to take part in the volunteer programme in 1994 and fifty eight in 1995.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions the chemical and biological defence establishment, Porton Down, has provided relevant extracts from *(a)* technical reports and *(b)* original laboratory data to the War Pensions Agency in response to individuals making disablement claims arising out of experiments at Porton Down as indicated in his answer of 22 July, *Official Report*, columns *87–88*. [742]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the provision of technical reports and original laboratory data to the War Pensions Agency when dealing with claims form former volunteers at Porton Down. The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) at Porton Down is now part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) for which I am responsible as Chief Executive.

It is normal practice in dealing with requests from the War Pensions Agency for CBD Sector to provide confirmation of attendance and a short explanation of the tests undertaken. This includes details of any exposure to chemicals, the believed purpose of the study, an outline of the experimental methods used (where they are known) and any reaction of the individual to the study noted in the remaining records. Only on one occasion in recent years have additional details of a volunteer's experiences been provided through release of photocopies of the laboratory record books or copies of technical reports discussing the type of study conducted.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the chemical and biological establishment's assessment of the effect on human health in *(a)* the short term and *(b)* the long term of one-off exposure to the chemical agent CN; and what research has been done by the chemical and biological defence establishment to reach this assessment. [725]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question concerning Porton Down's assessment of the effects on human health of exposure to the chemical agent CN. The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) at Porton Down is now part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) for which I am responsible as Chief Executive.

Short term exposure to chloroacteophenone (CN) causes a burning sensation in the throat, eyes and nose within seconds of exposure. These effects are accompanied by excessive lachrymation, a running nose and a stinging sensation of the skin. In the majority of cases these symptoms resolve themselves spontaneously within around 30 minutes of the end of the exposure.

Exposure to high concentrations can cause long term clinical effects, namely, damage to the eye and a dermatitis of the skin. This dermatitis involves reddening, swelling and in severe cases ulceration.

The eye effects were observed following studies of the exposure of experimental animals to riot control agents and further information was obtained from case reports from the United States following the widespread use of CN during Civil Rights Riots in the late 1960s. Information regarding the skin effects from exposure to CN and CS was obtained through limited volunteer studies carried out at Porton in the late 1960s. A copy of a technical report produced from these studies was sent to you with my letter of 21st October 1996.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the chemical and biological defence establishment's assessment of whether short-term exposure to mustard gas causes *(a)* chronic conjunctivitis or *(b)* pigmentation abnormalities of the skin; and what research has been carried out by the establishment at Porton Down to reach this assessment. [740]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question concerning Porton Down's assessment of the effects of short-term exposure to mustard gas. The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) at Porton Down is now part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) for which I am responsible as Chief Executive.

2,2—(bis-chloroethyl) sulphide, commonly called mustard gas, is a member of the class of chemical warfare agents called vesicants. These agents affect the skin, lungs and eyes of individuals who are exposed to either the liquid or the vapour, although the effects are more severe from exposure to the liquid.

Chronic conjunctivitis has generally been observed to occur after exposure of the eyes to mustard vapour or liquid. It can persist for several days, depending on the dose of agent, although complete healing usually follows except where very high doses are involved, in which case scarring of the conjunctiva and permanent damage may occur.

Similarly, de-pigmentation may occur in healed skin following exposure to mustard gas agent on a sufficient scale to cause blistering.

Information on mustard agent injuries used to produce Porton Down's assessment of the effect of exposure to the agent is taken from numerous sources. The best description of the effects continue to be the first hand accounts from First World War casualties. In the 1930s and early 1940s studies were conducted at Porton Down involving animals and service volunteers which provided considerable data. This information has been subsequently updated by the observations made by medical personnel involved in the clinical management of casualties from the Iran–Iraq war who were treated in London between 1984—988.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date the chemical and biological defence establishment published its annual report for 1995–96. [727]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 30 October 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the publication date of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment's annual report.

On 1 April 1995 the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment became part of the new Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. The DERA annual report, which includes a section on the activities of the enlarged CBDE division, was laid before the House on 16 July 1996.

I have arranged for a copy of this year's annual report to be sent to you under separate cover which I hope you will find helpful.

Land Mines

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the *(a)* designed maximum timed life and *(b)* self-destruct reliability of scatterable mine systems due to enter service with the armed forces in 1999. [392]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The designed maximum timed life of the land mines for the vehicle launched scatterable anti-tank mine system which is due to enter service with the Army in 1999 is classified. The design aim for the self destruct reliability of these anti-tank mines is 99.9 per cent. Testing to date has demonstrated that this is being met. Additionally, mine detonation relies on a short-life battery and any mine that fails to self-destruct will deactivate within a further short time.

Departmental Property

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the terms of reference for agents undertaking the sale of his Department's property. [205]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The terms of reference for agents undertaking the sale of my Department's property depend upon the particular circumstances of the sale in question. The details of the sales contract are negotiated with the relevant agent.

Pilots and Navigators

Mr. Allason: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will examine the reintroduction of senior non-commissioned officers as pilots and navigators on transport aircraft and helicopters; and if he will assess the performance of their equivalents in the Army Air Corps. [836]

Mr. Soames: The Royal Air Force has no plans to extend the role of airmen (aircrew), who are non-commissioned officers, to encompass the role of pilots or navigators.

Personnel Training (Bermuda)

Mr. Allason: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will scrap the policy of charging the Bermuda Government for the training of personnel. [838]

Mr. Soames: No. It is our policy to recover the costs of providing training for outside customers, except in cases where the benefit to the United Kingdom is such that a subsidy can be justified.

Recruitment

Mr. Allason: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effect of the recruitment of British dependent territory citizens on British forces. [839]

Mr. Soames: No specific assessment of the effect of recruitment of British dependent territory citizens on British armed forces has been made.

Bermuda Regiment

Mr. Allason: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to incorporate the Bermuda Regiment into the British Army's order of battle. [840]

Mr. Soames: There are no plans to incorporate the Bermuda Regiment into the Army's order of battle.

Merchant Vessels

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the number of merchant vessels chartered for use in military exercises or operations involving United Kingdom forces, the flag nationality of those vessels, and the total cost of these charters, over the past five years. [1029]

Mr. Soames: During the past five years—1992 to September 1996—143 vessels have been chartered for exercise/operations. These were:

Nationality	*Number*
Danish	49
German	18
Norwegian	16
Swedish	12
Spanish	7
Ukrainian	6
Maltese	5
Swiss	4
Panamanian	3
Bahamian	3
Finnish	3

Nationality	Number
Italian	3
Dutch	2
Greek	2
Luxembourg	2
Polish	2
French	1
Swiss	1
Cypriot	1
Dutch	1
Liberian	1
British	1

The total cost of chartering these vessels was £43,816,794.

Pregnancy Dismissal Cases (Legal Fees)

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of legal fees incurred by Her Majesty's Government in relation to the armed services pregnancy dismissal cases defended by his Department in respect of legal advice and work, separately identifying advocacy provided by lawyers in private practice; and what was the average *(a)* daily and *(b)* hourly rate contracted for the advice and work. [851]

Mr. Soames: The total cost of legal fees to date in the armed forces pregnancy dismissal litigation, including disbursements and VAT, is £6.8 million, the majority of which—£6.3 million—has been paid to the Treasury Solicitor's Department. Barristers in private practice have been used as advocates in the 360 cases which have proceeded to an industrial tribunal—7 per cent., of all cases—but their fees cannot be separately identified in the overall figure of £1.9 million, including VAT, which the Treasury Solicitor's Department has disbursed in respect of counsel's fees. It is not possible to calculate a meaningful average daily or hourly rate for the variety of advice given and work done.

Proof and Experimental Station, Inchterf

Mr. Tom Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what future use he is considering for the former proof and experimental station at Inchterf, Auchenreoch; and if he will preclude its use as (i) a private shooting range or (ii) an explosives testing ground. [853]

Mr. Soames: The former proof and experimental station at Inchterf has been marketed on the basis of a planning brief agreed with the local authority. This does not envisage the site being used as an explosive testing ground nor as a private shooting range. We are not aware that any of those who have expressed interest in the site intend to use it for those purposes.

Air Traffic Movements (Northolt)

Sir Michael Shersby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what were the number of military air traffic movements at RAF Northolt in *(a)* 1989 and *(b)* 1994; and if he will estimate the number of such movements for the year ending 31 December 1996; [855]

(2) what was the total number of civilian air traffic movements at RAF Northolt in *(a)* 1989 and *(b)* 1994; and if he will estimate the number for the year ending 31 December 1996. [854]

Mr. Soames: The following table provides the information requested on military and civilian movements at RAF Northolt. The 1996 estimate for military movements includes those by civil aircraft on Government business, such as MOD charters.

	1989	1994	1996[1]
Military	9,500	7,319	8,450
Civilian	5,600	5,425	6,450

[1] Estimate.

RAF Fast Jets (Maintenance)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to improve quality control in the maintenance of RAF fast jets by contractors. [898]

Mr. Soames: The MOD aims to place full responsibility on its contractors for the quality of the products and services which they supply. It is MOD policy to place contracts only with those suppliers who have been assessed by an accredited body to an appropriate quality management standard.

Computer Hacking, Fraud and Theft

Mr. George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many cases of computer hacking, fraud and theft, including theft of computer chips, his Department has recorded in the last five years. [800]

Mr. Soames: Consolidated records of computer hacking, computer fraud and computer theft have only been maintained across the Department since 1 April 1995. Since that date 152 known cases of theft of computers or computer equipment, including two cases of chip theft, have been recorded and there have been no reported instances of computer fraud.

In respect of hacking I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) on 17 June 1996, *Official Report*, column *364*.

These figures do not include cases under current active investigation or sub judice.

Computers

Mr. George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many computers are held by *(a)* the Ministry of Defence and *(b)* the individual services. [799]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Beef Purchases

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how much non-United Kingdom produced beef was purchased by his Department in 1995–96; and how much has been purchased in the current financial year; [910]

(2) if he will list the countries which have supplied beef to his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97 indicating the amounts and value. [911]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement of food for the armed forces is contracted to the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes NAAFI. My Department does not specify the source of origin from which NAAFI should obtain beef or any other meat, but expects them to seek the best market price for the product. The majority of our requirements are for frozen beef, which is not readily available from the British market.

In the financial year 1995–96 and in the first six months of the current financial year NAAFI purchased some 1.45M kg of non UK beef, valued at £5.2 million. This was sourced primarily from South America, New Zealand and Australia.

Argentine Destroyers

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the security threat posed by Argentine destroyers, with particular reference to those equipped with bomb-proof casing. [673]

Mr. Soames *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* We continue to monitor all developments which may affect our security interests in the South Atlantic. We are satisfied that the forces we maintain there, supported as necessary by reinforcements, are capable of meeting our commitment to the security of the Falkland Islands and other dependencies.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Vessels Safety Grants Scheme

Mr. Beith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will extend the vessel safety grants scheme to fishing boats under 12 m prior to the extension of the marine safety code to these vessels in 1997. [663]

Mr. Baldry: The Marine Safety Agency is developing a safety code for fishing vessels under 12 m and consultations with the industry on its requirements are in progress. I am informed that the MSA intends to publish the code early in 1997 and to bring it into force in 1998. But until the requirements of the code have been agreed and the costs of implementation calculated it will not be possible to reach decisions on any extension of the current safety grant scheme to fishing vessels under 12 m.

Feline Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what Government guidelines exist to assist veterinary staff and surgeons in diagnosing feline spongiform encephalopathy; and if he will make a statement. [455]

Mrs. Browning: The clinical signs and pathological lesions associated with feline spongiform encephalopathy have been published in the veterinary and scientific press in considerable detail. The first confirmation was announced in *The Veterinary Record* on 19 May 1990, and included details of clinical signs that would enable veterinary surgeons to identify possible cases. The signs are not dissimilar to rabies which, being a notifiable disease, veterinary surgeons would automatically report to the divisional veterinary manager. Moreover, the clinical signs of FSE are in fact similar to those seen in cattle with BSE, a condition with which most veterinary practitioners and all MAFF veterinary officers are fully familiar.

Advice was given directly to such practitioners that, subject to the elimination of rabies as a cause of disease, a free post mortem examination for FSE was available through the veterinary investigation service of MAFF. Since November 1994 the diagnosis of any transmissible spongiform encephalopathy in the laboratory, other than those produced by experimental means in the course of research, has been officially notifiable.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what Government procedures exist for *(a)* encouraging the reporting of and *(b)* collating data relating to feline spongiform encephalopathy; if he will indicate the date of inception for each procedure; and if he will list those procedures which no longer operate; and if he will make a statement. [465]

Mrs. Browning: The Spongiform Encephalopathy (Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 1994 makes suspicion of spongiform encephalopathies in species other than cattle, sheep and goats following laboratory examination notifiable. Nevertheless, from May 1990 when the first confirmation of feline spongiform encephalopathy was announced, MAFF encouraged the veterinary profession to report suspicion of any cases to the local divisional veterinary manager. This was done by publication of a letter from the Chief Veterinary Officer in *The Veterinary Record*, as well as by local communication between DVMs and veterinary surgeons. A free diagnostic service was offered through the veterinary investigation service where a differential diagnosis was not required. Not all presentations of cases were directly through veterinary practitioners. Some were identified after referral to university veterinary departments. While the majority of cases have subsequently confirmed by examination of brain tissue at the central veterinary laboratory, the diagnosis of veterinary pathologists with experience of FSE is usually accepted as definitive.

Following confirmation, a veterinary officer of the Ministry carries out an epidemiological investigation, where possible, involving the veterinary surgeon, the current owner, and if appropriate previous owners. As with cattle, this involves full details of the animal's medical and feeding history. Details of all confirmed cases are held centrally to allow further analysis and interpretation.

Pet Food

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what data his Department collates on the quantity of mammalian meat and bonemeal used in pet food; which manufacturers of pet food use mammalian meat and bonemeal in pet food; and if he will make a statement. [422]

Mrs. Browning: This Department does not collate data on the quantity of mammalian meat and bonemeal used in pet food, nor does it have any information on which pet food manufacturers use such material.

Bovine Livestock Feeds

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all known ingredients of *(a)* cattle cake and *(b)* bovine livestock feeds; and if he will make a statement. [474]

Mrs. Browning: It is not feasible to provide an exhaustive list of the ingredients of either cattle cake or bovine livestock feeds. However, the Feeding Stuffs Regulations 1995 list the main raw materials used in compound feeds in the European Union as well as permitted additives and protein sources. A copy of these regulations has been deposited in the House of Commons Library.

Genetic Engineering

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the percentage of the total United Kingdom quantity of *(a)* grains, *(b)* pulses and *(c)* vegetables grown using genetic engineering which have been exported abroad in each of the last five years. [1019]

Mrs. Browning: There have been no exports of genetically modified grains, pulses or vegetables from the United Kingdom in the last five years.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what requirements there are on *(a)* manufacturers and *(b)* retailers to indicate the use of genetically engineered ingredients on the labels of food products; and if he will make a statement. [1021]

Mrs. Browning: The need for genetically modified foods to be labelled is assessed by the Food Advisory Committee on a case by case basis as part of the approval process for their use.

In line with the latest draft of the EC Novel Foods and Novel Food Ingredients Regulation, which is expected to be adopted shortly, compulsory labelling is normally required when there is a significant difference in the composition, nutritional value or intended use of a food compared to its conventionally produced equivalent, or if it is likely to give rise to ethical concerns or contain an unexpected allergen. Labelling is also required if any live genetically modified organisms are likely to be present in the food as consumed.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the (i) quantity and (ii) percentage of *(a)* grains, *(b)* pulses and *(c)* vegetables grown using genetic engineering which have been imported into the United Kingdom in each of the last five years. [1023]

Mrs. Browning: The only food from a genetically modified crop imported into the United Kingdom in the past five years is a tomato paste that went on sale in February this year. A total of 900,000 cans have been imported from the USA to date.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the percentage of soya products on sale in the United Kingdom which contain genetically engineered beans in each of the last five years. [1020]

Mrs. Browning: No soya products sold in the United Kingdom in the last five years have contained genetically modified beans.

Casualty Cows (Slaughtering)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many casualty dairy cows were slaughtered in each month of 1995 and 1996. [912]

Mrs. Browning: The number of casualty cattle handled under the over thirty months scheme are as follows for each month since the scheme began on 13 May 1996:

	Number
May	3,775
June	8,749
July	13,446
August	12,658
September	15,363
October (up to 28 October)	12,793

These figures do not differentiate between dairy and beef cattle.

The Ministry does not hold central records of the number of dairy cows slaughtered as casualties.

Beef Imports

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much beef and of what value was imported into the United Kingdom in each month of 1995 and 1996 to date. [863]

Mr. Baldry: Imports of beef[1] into the United Kingdom during 1995 and 1996, as recorded in the overseas trade statistics, are as follows:

Year	*Month*	*£ million*	*Tonnes (thousand)*
1995	1	34	15
1995	2	35	15
1995	3	43	20
1995	4	42	17
1995	5	54	24
1995	6	68	28
1995	7	62	26
1995	8	55	22
1995	9	69	26
1995	10	60	24
1995	11	44	19
1995	12	39	17
1996	1	38	16
1996	2	31	13
1996	3	34	14
1996	4	43	20
1996	5	44	20
1996	6	44	20

All figures are provisional. Branch C, Statistics (Commodities and Food) Division, Economics and Statistics Group.

[1] Beef includes the following; beef carcass meat, bovine offal and preparations of beef meat and bovine offal.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 31 October 1996

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Incitement to Racial Hatred

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Attorney-General how many people have been prosecuted in each of the last five years for incitement to racial hatred. [61]

The Attorney-General: For the years 1992 to 1996, I have granted consent to the institution of proceedings for incitement to racial hatred against the following number of defendants:

1992: 3

1993: 2

1994: 2

1995: 7

1996: 4 (to date)

During the last five years, I have declined to give my consent in a total of two cases.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Dual Support Transfer

Sir John Hannam: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what conclusion has been reached on the review of the dual support transfer. [2111]

Mr. Ian Taylor: Following extensive consultations, the Government have decided that, to address the evident concerns of the effect of the dual support transfer on research infrastructure, the contribution to indirect costs in research council grants should be increased from 40 to 45 per cent. of approved staff costs for all grant payments on new and existing grants from 1 April 1997.

Additionally, the research councils and funding councils have been asked to identify and implement further measures by next April to ensure that the transfer achieves its original intentions. In particular, it is important that those making research grant applications include all eligible direct costs, and that the research councils meet these wherever possible.

In announcing these measures, I should like to acknowledge the considerable assistance provided by all concerned. As those consulted plainly recognise, the difficult issues raised by the review require a finely balanced judgment to be made. From the consultation, it was clear that the major concern was with departmental infrastructure associated with grant-funded research projects, and hence the Government hope that universities will deploy the increase in the indirect costs contribution to support such infrastructure.

I have asked the Government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Robert May, to keep under review these new arrangements and the health of the higher education research base through the Science and Engineering Base Co-ordinating Committee, which he chairs.

Manufacturing Jobs

Mr. Bayley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many manufacturing jobs with foreign-owned companies operating in the United Kingdom have been lost in the past 12 months. [315]

Mr. Greg Knight: My Department does not collect such information on a systematic basis.

Outward Trade Missions

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what account he has taken of the size of the chambers of commerce and industry when setting criteria of eligibility in respect of outward trade missions; [41]

(2) if he will give for each of the last four years and for 1997–98 details of the awards given to outward trade missions; [40]

(3) what assessment he has made of the implications of the first stage announcement in respect of DTI-supported outward trade missions for north Staffordshire; and if he will make a statement. [42]

Mr. Nelson: The size of the organisation seeking support is but one factor in determining its suitability to run a mission supported by the Department. Other criteria which a chamber of commerce, trade association, business link or similar organisation must fulfil is that it is based in the United Kingdom; represents a substantial proportion of the companies in its industry and/or area, and is of good standing; it must have adequate staff and financial resources to recruit and organise an effective group promotion overseas; and show an active and continuing role in export promotion activities.

All proposals for support are considered on their merits, with account taken of various factors including, for example, the case made for support; how well the proposal meets priorities identified in the country market plan; sponsor's past record. I need also to balance demand against the budget available.

I am confident that the implications of the recent announcement of the 1997–98 stage 1 mission programme for north Staffordshire and indeed the whole of the west midlands are good. In addition to the three offers to the north Staffordshire chamber, 24 offers have been made to other chambers in the region. As participation is not restricted by membership or geographical location, north Staffordshire-based companies can apply to join any of these missions. They may also apply to join all the others which comprise the existing programme.

Trade missions are an important promotional tool. Some 151 missions were supported in 1993–94; 149 in 1994–95 and 210 in 1995–96. Support has been offered for 281 to take place in 1996–97, and a further 230 under stage 1 of the 1997–98 programme. Subject to the availability of additional funding, further offers will be announced in the new year.

Resale Price Maintenance (Medicines)

Mr. Wareing: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received in respect of the proposal of the Office of Fair Trading to abolish resale price maintenance on certain medicines; what response he has made; and if he will make a statement. [482]

Mr. John M. Taylor *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The Director General of Fair Trading announced on 18 October that he was seeking leave of the restrictive practices court to apply for a discharge of its 1970 order in respect of resale price maintenance on certain medicines. If leave is given, it will be for the court to decide whether the 1970 order remains in the public interest. The director general is content to receive further information relevant to the preparation of the application for leave. The Secretary of State has no statutory role or discretion in relation to the director general's application nor in relation to the court's consideration of the case. In the period between the announcement and the 29 October 1996, he has received one representation on this matter, which has been passed to the director general.

Offshore Oil and Gas

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) when was the last occasion that a field inspection of an offshore oil or gas installation was undertaken by a Government official in order to confirm the composition of produced water; and if he will list the number of occasions that such inspections have been undertaken in each of the last eight years; [511]

(2) when was the last occasion that a field inspection of an offshore oil or gas installation was undertaken by a Government official in order to confirm the composition of contamination on drill cuttings; and if he will list the number of occasions that such inspections have been undertaken in each of the last eight years. [512]

Mr. Page *[holding answers 30 October 1996]:* The last occasion that a field inspection of an offshore oil and gas installation was undertaken by a Government official in order to confirm the composition of produced water was on the 25 of October 1996.

As the hon. Member was advised earlier this year on 3 July, *Official Report,* column *457,* inspections of offshore installations have been undertaken by the Department of Trade and Industry in each of the last eight years, although figures are not available, apart from at disproportionate cost due to the relocation of the office responsible to Aberdeen and the subsequent archiving of files.

Ms Ruddock: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the total volumes of unrecovered oil-based drilling muds and of water-based drilling muds that were discharged from offshore oil and gas installations on the UK continental shelf in each of the last eight years. [513]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* The total volumes of unrecovered oil-based drilling muds discharged offshore oil and gas installations on the United Kingdom continental shelf for the last eight years are routinely recorded in the "Energy Report", which is published annually and is available in the Library of the House.

There is no statutory record of total water-based drilling mud discharged.

North Sea Oil Rigs

Mr. Meacher: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many environmental inspections have been carried out in respect of North sea oil rigs in each year since 1980; and how many inspectors carried out this work in each of those years. [1016]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* Numerous inspections of offshore installations have been undertaken by my inspector in each of the last 16 years, although figures are not available apart from at disproportionate cost due to the relocation of the office responsible to Aberdeen and the subsequent archiving of files. I refer the hon. Member to my reply given earlier this year to the hon. Member for Lewisham and Deptford (Ms Ruddock) on 3 July, *Official Report,* column *457.*

There were two inspectors until the end of 1989, but, until 1992, 10 safety inspectors also carried out environmental checks. From 1992 to 1994, there was only one inspector but other staff visiting offshore installations carried out environmental checks. The Department now has six inspectors.

Mr. Meacher: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much oil was discharged in *(a)* the United Kingdom sector and *(b)* the Norwegian sector of the North sea in each year since 1980; and what the figures were for each United Kingdom offshore installation in each of these years. [1017]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* The total amount of oil discharged from United Kingdom offshore installations is published annually in the "Energy Report". Copies of this are available in the Library of the House.

Available figures for discharges of oil (in tonnes) in the Norwegian sector are given below:

1981: 591

1982: 1,534

1983: 1,770

1984: 3,900

1985: 3,490

1986: 2,378

1987: 1,768

1988: 2,339

1989: 1,604

1990: 1,585.

The provision of discharge information on an installation basis for the last 16 years could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Hong Kong (Power Station Explosion)

Mr. Cabom: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress his Department has made in its inquiry into *(a)* the cause of the explosion at Castle Peak B power station in Hong Kong in 1992 and *(b)* the safety of similar power stations in the United Kingdom. [983]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* The safety of power stations in Hong Kong is a matter for the Hong Kong Government. However, I understand that a police inquiry being conducted in Hong Kong has not yet reached any conclusions and in view of this we cannot tell whether it may have any relevance to the question of safety at power stations.

The Health and Safety Executive consulted the electricity industry through the Electricity Association's generation safety managers group and asked what action had been taken to avoid a possible read across of the Castle Peak incident to UK power stations. A reply was received from the Electricity Association which detailed the action taken by the five companies that had or operated hydrogen generating plant. I understand that either the design and/or the operation of the plants are different from that at Castle Peak, or that any necessary modifications have been made.

Mr. Caborn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many power stations in the United Kingdom are equipped with hydrogen plants similar to the Hong Kong Castle Peak B plant which exploded; and what steps have been taken to warn them of the possibility of a similar occurrence here. [985]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* Five electricity companies operate hydrogen plants in the United Kingdom. The detailed design of the plants is different to that at Castle Peak. While some plant similar to that used at Castle Peak is installed in one United Kingdom power station, detailed consideration of that plant's design by the utility and the manufacturer following the accident confirmed that the plant's design was such not to make it susceptible to the type of incident which occurred at Castle Peak.

Mr. Caborn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what account his Department's inquiry into the cause of the explosion at Castle Peak B power station in Hong Kong in 1992 has taken of *(a)* reports by the Hong Kong Governor's board of inquiry and *(b)* the investigation by the Hong Kong police into a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. [984]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* Investigations by the Hong Kong police are matters for the Hong Kong Government.

Following a request by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Health and Safety Executive consulted the electricity industry through the Electricity Association's generation safety managers group on what action had been taken to avoid a possible read across of the Castle Peak incident to United Kingdom power stations. This included forwarding to the association a copy of the technical report by the China Light and Power Company which had been prepared on the recommendation of the coroner who investigated the cause of the explosion at Castle Peak B power station.

ENVIRONMENT

Housing (London)

Mr. John Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list *(a)* the level of rent arrears, *(b)* the number of empty council houses and *(c)* the level of council tax and similar arrears for each London local authority. [238]

Mr. Clappison: The latest available information is as follows:

	LA Rent arrears[1] at end March 1995		*LA vacants[2] at 1 April 1995*			
	Amount (£000)	*Percentage of rent roll*	*Number*	*Percentage of dwellings*	*Council Tax arrears[3] (£000)*	*Community charge arrears (£000)*
Barking and Dagenham	942	2.0	427	1.6	1,440	1,558
Barnet	1,401	3.8	124	0.9	6,678	10,281
Bexley	505	2.5	139	1.6	1,679	2,644
Brent	13,750	29.3	301	1.8	8,892	26,035
Bromley	0	0.0	5	6.3	1,963	1,944
Camden	8,986	10.7	543	1.8	12,379	22,095
City of London	256	4.2	24	1.1	n/a	n/a
Croydon	2,208	4.7	265	1.6	5,392	4,246
Ealing	10,809	19.1	210	1.3	n/a	n/a
Enfield	4,037	9.9	342	2.2	8,815	8,396
Greenwich	14,984	19.6	795	2.5	6,494	9,737
Hackney	32,675	31.6	3,894	9.8	4,588	10,470
Hammersmith and Fulham	6,553	15.1	343	2.1	6,752	7,186
Haringey	20,318	33.4	303	1.5	n/a	n/a
Harrow	793	3.6	108	1.6	3,595	4,787
Havering	561	2.2	219	1.6	1,506	3,628
Hillingdon	933	2.2	159	1.2	4,857	6,586
Hounslow	2,483	7.1	333	2.0	4,087	15,618
Islington	16,072	16.0	1,483	4.0	n/a	n/a
Kensington and Chelsea	2,351	9.4	108	1.4	4,672	5,083
Kingston upon Thames	507	3.0	97	1.7	n/a	n/a
Lambeth	19,491	19.8	2,176	5.1	40,172	75,423
Lewisham	7,482	9.3	1,051	3.0	n/a	n/a
Merton	1,168	4.5	89	0.9	3,211	4,238
Newham	7,886	13.6	735	2.8	12,052	24,397
Redbridge	1,142	5.0	515	7.6	n/a	n/a
Richmond upon Thames	1,062	5.5	246	3.2	1,887	4,056
Southwark	26,160	20.8	1,129	2.1	10,811	25,290

	LA Rent arrears[1] at end March 1995		LA vacants[2] at 1 April 1995			
	Amount (£000)	Percentage of rent roll	Number	Percentage of dwellings	Council Tax arrears[3] (£000)	Community charge arrears (£000)
Sutton	1,265	5.2	76	0.8	1,215	1,555
Tower Hamlets	3,987	5.5	1,562	4.2	4,156	5,437
Waltham Forest	2,404	6.6	465	2.9	8,134	16,656
Wandsworth	4,362	6.7	508	2.4	2,091	181
Westminster	3,100	6.0	263	1.7	4,110	67

[1]*Source:*
Housing Subsidy Claim Form (SCF) returns.
[2]*Source:*
Housing Investment Programme (HIP1) returns.
[3]*Source:*
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).
n/a = not available.

Rough Sleepers Initiative

Mr. John Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many hostel places have been provided under the rough sleepers initiative; and what has been their occupancy rate during the past two years. [463]

Mr. Clappison: Since the rough sleepers initiative in central London began in 1990, my Department has provided funding for 986 places in nightshelters and hostels. Most of these places were in temporary hostels which have now closed either because the lease on the building has expired or the site has been redeveloped, in some cases to provide hostel accommodation of an improved standard. During 1996–97, my Department is funding 126 places in two nightshelters and two hostels. Occupancy rates exceed 95 per cent. in two of them and are between 85 and 90 per cent. in the other two.

Under the rough sleepers initiative, my Department also provides funding for an annual programme of winter shelters, open from December to March. In 1994–95, 331 places were provided in seven shelters, with occupancy rates of about 89 per cent. In 1995–96, 315 places were provided in seven shelters with occupancy rates in excess of 89 per cent. My Department hopes to fund an enhanced winter shelter programme in 1996–97, providing up to 450 places in central London and 36 places in Bristol, where the rough sleepers initiative also now operates.

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how he plans to respond to the findings of evaluations of the extent of rough sleeping in 23 areas identified in the Government's strategy paper "Rough Sleepers Initiative—The Next Challenge". [2112]

Mr. Curry: The success of the rough sleepers initiative has been clearly demonstrated in central London, where it has been operating since 1990. In that time, the number of people sleeping rough on any night has fallen from estimates of over 1,000 to less than 300.

On 4 March this year, I announced that the Government would be making £73 million available for a third phase of the initiative from 1996–97 to 1998–99. The interdepartmental strategy paper "Rough Sleepers Initiative—The Next Challenge" set out our plans for continuing the initiative in central London, where the problem is greatest; expanding the initiative to Bristol, where a major rough sleeping problem had been demonstrated; and assisting evaluations of the extent of rough sleeping in 23 other areas where some evidence of a rough sleeping problem existed, with a view to providing further assistance.

Evaluations of the extent of rough sleeping in 23 areas around the country, undertaken by Shelter on contract to my Department, have now been completed. In total, 375 people were found sleeping rough during single night head counts in all 23 areas. I have considered the findings, along with the range of other information collected as part of each evaluation, including the amount and availability of direct-access hostel provision, the range of existing local services providing help for people sleeping rough, and local authority policies on providing housing for people sleeping rough. From this evidence, I have decided that further assistance should fall into three main categories.

First, I have decided to create new rough sleepers initiative zones in Brighton, Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham, where significant rough sleeping problems have been identified. The local authorities for these areas will be invited to form consortiums of statutory and voluntary sector agencies to develop a local strategy for tackling rough sleeping and to bid for rough sleepers initiative funding, which may be made available for capital projects—such as hostels and permanent accommodation—or revenue projects—such as outreach and resettlement work. I expect the strategies to be based closely on the findings of the evaluations in these areas. The local authorities for Kensington and Chelsea and for Hammersmith and Fulham are being invited to form a single consortium to focus resources on the areas within both boroughs where people sleep rough.

Additionally, I have decided to expand the area covered by the existing central London rough sleepers initiative zones to include parts of the W1 and W2 postal districts in Westminster. My Department will be discussing the arrangements for this expansion with Westminster city council and the chairmen of the existing central London rough sleepers initiative consortiums.

Secondly, I have decided to create a new rough sleepers revenue fund to which local voluntary sector agencies can submit applications for funding of projects, such as outreach and resettlement work. Local authorities, working in close consultation with voluntary sector agencies, will be invited to prepare joint statutory and voluntary sector local strategies for tackling rough sleeping and to identify suitable revenue projects for which applications for funding could be sought. Funding

decisions will be based on the strength of the local strategies and on the value for money offered by applications. Initially, I will be inviting the local authorities for Bath, Bournemouth, Cambridge, Ealing, Exeter, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford and Richmond upon Thames, where rough sleeping problems have been identified, to prepare and submit such strategies. I expect the strategies to be based closely on the findings of the evaluations in these areas.

Subsequently, my Department will be publishing guidance for local authorities on evaluating the extent of rough sleeping in their areas and developing strategies for tackling any problems which exist. In the light of responses to this guidance, I will consider inviting other local authorities to prepare strategies and suggest projects which might be considered for grants from the rough sleepers revenue fund.

Up to £25 million will be available from 1 April 1997 to 31 March 1999 to fund the new rough sleepers initiative zones and the rough sleepers revenue fund.

The Department of Health will also be making available nearly £2 million over the next three years in areas which have been targeted for help under the rough sleepers initiative and the new rough sleepers revenue fund. This help is being made available through the extension of the homeless mentally ill initiative. It will be available to assist local authorities with outreach services and care costs for those people sleeping rough who have mental health problems. One of the primary aims of this additional funding will be to ensure that this vulnerable group is reintroduced to the services which comprise the spectrum of care for mentally ill people.

Thirdly, my Department will be contacting the local authorities for Barnet, Basingstoke, Birmingham, Gloucester, Norwich, Reading, Tower Hamlets, Tunbridge Wells, Waltham Forest and York to offer advice on the findings of the evaluations and action which they might consider to tackle the relatively minor problems of rough sleeping identified in those areas.

I am determined that the hard core of people who sleep rough are given every opportunity to get off the streets and into a better life. These further measures demonstrate the Government's commitment to ensuring that there is no necessity for people to sleep rough. Shelter, Homeless Network, Centrepoint, CHAR and Crisis have indicated their willingness to work nationally with Government, local authorities and other voluntary sector agencies to help make it unnecessary for people to sleep rough.

In addition to these measures to tackle rough sleeping, grants are available from my Department to voluntary sector agencies for the prevention and relief of single homelessness. Some £25 million is being made available through these grants between 1996–97 and 1998–99, under section 73 of the Housing Act 1985.

Copies of the final report on the evaluation exercise have been placed in the Libraries of the House and are available on request from my Department.

Industrial Waste

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the Government's current policy on the import or export of poisonous industrial waste substances out of, or into, the United Kingdom; what are the latest trends in respect to such trade; and if he will make a statement. [130]

Mr. Clappison: The Government's policies on the import and export of hazardous wastes are set out in the United Kingdom management plan for exports and imports of waste. Under the plan, which is legally binding throughout the United Kingdom, all exports of waste for disposal are banned, as are most imports for disposal other than in exceptional cases where wider environmental considerations apply. Exports of waste for recovery to countries within the OECD may continue but, subject to limited exceptions, exports of hazardous waste for recovery to non-OECD countries are banned. Imports of waste for genuine recovery operations may continue.

The plan, which was published on 16 May 1996 and came into effect on 1 June, provides the means to implement the Government's long-standing policy of self-sufficiency in waste disposal, while preserving legitimate trade in wastes moving for recovery.

Imports of hazardous waste into the UK for disposal in the period 1988–89 to 1993–94 are as follows:

	Imports (tonnes)
1988–89	40,027
1989–90	31,918
1990–91	44,517
1991–92	46,920
1992–93	47,018
1993–94	67,993

Some 525 tonnes were exported from Northern Ireland to Finland between 1990–91 and 1991–92. No waste has been exported from the UK for disposal since 1992. More detailed information is available in my Department's digest of environmental statistics No 18 for 1996. The Department did not collect data on shipments for recovery before May 1994. Information on imports and exports of waste for recovery or disposal in more recent years is currently in preparation.

Castle Cement

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) what reasons were given by Castle Cement for its decision to withdraw its appeal against the conditions imposed by the Environment Agency on the operation of the plant; [901]

(2) whether Castle Cement has undertaken to comply with the conditions set by the Environment Agency relating to the operation of the plant at Clitheroe. [902]

Mr Clappison: Castle Cement withdrew its appeal in a letter dated 11 October. I have today placed a copy of that letter in the House Library.

Also, in answer to the question of whether the company has now undertaken to comply with the conditions of authorisation, the company was, and continues to be, legally obliged to comply with any condition of authorisation pending the outcome of its appeal. Any breach of a condition is a criminal offence.

Planning Permission

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the occasions on which he has used discretionary powers to *(a)* revoke and *(b)* challenge planning permission for out-of-town or edge-of-town retail developments since 1990, giving the date in each case. [864]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: None. The revocation of any planning permission is rare. Slightly more usual is for my right hon. Friend to call in for his own determination certain planning applications which are required to be referred to him. An application cannot be called in once permission has been granted. An application for retail development in Alnwick, Northumberland, was not referred to my right hon. Friend and was granted permission in 1993. These circumstances will be examined at a local public inquiry and my right hon. Friend will then decide whether to invoke his powers.

Water Authority Debit

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the amount of regional water authorities' debt written off before privatisation. [1521]

Mr. Clappison: Debts to the Exchequer of £5,028 million were written off as part of the capital restructuring of the water industry in England and Wales for privatisation.

Coastal Zone Management

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects to issue the proposed best practice guide for coastal zone management. [2185]

Mr. Clappison: The Department of the Environment has today published "Coastal Zone Management—Towards Best Practice". The guide takes a practical look at the main issues which arise in coastal management and it highlights numerous examples of good practice which are at present being used. We have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House, and the guide will be extensively distributed to interested organisations and individuals.

World Trade Report

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects the Government to respond to the Environment Committee's report on world trade and the environment. [2293]

Mr. Gummer: My right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the President of the Board of Trade, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Minister for Overseas Development and I have today published the Government response to the Environment Committee report on world trade and the environment and have placed copies in the libraries of both Houses.

The Government wish to take the opportunity presented by the preparation of this document to set out an overview of their evolving approach to trade and the environment. This comprises part I of the response; part II contains the detailed response to the Committee's conclusions and recommendations.

The Government have always held the view that economic development makes a vital contribution to improving environmental standards. An open and non-discriminatory world trading system is crucial to future economic development throughout the world. However, to deliver high environmental standards, economic development must take place within a framework which ensures sustainable development.

There has been much debate about the impact of trade on the environment; and the impact of environmental controls on trade.

The challenge for the world community, both at the forthcoming ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation this December in Singapore and more widely, is to move away from the misleading rhetoric of trade versus environment to focus more closely on the principles of sustainable development. The Government are determined to ensure that the European Union takes the lead in promoting these principles.

Further work on trade and environment will be required both in the WTO and in other forums such as the United Nations Environment Programme. We have identified six topics as the focus of major international effort in the near future:

- multilateral environmental agreements—the most effective response to transboundary and global environmental problems. We support the efforts of the European Union in the WTO to clarify the relationship between trade measures in multilateral environmental agreements and GATT;
- environmental policies based on processes—a wide variety of process controls are employed as part of environmental policy. The WTO needs to consider their relationship with the product-related regime of trade agreements;
- examination of environmental effects—we should like to see more analysis by the WTO of the potential environmental effects of trade proposals as they are developed;
- spreading understanding of environmental principles—there needs to be better understanding among those concerned with trade policy of the principles and concepts underlying environmental laws and policies;
- market access for least developed countries—reinforcing and spreading the benefits of the multilateral trading system is an important way of providing the world's poorest countries with the wealth to tackle environmental issues;
- combating illegal trade in endangered species, chlorofluorocarbons and hazardous wastes.

Housing Corporation

Mr. Liddington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans there are for the sale of the Housing Corporation's loan portfolios to the private sector to proceed. [2294]

Mr. Gummer: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration announced on 28 November 1995 the Government's decision in principle to sell the loans provided to housing associations by the Housing Corporation, Scottish Homes and Housing for Wales. We subsequently appointed N M Rothschild and Sons Ltd. as the Government's financial advisers for the project and asked them to evaluate the options for selling these loans to the private sector.

On the basis of Rothchild's advice, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales and I have decided to proceed with the sale of the loans, subject to receiving satisfactory final bids at the conclusion of negotiations. We have asked Rothchilds to make the necessary arrangements for the next stage.

Due to the different nature of the loans provided by Scottish Homes, separate arrangements will be adopted for the Scottish portfolio. These will take longer than those for the English and Welsh portfolios.

Housing associations have been most successful in securing private resources to finance social housing projects. The sale of the loans portfolios will be the logical conclusion of our policy of withdrawing from a lending activity which can clearly be funded directly by the private sector. There has already been considerable interest from the private sector in acquiring the portfolios, and I expect a successful conclusion to the sale process.

DEFENCE

Land Mines

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what programme of research he has commissioned into mine clearance and detection. [396]

Mr. Arbuthnot: My Department has commissioned work by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, including research into detection using hand-held equipment; location and destruction of mines for route clearance; and the remote detection of minefields. DERA's centre for post-conflict battle area clearance technologies and techniques is primarily concerned with work for military purposes, but also undertakes studies of mine clearance funded by other bodies such as the ODA and the EU.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will now review all parliamentary answers given in both Houses on the subject of exposure to chemicals of British service personnel serving in the Gulf during Operation Granby since March 1991, and publish correct answers where required. [196]

Mr. Soames: When new information came to light that there had been wider use of organophosphate pesticides by British troops during the Gulf war, I wrote immediately to those Members of Parliament who had tabled questions or had inquired of my Department about pesticides to correct the pubic record. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence wrote similarly to the Countess of Mar. Copies of the letters have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he was first informed that British troops and military medical staff were exposed to organophosphate pesticides during their service in Operation Granby in the Gulf war; what action he then took; and if he will place in the Library copies of all documentation on organophosphates held by his Department. [232]

Mr. Soames: I was first made aware last month that British troops had made wider use of organophosphate pesticides during the Gulf war than we had previously been led to believe. As soon as this information came to light, we commissioned a detailed comprehensive investigation into the use of organophosphate pesticides by British troops. When this investigation is complete, I will make a full report to the House.

St. Helena

Mr. Allason: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to utilize St. Helena for military exercises. [837]

Mr. Soames: There are currently no plans to utilise St. Helena for military exercises.

US Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United States nuclear weapons are currently situated on the United Kingdom mainland; and if he will make a statement. [1539]

Mr. Soames: It has been the practice of successive Governments neither to confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons in specific locations at specific times. All allies remain committed to the maintenance of nuclear forces in Europe as an essential political and military link between the European and North American members of the alliance. The United Kingdom continues to make available facilities for United States' nuclear forces within the UK.

Overseas Forces

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the countries in which there is a United Kingdom military presence. [1478]

Mr. Soames: British service personnel are currently providing a UK military presence either on operations or at permanent bases in the following countries:

Ascension Island
Belize
Bosnia-Herzegovina
Brunei
Canada
Croatia
Cyprus
Diego Garcia
Falkland Islands
Georgia
Germany
Gibraltar
Hong Kong
Italy
Kuwait
Saudi Arabia
South Georgia
Turkey
United Kingdom

This list does not include countries where loan service personnel and training teams are based, where short-term training exercises are being conducted and where there are minor commitments involving individual service men and women.

Polaris and Trident

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total defence expenditure on *(a)* the Polaris and *(b)* the Trident programmes in 1993–94 and 1994–95. [1477]

Mr. Arbuthnot: For the years in question, expenditure, in £ million and at outturn prices was:

	1993–94	*1994–95*
(a) Polaris	103	65
(b) Trident	979	723

Armed Forces (Beef)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much British beef *(a)* in weight and *(b)* in value, was supplied to the British armed forces in each of the last three years. [1381]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The procurement of food for the Armed Forces is contracted to the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes. My Department does not specify the source of origin from which NAAFI should obtain beef (or any other meat), but expects it to seek the best market price for the product. The majority of our requirements are for frozen beef which is not readily available from the British market. Records for the last three years are not available, however in the financial year 1995–96 and in the first six months of the current financial year, NAAFI purchased some 690,000 kg of UK beef, including sirloin, forerib, diced mince and a range of manufactured products; these were valued at £1.3 million.

Army Technical Services Agency

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Army Technical Services Agency at Malvern. [1380]

Mr. Soames: On 25 October, *Official Report*, columns *14–15*, I announced that the Army Technical Support Agency collocation would be taken forward as a private finance initiative project. The future of the ATSA at Malvern will depend on the outcome of the PFI solution for ATSA collocation.

PRIME MINISTER

Queen's Speech

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Vote Office copies of the consolidated press lobby briefing on the Queen's Speech. [833]

The Prime Minister: Copies of the background notes have been placed in the Library of the House.

Data Protection

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister (1) whether (i) the security services and (ii) GCHQ have registered under the Data Protection Act 1984; and if he will make a statement; [151]

(2) if the intelligence services have registered under the Data Protection Act 1984; and if he will make a statement. [207]

The Prime Minister: No. Agencies holding personal data for the purpose of safeguarding national security are exempt from registration under section 27 of the Data Protection Act 1984. The exemption is kept under review.

Engagements

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [996]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 31 October. [997]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

HEALTH

NHS Trusts (Severance Payments)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what severance payments were paid to *(a)* Ms Sue De Gilio of Plymouth Community Services NHS trust and *(b)* Ms Jenny Parsonage of Thameslink Healthcare Services NHS trust upon their resignations. [453]

Mr. Malone: Severance payments for trust staff are a matter for the trusts concerned, taking into account the guidance issued to trusts by the national health service executive in May 1994. The hon. Member may wish to contact Miss Louise Churchill, chairman of Plymouth Community Services NHS trust and Mr. Ron March, chairman of Thameslink Healthcare Services NHS trust for details.

Schools (Dysentery)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many schools which have experienced outbreaks of dysentery in the last year have pupils from families whose water has been cut off. [426]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected centrally.

Cosmetic Surgery

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the results of the study commissioned by his Department from the British Association of Plastic Surgeons on private cosmetic surgery started in July 1995. [421]

Mr. Horam: It is for the researchers to publish the report. The information from the study indicated that there was only very small usage of NHS resources in the treatment of the problems of aesthetic surgery carried out in the private sector.

Mental Health

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which schemes for the provision of services for psychiatric patients have been approved under the private finance initiative. [1032]

Mr. Horam: Seven schemes providing services for psychiatric patients have been approved under the private finance initiative. Four of these schemes have been completed, one is under way and two are negotiating contract signature. They are:

Tees health authority: residential accommodation for elderly and mental ill patients. Capital value: £2.0 million. (Completed).

North Bedfordshire health authority: residential accommodation for elderly severely mentally ill patients. Capital value: £1.4 million. (Completed).

Brent and Harrow health authority: residential accommodation for elderly mentally ill patients. Capital value: £2.1 million. (Completed).

Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority: residential accommodation for elderly mentally ill patients. Capital value: £1.0 million. (Completed).

Barnet Health NHS trust: residential accommodation for elderly mentally ill patients. Capital value: £1.5 million. (Under way).

Leeds Community and Mental Health Services Teaching NHS trust: north west community unit for elderly mentally ill patients. Capital value: £2.5 million. (Approved but not yet under way).

Leeds Community and Mental Health Services Teaching NHS trust: west central community unit for elderly mentally ill patients. Capital value: £2.5 million. (Approved but not yet under way).

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish his Green Paper on the future management of mental health services; and if he will make a statement. [1063]

Mr. Burns: Much progress has been made in developing and implementing policies for the delivery of comprehensive health and social care services to people with mental illness, but concerns are now being expressed that particular structural and organisational barriers may be impeding further progress. We are therefore examining the legal and other structural obstacles which might be inhibiting effective working between agencies and will shortly be issuing a consultation document seeking views on which options for change would be most supported by those working in the mental health field and by service users.

General Chiropractic Council

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects an announcement on the composition of the General Chiropractic Council. [1064]

Mr. Horam: Work on establishing the General Chiropractic Council is proceeding well and we expect to be able to announce its membership shortly.

Secure Accommodation

Sir Michael Shersby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many places are available in secure accommodation for juvenile offenders in England and Wales; how many extra places will be provided during 1996; and if he will make a statement. [856]

Mr. Burns: There are presently 309 places available for use in local authority secure units in England and Wales. A further 40 places are available at Glenthorne youth treatment centre. We are on course to bring into use another 33 places by the end of 1996, making a total of 94 additional places provided during the year. All these places are available not only for young offenders but for children who need help with severe emotional and behavioural problems.

NHS Cost Inflation

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the basis for the current national health service cost inflation; and into which categories of patient care it is applied by district health service by his *(a)* Department and *(b)* district health services. [879]

Mr. Malone: Estimates of national health service cost inflation are not calculated. A retrospective measure of current inflation in the hospital and community health services—HCHS—sector of the national health service is calculated annually. The inflation measure is calculated as a weighted average of HCHS staff pay inflation and inflation in the purchase of goods and services within HCHS current expenditure.

The inflation estimate is calculated only at the national level, and is not disaggregated by category of patient care.

Community Care (Staffordshire)

Sir Ivan Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the extent of the failure of compliance of Staffordshire county council with the requirement in each of the last three years that 85 per cent. of special transitional grant for community care should go to private sector homes; what action Her Majesty's Government are proposing to take as a result; and if he will make a statement. [1050]

Mr. Burns: The independent sector condition attached to the special transitional grant required local authorities to spend at least 85 per cent. of the Department of Social Security transfer element of the grant on community care services purchased in the independent sector. The audited figures for 1993–94 show Staffordshire county council expenditure in the independent sector of £6.439 million compared with the minimum requirement of £7.958 million, thus failing the requirement by £1.5 million. The Secretary of State exercised his discretion not to require the repayment of the grant after taking account of the representations made by Staffordshire. In 1994–95, its expenditure in the independent sector amounted to £17.618 million, falling short of the minimum requirement of £18.166 by £0.5 million. No decisions have yet been made on the consequences of this failure. Audited figures for 1995–96 will not be available until 31 December.

School Health Service

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses were employed by the school health service in each of the past five years. [1101]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for York (Mr. Bayley) on 21 May 1996, *Official Report* columns *87–88*. Information for later years is not available centrally.

Waiting Lists

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients had been waiting for operations in excess of the patients charter waiting time standards at 1 September 1996. [1113]

Mr. Horam: The latest information available centrally is for 30 June 1996. This shows that, on that date, seven patients waiting for operations had been waiting more than 18 months from the date they were placed on a waiting list. Also, 109 patients did not receive coronary artery bypass grafts and associated procedures within the 12 months standard set by the patients charter.

AIDS

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died of AIDS in England and Wales in each year since 1990. [1116]

Mr. Horam: The number of deaths in reported AIDS cases by the end of September 1996 are shown in the table. These data are affected by reporting delays and under-reporting. The figures given exclude deaths reported in HIV-infected individuals who either died without reaching the AIDS case definition of whose AIDS status at the time of death has yet to be confirmed.

Year of death	*England and Wales*
1990	736
1991	892
1992	1,013
1993	1,192
1994	1,236
1995	1,130
Total	6,199

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died of CJD in England and Wales in each year since 1990. [1117]

Mr. Horam: As at 29 October 1996, the number of deaths in confirmed cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in England and Wales, including sporadic, iatrogenic, familial, new-variant CJD and Gertsmann-Straussler-Scheinker syndrome in each year since 1990 are as follows:

Year	*Confirmed deaths*
1990	27
1991	31
1992	45
1993	38
1994	55
1995	42
1996[1]	29

[1] Up to end of September 1996. Comparable figures for the United Kingdom were published in the chief medical officer's "Update" issue 12, published on 28 October, copies of which are available in the Library.

Lung Cancer

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients with lung cancer were over 75 in the following years *(a)* 1993–94, *(b)* 1994–95 and *(c)* 1995–96; and what proportion of the total these figures represent. [1118]

Mr. Horam: Information is held centrally in the hospital episode system—HES—for diagnosis using specific codes under ICD9 classification, copies of which are available in the Library. The latest year available is 1994–95. Data for the number of finished consultant episodes with primary diagnosis "Malignant neoplasm of trachea, bronchus and lung"—ICD code 162—in NHS hospitals in England are shown in the table:

Data year	*Total cases*	*75 years and over*	*Percentage of 75 years and over of total*
1993–94	57,822	13,620	24
1994–95	57,823	13,138	23

Episodes where the age of the person was unknown have been allocated pro rata.

Breast Cancer

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of breast cancer were identified in women of 65 years and over for each year since 1992; and what proportion they represent of all women diagnosed as having breast cancer. [1114]

Mr. Horam: Provisional numbers of registrations of breast cancer diagnosed in 1991 in England and Wales were published in the Office for National Statistics "Monitor" MBI 96/1, copies of which are available in the Library. Figures for 1992 and 1993 will be published shortly by the Office for National Statistics and copies will be placed in the Library.

NHS Health Advisory Service

Dame Jill Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what decision has been made on the findings of the review of the NHS health advisory service. [2037]

Mr. Burns: We have decided to merge the NHS health advisory service, from April 1997, with a consortium led by the Royal College of Psychiatrists research unit and comprising members from the Royal College of Nursing Institute, Office for Public Management and British Geriatrics Society.

I believe this decision develops and builds on the work of the review team. It is the basis for an up-to-date and proactive advisory service, equipped with a multidisciplinary team able to help organisations improve and develop services.

Under a separate contract, the work of the drug advisory service will also change. It will take a more active role in alcohol misuse services and it will develop as a resource for health and local authority purchasers of substance misuse services.

Health Authorities (Manchester)

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funding of health authorities in Manchester in the remaining months of the financial year; which authorities expect a shortfall; and if he will make a statement. [1378]

Mr. Horam: All health authorities are expected to remain within their allocated cash limit. I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) on 17 October 1996 *Official Report*, columns *1104–05*, which provided the estimated outturn position for all English health authorities.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Open Prisons

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are applied to assess the suitability of prisoners in an open prison for work carried out in the community as part of their rehabilitation. [1083]

Miss Widdecombe: Prisoners who are held in open prisoners are thoroughly assessed to ensure that they do not pose a risk to the public. Open prisons will allocate prisoners to work in the local community only when this is considered to be of benefit to both the community and to the prisoner. Particular attention is always paid to the offences committed by the prisoner and to his or her background as part of this process. The overriding concern in such allocation is always the safety of the public; if such concern exists, the prisoner does not undertake work in the community, and may be transferred to a closed and more secure prison.

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what procedures exist to assess a prisoner's suitability for transfer to an open prison; who is responsible for their implementation; and what assessment he has made of their effectiveness. [1084]

Miss Widdecombe: Determinate sentence prisoners must be reallocated to the lowest security category before their transfer from a closed to an open prison. This involves an assessment of any risk posed to the public by the prisoner, together with the risk of escape or abscond. Such reallocation and transfer will take place only if the staff of the closed prison are satisfied that the prisoner is not a risk to the public and is not likely to escape or abscond. The prisoner will undergo a further risk assessment at the open prison to ensure that he or she is suitable for open conditions.

The governors of the closed prisons transferring prisoners to open prisons and the governors of the open prisons themselves are responsible for the implementation of these procedures.

Life sentence prisoners who are considered suitable for open conditions require both a favourable recommendation from the Parole Board and the authority of a Minister, who considers detailed reports on each individual case before making a decision.

The allocation of all prisoners to open conditions is kept under continual review.

Prisons

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list all *(a)* planned new prisons and *(b)* detention centres to be financed through (i) public capital expenditure and (ii) the private finance initiative. [55]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. Chris Davies, dated 31 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the planned number of new prisons and detention centres to be financed through public capital expenditure and the private finance initiative.

The Prison Service has plans to build prisons but not detention centres. Currently, it has funding to provide three new prisons and one re-built prison, all of which will be provided under the private finance initiative. These include Fazakerley, Bridgend and the re-built prison at Lowdham Grange. A third new prison is currently the subject of a planning inquiry, which if successful, will be built at Agecroft near Manchester.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people who had applied at some stage for asylum were detained in Birmingham prison during *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September; and what were the nationalities of those detained; [1037]

(2) how many people who had applied at some stage for asylum were deported from Birmingham prison during *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September; and what were the nationalities of those deported. [1038]

Mr. Kirkhope: The available information on asylum seekers detained in Her Majesty's prison Birmingham is given in the table.

There were no failed asylum seekers recorded as being deported from Her Majesty's prison Birmingham during each of the months July to September 1996.

This does not include asylum seekers removed as illegal entrants.

Asylum seekers detained[1] at Her Majesty's prison Birmingham as at 31 July, 4 September and 1 October by nationality

Nationality	31 July	4 September	1 October
India	18	15	14
Nigeria	—	—	6
Algeria	5	5	4
Pakistan	—	3	—
Others[2]	4	3	2
Total	27	26	26

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in schedules 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971. In some cases the asylum application will have been lodged subsequent to the applicant being detained. The figures include asylum applicants detained in after-entry enforcement work and those awaiting removal following refusal of asylum, as well as those whose applications were under consideration or subject to appeal.
[2] The "Others" category may include nationalities already listed.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to declare a country as one in which there has been a fundamental change of circumstances under the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. [972]

Miss Widdecombe: My right hon. and learned Friend has no plans at present to declare that any country has undergone a major upheaval such that we would not seek to return people there for the time being.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the total number of asylum seekers held in detention at the end of *(a)* June, *(b)* July, *(c)* August and *(d)* September; in which establishments they were held; what were the nationalities of those detained; what were the gender of those detained; and how many were deported and from which establishments. [1044]

Mr. Kirkhope: The available information on asylum seekers detained, and on those deported from detention, is given in the tables. The number deported does not include those who are removed as illegal entrants or under port refusal procedures.

Number[1] of asylum detainees deported[2] during June, July, August and September

	Number of deported asylum detainees
June	11
July	6
August	7
September	3

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] Removed under the deport process, including those removed voluntarily prior to the initiation of deportation action.

Table 1: Number of people recorded as detailed on 17 June, 31 July, 4 September , and 1 October 1996[1] who sought asylum at some stage, by gender

Gender	As at 27 June	As at 31 July	As at 4 September	As at 1 October
Male	720	716	727	783
Female	52	60	82	81
Total	772	776	809	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 2: Number of people recorded as detained on 27 June, 31 July, 4 September, and 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by location of detention

	As at 27 June	As at 31 July	As at 4 September	As at 1 October
Prisons				
HMP Rochester	154	146	148	154
HMP Haslar	99	112	107	97
HMP Birmingham	37	27	26	26
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	12	6	11	14
HMP Magilligan	8	7	7	7
HMP Manchester	2	—	6	5
HMP Bristol	6	3	4	4
HMP Wandsworth	4	6	2	3
HMP Greenock	5	5	6	3
HMP Holloway	—	—	—	2
HMP Doncaster	2	2	2	2
HMP Brixton	2	—	2	2
HMP Belmarsh	—	—	—	2
Other prison[2]	20	26	18	22
Other Places of Detention				
Campsfield House	151	151	170	173
Tinsley House	45	68	96	119
Harmondsworth	102	89	82	91
Meadvale Buildings	36	35	33	38
Police Cells	27	33	35	33
Port	—	8	8	19
Queens Building	13	10	15	15
Dover Harbour	10	14	7	14
Manchester Airport Detention Suite	6	11	7	7
Other Place of Detention[2]	31	17	17	12
Total	772	776	809	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.
[2] The 'Others' categories may include places of detention already listed.

Table 3: Number of people recorded as detained on 27 June, 31 July, 4 September, and 1 October 1996[1], who had sought asylum at some stage, by nationality

Nationality	As at 27 June	As at 31 July	As at 4 September	As at 1 October
Nigeria	106	106	110	112
India	101	96	91	95
Algeria	75	70	65	63
Ghana	52	56	60	58
Sri Lanka	43	45	47	48
China Peoples Republic of	32	35	39	44
Zaire	38	43	48	44
Turkey	35	39	47	42
Columbia	15	11	10	35
Pakistan	25	35	35	34
Angola	16	16	18	23
Bangladesh	18	17	16	18
Romania	23	33	20	18
Cyprus	7	6	12	17
Gambia	27	16	16	16
Israel	—	—	—	15
Iran	11	9	11	13
Jamaica	5	8	8	10
Ethiopia	6	8	9	9
Yugoslavia	9	6	12	9
Russia	6	5	6	8
Sierra Leone	6	4	7	8
Uganda	4	3	4	8
Kenya	6	4	9	7
Liberia	4	5	9	7
Lithuania	5	4	4	7
Ivory Coast	6	7	7	6
Poland	6	8	6	5
Somalia	9	6	6	5
Equador	8	6	3	4
Lebanon	3	2	3	4

Table 3: Number of people recorded as detained on 27 June, 31 July, 4 September, and 1 October 1996[1], who had sought asylum at some stage, by nationality

Nationality	As at 27 June	As at 31 July	As at 4 September	As at 1 October
Sudan	3	—	4	4
Tanzania	4	4	3	4
Bulgaria	—	—	2	3
Egypt	2	2	2	3
El Salvador	—	—	3	3
Morocco	2	—	—	3
Albania	3	2	3	2
Nationality Doubtful[2]	6	10	8	11
Others[2]	45	49	46	39
Total	772	776	809	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

[2] The 'Others' category may include nationalities already listed.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown of the number of asylum seekers currently detained under Immigration Act powers by (i) nationality, (ii) gender, (iii) place of detention, (iv) length of detention and (v) immigration status at the time of application. [882]

Mr. Kirkhope: The information requested on detained asylum seekers is given in the tables.

Table 1: Number of people recorded as detained on 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by gender and immigration status

Gender	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation order	Total
Male	481	258	44	783
Female	62	14	5	81
Total	543	272	49	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 2: Number of people recorded as detained on 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by stage of application and immigration status

Stage of application	Port	Illegal Entrants	Subject to deportation order	Total
Awaiting initial decision	157	53	8	218
Awaiting result of appeal	256	139	32	427
Awaiting removal after refusal	130	80	9	219
Total	543	272	49	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 3: Number of people recorded as detained on 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by length of detention and immigration status

Length	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation order	Total
0–1 Month[1]	154	86	4	244
1–2 Months	84	56	14	154
2–6 Months	196	95	20	311
6–12 Months	90	25	6	121
12 Months +	19	10	5	34
Total	543	272	49	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 4: Number of people recorded as detained on 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by nationality and immigration status

Nationality	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation order	Total
Nigeria	73	26	13	112
India	20	69	6	95
Algeria	21	37	5	63
Ghana	40	16	2	58
Sri Lanka	30	17	1	48
China Peoples Rep of	35	9	0	44
Zaire	37	4	3	44
Turkey	34	7	1	42
Columbia	32	3	0	35
Pakistan	14	17	3	34
Angola	17	4	2	23
Bangladesh	9	8	1	18
Romania	4	14	0	18
Cyprus	17	0	0	17
Gambia	13	1	2	16
Israel	15	0	0	15
Iran	9	3	1	13
Jamaica	4	3	3	10
Ethiopia	5	3	1	9
Russia	3	5	0	8
Yugoslavia	5	4	0	9
Sierra Leone	5	2	1	8
Uganda	6	1	1	8
Kenya	5	2	0	7
Liberia	7	0	0	7
Lithuania	6	1	0	7
Ivory Coast	5	1	0	6
Poland	3	2	0	5
Somalia	5	0	0	5
Ecuador	4	0	0	4
Lebanon	2	2	0	4
Sudan	4	0	0	4
Tanzania	4	0	0	4
Bulgaria	2	1	0	3
Egypt	0	2	1	3
Morocco	1	1	1	3
El Salvador	3	0	0	3
Albania	2	0	0	2
Other	31	7	1	39
Nationality Doubtful	11	0	0	11
Total	543	272	49	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 5: Number of people recorded as detained on 1 October 1996[1] who had sought asylum at some stage, by location of detention and immigration status

	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation order	Total
Prisons				
HMP Rochester	97	43	14	154
HMP Haslar	54	38	5	97
HMP Birmingham	8	17	1	26
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	3	11	0	14
HMP Magilligan	0	7	0	7
HMP Manchester	0	5	0	5
HMP Bristol	0	4	0	4
HMP Wandsworth	0	1	2	3
HMP Greenock	0	3	0	3
HMP Holloway	1	0	1	2
HMP Doncaster	0	2	0	2
HMP Brixton	0	2	0	2
HMP Belmarsh	1	1	0	2
Other	13	5	4	22
Other Places of Detention				
Campsfield House	116	48	9	173
Tinsley House	80	31	8	119
Harmondsworth	64	23	4	91
Meadvale Buildings	33	5	0	38
Police Cells	9	23	1	33
Port	19	0	0	19
Queens Building	15	0	0	15
Dover Harbour	14	0	0	14
Manchester Airport Detention Suite	4	3	0	7
Other	12	0	0	12
Total	543	272	49	864

[1] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many substantive asylum appeals to immigration appellate authority special adjudicators have been (i) allowed, (ii) dismissed and (iii) withdrawn in 1996 to date. [884]

Mr. Kirkhope: Provisional information shows that, of the estimated 9,070 substantive asylum appeals determined by special adjudicators between January and September 1996, 3 per cent. were allowed, 81 per cent. were dismissed and 16 per cent. were withdrawn.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications are currently awaiting an initial decision by his Department's asylum directorate; and how many of these applications were made prior to July 1993. [885]

Mr. Kirkhope: As at 30 September 1996, there were 60,275 asylum applications awaiting an initial decision, of which an estimated 27,900 were made prior to the implementation of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993. Work is currently in hand to revise this estimate.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements his Department has made to expedite initial decisions on asylum applications in those cases where the applicant is detained under Immigration Act powers; and what is the current average time taken by his Department to reach an initial decision in such cases. [887]

Mr. Kirkhope: Statistics on the average time taken to decide cases where the applicant is detained are not available. However, all such cases are given priority consideration within the asylum directorate, with many applications being determined within days.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the average time currently taken by his Department to reach an initial decision on (i) asylum applications submitted prior to implementation of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, (ii) asylum applications submitted since implementation of the 1993 Act and (iii) all asylum applications; [889]

(2) what is the average time currently taken by the Home Office and the immigration appellate authority to prepare, hear and determine an appeal against a refusal to asylum. [890]

Mr. Kirkhope: Information on the times taken at the various stages of the asylum process are given in the table.

Average times involved in deciding applications for asylum (March–August 1996)

	Months
Time taken for an initial decision to be made (Pre-act applications)	44.8
Time taken for an initial decision to be made (Post-act applications)	11.6
Time taken by the Home Office to process an appeal	1.4
Time taken by the Immigration Appellate Authority to determine an appeal	8.1

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration he has given to declaring Sri Lanka a country in which there has been a fundamental change of circumstances under the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 following the upsurge of fighting in September. [974]

Miss Widdecombe: We do not believe that the continuing hostilities in Sri Lanka constitute such a fundamental change in the circumstances there as to justify my right hon. and learned Friend declaring that the country has undergone a major upheaval.

The hostilities since May 1995 have been sporadic and confined largely to the north and east of the country. Most reports suggest that conditions elsewhere in the country remain reasonably safe and normal.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration he has given to declaring Afghanistan a country in which there has been a fundamental change of circumstances under the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 since the capture of Kabul by Taliban. [973]

Miss Widdecombe: We do not believe that the recent developments in Afghanistan constitute such a fundamental change in the circumstances as to justify my right hon. and learned Friend declaring that the country has undergone a major upheaval.

Afghanistan has been in a state of civil unrest for a number of years. The fall of Kabul to Taliban is part of this long-term continuing conflict.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons, having been refused asylum, have (i) been removed and (ii) made a voluntary departure from the United Kingdom in 1996 to date. [886]

Mr. Kirkhope: Provisional information shows that, during the period January to September 1996, there have been 2,810 removals—including voluntary departures—of persons refused asylum.

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum, by persons applying *(a)* at a port of entry to the United Kingdom and *(b)* after entry have been decided in 1996 to date; and how many in each category have been granted (i) asylum and (ii) exceptional leave to remain. [888]

Mr. Kirkhope: The information requested is given in the table.

Decisions[1] on applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, January to September 1996

Number of principal applicants

	Applied at port	*Applied in-country*	*Total*
Asylum applications[2]	8,280	13,240	21,520
Decisions[3]	10,385	18,170	28,550
Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum	380	1,185	1,565
Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave to remain[4]	1,430	2,160	3,595
Total refusals	8,575	14,820	23,395
Refused asylum and ELR after full consideration	7,610	13,245	20,855
Refused on safe third country grounds[5]	965	50	1,015
Refused on non-compliance grounds[6]	—	1,530	1,530

[1]Provisional figures rounded to the nearest five.

[2]Figures exclude information on applications made overseas.

[3]Decisions do not necessarily relate to applications made in the period.

[4]Usually granted for a year in the first instance, subject then to further review.

[5]Refused on the grounds that the applicant had arrived from a safe third country.

[6]Paragraph 340 of Immigration Rules. For failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period, including failure to respond to invitation to interview to establish identity.

Deportations

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total number of people deported under Immigration Act powers from the United Kingdom for *(a)* June, *(b)* July, *(c)* August and *(d)* September; and what were the nationalities of those deported. [1042]

Mr. Kirkhope: The information requested for June to August is given in the table. Complete data for September are not yet available. The figures do not include people removed as illegal entrants or under port refusal procedures.

Persons removed[1] from the United Kingdom under the deportation process[2]

Nationality	*1996[3]*		
	June	*July*	*August*
European Economic Area			
Belgium	1	—	1
France	—	1	1
Germany	—	1	1
Ireland	2	—	—
Italy	—	2	1
Netherlands	2	1	1
Spain	2	—	—
Other Europe			
Cyprus	—	—	1
Croatia	1	—	—
Former Czechoslovakia	1	1	4
Hungary	2	—	—
Poland	12	19	13
Romania	—	1	—
Russia	1	—	1
Other former USSR	—	5	—
Turkey	1	6	2
Former Yugoslavia	—	—	2
Americas			
Brazil	—	1	1
Colombia	3	1	1
Guyana	2	—	1
Jamaica	10	8	10
Trinidad and Tobago	—	1	1
USA	2	1	2
Other Americas	3	—	1
Africa			
Algeria	2	—	1
Egypt	2	—	—
Ghana	10	19	25
Kenya	1	2	3
Mauritius	3	1	—
Morocco	4	2	1
Nigeria	13	14	9
Sierra Leone	5	1	1
South Africa	1	3	2
Sudan	—	1	—
Tanzania	—	—	1
Uganda	1	1	—
Zaire	—	1	—
Zambia	2	3	3
Zimbabwe	2	3	2
Other Africa	2	5	2
Indian sub-continent			
Bangladesh	6	—	2
India	10	8	18
Pakistan	14	12	10
Middle East			
Iraq	—	—	1
Israel	1	—	—
Jordan	—	4	1
Kuwait	—	—	1
Saudi Arabia	1	—	—
Yemen	1	—	—
Remainder of Asia			
China	2	1	1
Hong Kong	3	2	1
Indonesia	1	—	1
Japan	—	1	—
Malaysia	6	2	6

Persons removed[1] from the United Kingdom under the deportation process[2]

Nationality	1996[3] June	July	August
Philippines	2	3	1
Sri Lanka	—	—	1
Thailand	—	4	2
Other Asia	—	—	1
Oceania			
Australia	1	3	—
All nationalities	141	145	142

[1]Including voluntary departures after deportation action had been initiated.
[2]Excluding illegal entrants removed.
[3]Provisional data.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people who were convicted of a criminal offence, punishable by a prison sentence, as part of their sentence, were also ordered to be deported; how many deportations were effected; what were the nationalities of those deported; and what were the gender of those deported in each of the years 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995 and from the first of January this year to date. [1045]

Mr. Kirkhope: Information on persons recommended for deportation by a court on those removed from the United Kingdom is given in the tables. The data include persons who did not receive a custodial sentence: five such persons were recommended for deportation in 1995 but further information on these persons and for other years could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Table A: Persons recommended for deportation by a court

	Number
1992	345
1993	310
1994	350
1995	384
1996[1]	207

[1] January to August.

Table B: Persons removed[1] from the United Kingdom under the deportation process following a court recommendation, 1993 onwards[2]

Nationality	1993	1994	1995	1996 (January to August[3])
European Economic Area				
Austria	1	1	1	—
Belgium	—	—	—	1
Denmark	2	—	—	—
Finland	—	—	—	—
France	2	—	2	1
Germany	—	—	2	3
Greece	—	—	—	—
Iceland	—	—	—	—
Ireland	—	1	—	1
Italy	5	2	2	2
Luxembourg	—	—	—	—
Netherlands	1	1	3	—
Norway	—	—	—	—
Portugal	1	—	2	—
Spain	1	1	6	—
Sweden	—	—	—	—

Table B: Persons removed[1] from the United Kingdom under the deportation process following a court recommendation, 1993 onwards[2]

Nationality	1993	1994	1995	1996 (January to August[3])
Other Europe				
Bulgaria	—	1	—	—
Cyprus	2	—	1	—
Former Czechoslovakia	—	—	1	1
Hungary	—	—	2	2
Malta	—	—	—	—
Poland	—	7	1	3
Romania	—	1	1	—
Russia	—	1	2	1
Other former USSR	—	1	—	—
Switzerland	—	—	—	—
Turkey	4	2	4	3
Former Yugoslavia	—	2	1	—
Other Europe	—	—	—	—
Americas				
Argentina	1	3	—	—
Barbados	1	1	—	—
Brazil	5	—	4	—
Canada	2	2	—	—
Chile	3	2	1	2
Colombia	43	19	7	6
Guyana	2	1	4	9
Jamaica	49	25	33	29
Mexico	—	—	—	—
Peru	4	2	4	3
Trinidad and Tobago	2	1	—	—
USA	12	14	12	9
Venezuela	1	—	1	—
Other Americas	7	1	6	1
Africa				
Algeria	5	2	3	2
Angola	1	1	2	1
Egypt	1	—	—	—
Ethiopia	—	—	—	—
Ghana	19	18	19	14
Kenya	2	3	6	4
Libya	—	—	—	—
Mauritius	—	—	1	—
Morocco	3	1	1	1
Nigeria	148	61	61	39
Sierra Leone	—	1	—	1
Somalia	—	—	1	—
South Africa	8	8	7	5
Sudan	—	—	—	—
Tanzania	3	—	2	2
Tunisia	—	—	—	1
Uganda	3	—	3	1
Zaire	2	—	—	1
Zambia	1	5	5	4
Zimbabwe	2	—	5	3
Other Africa	10	3	4	8
Indian sub-continent				
Bangladesh	2	1	—	—
India	11	4	3	3
Pakistan	23	8	13	5
Middle East				
Iran	1	2	3	—
Iraq	—	—	—	—
Israel	5	2	1	—
Jordan	3	2	—	—
Kuwait	—	—	—	1
Lebanon	3	—	1	—
Saudi Arabia	—	—	—	—

Table B: Persons removed[1] from the United Kingdom under the deportation process following a court recommendation, 1993 onwards[2]

Nationality	1993	1994	1995	1996 (January to August[3])
Syria	—	1	—	—
Yemen	1	—	—	—
Other Middle East	—	—	—	—
Remainder of Asia				
China	—	—	—	2
Hong Kong[1]	3	4	3	1
Indonesia	—	—	—	—
Japan	—	—	3	—
Malaysia	3	—	5	2
Philippines	—	—	—	—
Singapore	1	1	—	—
South Korea	—	—	1	—
Sri Lanka	4	2	—	—
Taiwan	—	—	—	—
Thailand	2	1	—	—
Other Asia	2	—	—	—
Oceania				
Australia	—	1	3	1
New Zealand	2	2	—	—
Other Oceania	—	—	—	—
All nationalities of whom	425	226	259	179
males	334	166	206	131
females	91	60	53	48

[1] Including voluntary departures after deportation action had been initiated.
[2] The only information available for 1992 is that a total of about 510 were removed or departed voluntarily.
[3] Provisional data.

Custody (Deaths)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ensure that the same categories of information in respect of deaths in custody are provided in private and state prisons. [960]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. Harry Cohen, dated 31 October 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the categories of information provided in respect of deaths in custody in private prisons and state prisons.

There is no distinction in the categories of information provided in respect of deaths in custody which occur in privately managed prisons or public sector prisons. It is a contractual requirement that all privately managed prisons report deaths in custody to Prison Service Headquarters in the same way as all other establishments.

WALES

Inward Investment

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the inward investment projects into Clwyd from outside Wales since 1980; and if he will make a statement. [212]

Mr. Hague: The Welsh Development Agency has collected data on inward investment since April 1983. Since then, over 300 projects have been recorded for the country; they promise over 18,000 new jobs, over 5,000 safeguarded jobs, and capital investment of almost £2 billion. Clwyd has been a major beneficiary of Wales's inward investment success.

I have asked the chairman of the Welsh Development Agency to write with a list of projects, and will arrange for a copy of the reply to be placed in the Library of the House.

Strategic Development Scheme

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list all bids from the former Colwyn borough council, Rhuddlan borough council, Ogwr borough council, and Clwyd county council which received strategic development scheme funding from his Department. [216]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The end of year strategic development scheme approvals for each of the four former local authorities in 1994–95 and 1995–96 are as follows:

Clwyd County Council

Project	Amount Capital	Amount Revenue
1994–95		
Education and training for special needs, Wrexham	5,000	
Business units at Wrexham technology park	106,425	
Build a multi-purpose community centre and landscaping at Caia Park	114,094	
Construction of alternative access into Denbigh by widening Barkers Well lane	193,000	
Traffic calming measures, hard and soft landscaping, improved lighting, Caia Park	150,000	
Conversion of a building at Queensway to workshop and provide training, Caia Park	30,000	
Barkers Well lane	51,775	
Corwen business centre	9,196	
Pensarn community resource team to continue to address problems arising from floods		173,775
Appointment of village liaison and development worker, Brymbo		21,002
Conversion of a building at Queensway to workshop and provide training in Caia Park		30,500
Employment of 2 counsellors to provide enterprise training and business advice for small business start ups		55,000
Full time coordinator at WRENEWAL		9,360
Rhyl and district benefit advice shop		65,634
Caia Park employment project		47,409
West Rhyl young peoples project		42,193
Employment of county crime prevention coordinator		41,866
Rhyl adventure playground community recreation scheme		17,347
Business information Network—appointment of development and liaison officer		5,541
Education and training for special needs in Wrexham		83,518
Rhyl adventure playground		23,492
	659,490	616,637

Clwyd County Council

Project	Amount Capital	Revenue
1995–96		
Construction of suitable alternative access Barkers Well Lane, Denbigh	223,000	
Construction of new commercial units at Pinfold Industrial Estate, Rhyl—Phase 2	300,000	
Build a multipurpose community centre and landscaping at Caia Park, Wrexham	385,906	
Business Unit at Wrexham Technology Park	5,141	
Traffic calming measures, Caia Park	54,951	
Caia Park Employment Project		48,330
Education and training for special needs in Wrexham		85,518
Pensarn community resource team—floods in Towyn		86,888
Appointment of a village liaison and development worker		10,501
Conversion of a building at Queensway to workshop and provide training, Caia Park		66,500
Employment of 2 counsellors to provide enterprise training and business advice for small business start ups		56,000
West Rhyl young peoples project		42,193
Employment of worker at Rhyl adventure playground		16,840
Rhyl and district benefit advice shop		58,734
Full time coordinator at WRENEWAL		22,217
Employment of county crime prevention coordinator		39,740
West Rhyl community strategy		4,152
Community strategy for Castle Ward, Flint		3,000
	968,998	540,613

Colwyn Borough Council

Project	Amount Capital	Revenue
1994–95		
Grants for businesses	40,000	
Llanfairtalhaiarn landscaping	1,990	
Pensarn coast protection scheme	25,000	
Coast Protection—Rhos on Sea	80,000	
	146,990	
1995–96		
Colwyn Bay CRA	151,770	
Environmental Improvements Llanfairtalhaiarn	1,424	
Town Centre Beach link enhancement	180,000	
	333,194	

Glyndwr District Council

Project	Amount Capital	Revenue
1994–95		
Llangollen to Corwen steam railway	100,000	
Women's aid support worker		27,841
	100,000	27,841
1995–96		
Link road and parking Corwen Town Centre	280,000	
Women's aid support worker		26,956
	280,000	26,956

Rhuddlan Borough Council

Project	Amount Capital	Revenue
1994–95		
Refurbishment of Railway Station, Rhyl	634,470	
Commercial renewal area grants, Rhyl	24,250	
Cefndy employment park	15,400	
Fforddlas workshops	125,880	
Rhuallt community bus	4,920	
Employment of community development and liaison worker		20,867
	804,920	20,867
1995–96		
Ffordlas Industrial site Rhyl and associated infrastructure	100,000	
Rhyl Town centre and central promenade security initiative	232,000	
Refurbish railway station to construct commercial units, Rhyl	200,000	
Internal commercial renewal grants to 15 business in Rhyl	100,000	
Provide 150m of ind estate roads and 3ha serviced plots Cefndy road employment park	200,000	
Employment of community development and liaison worker		21,416
Rhyl Town centre and central promenade security initiative		58,000
Improvements to East Promenade Rhyl	1,000,000	
	1,832,000	79,416

Council Personnel (Declarations of Interest)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what guidelines his Department has given to local authorities in Wales on the declaration by elected councillors and senior officers of any interest they may have in *(a)* the freemasons and *(b)* other such body; and if he will make a statement. [129]

Mr. Hague: Guidance on the conduct of local authority members is set out in Welsh Office circular 23/90. Paragraph 9 of this code refers to membership of the freemasons and other bodies. We may review this guidance in the light of any recommendations made by the Nolan committee.

The conduct of local government officers is a matter for local authorities to determine.

Cardiff Bay Development Corporation

Mr. Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairmen of the Cardiff Bay development corporation and of the Welsh development agency concerning the need for a written statement on their roles in the corporation's designated area. [1538]

Mr. Hague: None. The Welsh Development Agency does not become involved in development within the corporation's designated area, except with the agreement of the corporation.

Bulgarian Debt

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the Welsh Health Common Services Authority concerning the

collectability of the outstanding debt owed to Welsh Health Development International by the Bulgarian authorities. [1536]

Mr. Hague: None. This matter is being pursued by the authority.

Public Bodies (Pensions)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those non-departmental public bodies whose staff are employed under civil service terms and conditions, in each case indicating if they have *(a)* contributory and *(b)* non-contributory pension schemes. [1537]

Mr. Hague: Employees of non-departmental public bodies are not civil servants. The following non-departmental public bodies have terms and conditions of service based upon the old civil service terms and conditions of service.

Arts Council for Wales: (b)

Countryside Council for Wales: (b)

Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales: (b)

Development Board for Rural Wales: (a)

Further and Higher Education Funding Council: (b)

Land Authority for Wales: (a)

Local Government Boundary Commission: (b)

National Library of Wales: (a)

Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (b)

Sports Council for Wales: (a)

Wales Tourist Board: (a)

Welsh Language Board: (b)

(a)–Indicates that they have a contributory pension scheme; and,

(b)–Indicates a non-contributory pension scheme, including a 1.5 per cent. contribution for widows/widower's pension.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Aid Funding

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the latest estimate of the proportion of GNP of the United Kingdom which will be directed to overseas aid during the current financial year; and what is the Government's medium-term target for this figure. [133]

Dr. Liam Fox: International comparisons of overseas aid figures are normally presented in relation to gross national product on a calendar year basis. In 1995, the latest year for which figures are available, UK net official development assistance was 0.28 per cent. of GNP. The figure for 1996 will be published in June 1997.

No ODA/GNP targets have been set for the future since, as with other areas of Government expenditure, the level of spending on development assistance is dependent on our economic circumstances and other public expenditure priorities. At £2,154 million in 1996–97, the UK development assistance programme is substantial and makes a significant contribution to tackling the problems facing the developing world.

Montserrat

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the total aid given to Montserrat in the current year; and if he will make a statement. [86]

Dr. Liam Fox: As at 30 September, total aid expenditure in Montserrat since 1 January 1996 has amounted to £7.75 million, comprising £2.8 million in emergency aid, £2.75 million in budgetary assistance, and £2.2 million in development aid.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what relief aid the United Kingdom Government have provided following the volcanic eruptions in Montserrat. [664]

Dr. Fox: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on 17 October, columns 1118–9.

Police Training

Ms. Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if she will list the countries in which British police or other bodies provided training for police or security forces in those countries; how long they have been in each country providing such training and what form that training takes for each; what criteria are used to determine whether training is provided, and what terms of reference are given for the training; what influence countries' human rights records have on determining police or security force training provided by the United Kingdom; if monitoring is carried out after the training to evaluate its impact; and what form that monitoring takes. [442]

Dr. Liam Fox: Countries whose police and security forces have received training from the FCO diplomatic wing include:

Police/security force training (DW)

Belize

Chile

Czech Republic

Costa Rica

Cyprus

El Salvador

Fiji

Honduras

Hungary

India

Kazakstan

Kenya

Lebanon

Malaysia

Nicaragua

Palestinian Authority

Papua New Guinea

Paraguay

Philippines

Romania

Singapore

Slovakia

Sri Lanka

Tonga

Trinidad and Tobago

Uganda

Vanuatu

Malta

Nepal

Countries who received aid for in-country police training from ODA in 1994 and 1995 were listed in the answer given to the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) on 14 May, *Official Report*, column *385*.

Details of training programmes are not kept centrally and it would involve a disproportionate cost to collate this information for each of the countries referred to above. Training for the police is considered alongside other priorities for assistance in consultation with recipient Governments. Programmes of training are tailored in content and duration to the requirements of the police forces to be assisted. Human rights records are taken into account in the provision of assistance along with other good government and developmental considerations, including poverty, as well as the UK's national interest. The FCO police advisers and other diplomatic, ODA and training staff monitor police projects during implementation. For all aid projects costing above £250,000, a project completion report is prepared providing a preliminary assessment of impact. A selection of projects are also subject to detailed evaluation. An evaluation of a selection of police projects is planned in 1997.

Zaire and Rwanda

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the need for humanitarian aid in eastern Zaire; and on what occasions embassy staff have visited this area recently. [1161]

Dr. Liam Fox: The key humanitarian problem in eastern Zaire is lack of access to those remaining in refugee camps and those displaced. Agencies believe that there are sufficient stocks available in region to meet immediate needs. The security situation has prevented visits to the area of conflict but our representative in Bujumbura visited Gatumba camp on the Burundi–Zaire border on 28 October where returnees are arriving. Our embassies in Zaire and Rwanda are also monitoring the situation closely.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in the great lakes region. [1218]

Dr. Fox: There have been 1.7 million refugees in the region since 1994. The current insecurity in eastern Zaire has served to exacerbate an already critical situation. About 500,000 people have been displaced. Agencies report that they have sufficient stocks in the region to meet immediate needs. Political and security difficulties are restricting their delivery. The Government have supported UN and EU efforts to resolve this. Bilateral approaches have been made to Zaire and Rwanda to help defuse the situation.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ferris Wheel

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what exchanges have taken place between the Accommodation and Works Committee and Lambeth borough council concerning the application for planning permission to build a giant ferris wheel by the Thames. [1353]

Sir Raymond Powell: The Committee was invited to express its views on the planning application for a ferris wheel on the south bank of the Thames. The Committee considered the matter on 22 July, and was of the opinion that the proposal was inappropriate on the grounds that the size, scale and location would be unsuitable given the fine surrounding buildings, would detract from the views of the Palace of Westminster from some angles, and during the lifetime of the temporary structure would be the dominant feature nearly opposite the, by then, newly completed New Parliamentary Building.

The Committee's views were communicated to Lambeth borough council on 24 July 1996.

Palace of Westminster (Works)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what are the expected final costs of all works carried out since July in the House of Commons for each room and area improved. [1460]

Sir Raymond Powell: In the 12 weeks of the summer recess, the Works Directorate completed another large programme of work. The value of the projets was £17 million and 1,800 contractors' employees were involved with up to 500 on site on some days. For the parliamentary data and video network—PDVN—installation, the magnitude of the task necessitated shift working, 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Overall, the works were finished on time, but the reconstruction of the Members' and Strangers' Cafeteria is planned to be completed in November 1996 and the contract to repair the roof over the Lords Chamber and the Royal Gallery is planned to continue until October 1998.

Some of the more significant projects completed since July are as follows:

Full PDVN cabling at Star Chamber Court Block, Norman Shaw North floors 1 and 2, House of Lords West Front ground and first floors and 1 The Abbey Garden.

All Members' offices now have connections for colour televisions with the clean feed from the Chamber.

The Refreshment Department modernisation phase C entailed the new Members' and Strangers' Cafeteria, completion due November 1996, and a new servery and furniture restoration for the Members' Tea Room.

The Speaker's outer office was renovated.

The Churchill Room was redecorated and a new fire escape was built.

Automatic fire detection and new telephone wiring were installed at Star Chamber Court Block and House of Lords West Front.

Fire precautions were installed, with rewiring and redecoration at the Burma road press offices.

Security double glazing was fitted in the Members' and Strangers' dining rooms and the Shadow Cabinet Room.

Enabling works were begun for air conditioning of the Committee Rooms.

As part of the heating modernisation, steam and calorifier plant was replaced.

Electrical distribution boards were renewed.

The following lifts were modernised with disabled facilities: lift at the south-east corner of the Commons Chamber, lift at the south-west corner of the Commons Chamber, lift at the back of Speaker's Chair, lift at Sovereign's entrance and lift at Law Lords' corridor.

The following works of art were restored: two fresco paintings off Central Lobby, a fresco painting in House of Lords Chamber and 35 oil paintings.

The following lavatories were refurbished: Upper Committee Corridor South, opposite Committee Room 7, Commons Court Block—second floor. Lavatory facilities for the disabled were provided at the ground floor of 7 Millbank and the Lower Waiting Hall.

The cash machines corridor was refurbished.

The second phase of overhaul of the carriage gates was carried out.

At Norman Shaw South external painting and roof repairs were completed.

Work began on the roof repairs above the Lords Chamber and the Royal Gallery. Completion is due October 1998.

Repairs were carried out to the supporting structure of the Princes Chamber ceiling.

In the Library cellars, improved storage was provided.

Asbestos was removed from plant rooms.

In addition, two projects were planned for completion during the prorogation period. They are an improved sales counter at the Speaker's bookstall and the new pulpit on the main Committee Corridor.

There were also many more small projects, and with the very tight timetable, this demanding programme has fully stretched the House's technical staff and their contractors. The PDVN project and the building maintenance carried out under the same contracts in Lords and Commons areas were particularly challenging. The following statistics indicate the work involved in the PDVN contract:

PDVN was taken to 454 desk positions, and there were 1,780 new telephone outlets, 912 data outlets and 1,910 new power outlets.

This entailed: 359 of cable, 3.1 of metal trunking, 2.7 of water pipe and 24 tonnes of new Welsh slate for floors supported by 7.3 tonnes of new steel joists; 67,000 man hours were worked on the project.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Teachers (Vetting)

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures her Department takes to ensure that grant-maintained and independent schools meet their statutory obligation to check list 99 before confirming appointments of teaching staff. [1367]

Mrs. Gillan: The Department's circulars 9/93 and 11/95, which were sent to all schools, remind schools that they have a legal obligation not to employ people on list 99 who are barred from working with children. The Department provides a service to grant-maintained and independent schools of checks against list 99 and criminal background checks. Checks are also run by the Department when appointments are notified for the purpose of the teachers' superannuation scheme and on the annual survey of independent school staff.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Privy Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Lord President of the Council what criteria are used to select individuals for membership of the Privy Council. [903]

Mr. Newton: Appointment to the Privy Council is an exercise of the prerogative. Appointments are made by Her Majesty the Queen on the advice of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. A range of factors are taken into account. Those appointed mostly comprise Ministers, other parliamentarians and members of the judiciary.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Access to Justice

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has made for the implementation of Lord Woolf's final report on access to justice. [2184]

Mr. Streeter: I have today placed in the Library a copy of the Lord Chancellor's strategy for implementing Lord Woolf's recommendations. The strategy proposes that the major elements of the reforms, the fast track, the multi-track and the new costs regime, will be in place by October 1998. The new civil procedure rules to underpin these changes will also be in place in time for implementation.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Angola

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the implementation of the Lusaka protocol in Angola; and if he will make a statement. [1220]

Dr. Liam Fox: The implementation of the Lusaka protocol was reviewed by the United Nations Security Council on 11 October. We and other council members expressed deep concern at the lack of significant progress in implementing the peace process. Both parties, but especially UNITA, were urged to fulfil their commitments to the Lusaka protocol. The United Nations Secretary-General will report further to the Security Council on 20 November.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the United Nations' plans for the future role of UNAVEM III, the United Nations Angola verification mission; and if he will make a statement. [1219]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The UN Secretary-General currently plans to begin reducing UNAVEM III military forces by the end of December 1996 in the expectation that the mission will be completed as planned by February

1997. Such an outcome will, however, depend on the willingness of the Angolan parties to honour their commitment to the peace process. The Secretary-General will submit detailed recommendations on the future role of the UN in Angola by 20 November 1996.

Rwanda and Zaire

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the role of the Rwandan authorities with regard to the security situation in the great lakes region. [1215]

Dr. Liam Fox: The Rwandan Government earlier denied any involvement of their forces in the conflict in eastern Zaire. There has been sporadic shelling across the Zaire–Rwanda border, in response to which the Rwandan Government on 30 October announced that they had sent troops into Bukavu. We have urged the Rwandans to withdraw immediately.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the security situation in the great lakes region of Africa. [1213]

Dr. Fox: The security situation in the great lakes is complex. There are long-standing ethnic tensions in eastern Zaire between Zairean peoples and those of Rwandan origin, aggravated by the influx of Rwandan and Burundi refugees. Recent violent clashes result from a backlash by Zairean Tutsis against attacks by the Zairean armed forces and extremist Hutus. The Rwandan Foreign Minister assured my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development on 31 October that Rwandan forces who entered Zaire on 29 October have now withdrawn. Meanwhile, an insurgency by extremist Hutus continues in Burundi.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures the UN is taking to prevent the conflict in eastern Zaire spreading throughout the great lakes region. [1216]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The UN Secretary-General sent Assistant Secretary-General Ibrahima Fall on a good offices mission to Zaire to assess the situation. He has now appointed a special envoy to visit the region with a humanitarian-political-military team. A special representative will be appointed after the special envoy's mission.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has recently received regarding the security and humanitarian situation in Zaire; and if he will make a statement. [1212]

Dr. Fox: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the security and humanitarian situation with the Zairean Prime Minister on 22 October. My right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Chalker met the Rwandan Foreign Minister on 31 October. We are urging restraint and dialogue to resolve the situation. We remain in close touch with other regional Governments, with UN and EU partners, as well as with the humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisations involved. Aid agencies believe there are sufficient stocks available in the region to meet immediate needs.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has participated in recently *(a)* in the UN and *(b)* within the EU concerning the situation in Zaire. [1214]

Dr. Fox: The General Affairs Council discussed Zaire on 28 October and issued a statement calling for an immediate ceasefire and urgent dialogue to resolve the crisis in eastern Zaire. The Un Security Council conducts regular discussions on the situation there.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response the Government have made to the UN Secretary-General's call for an emergency mission to go to Zaire. [1217]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The UK has expressed its support in the Security Council for an emergency mission to go to Zaire.

Albania

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress in negotiations with the Albanian Government regarding an outstanding claim for compensation arising from the Corfu incident and the return of the Albanian gold. [849]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The Secretary-General of the tripartite gold commission met in London on 29 October with representatives of the Government of Albania to conclude the transfer of gold from the tripartite gold commission to Albania. At the same time, the Government of Albania settled the British Government's claim for compensation for the Corfu channel incident.

Human Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to prevent human rights abuses against Christians in Egypt. [1098]

Mr. Hanley: The violence some Egyptian Christians have suffered at the hands of Islamic extremists is a cause for concern. The Egyptian authorities are trying to suppress such violence. Our embassy in Cairo is following developments closely.

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to prevent human rights abuses in China. [1096]

Mr. Hanley: We remain deeply concerned about the human rights situation in China. We regularly express our concerns to the Chinese authorities, both bilaterally and in conjunction with our European Union partners. We shall continue to use our bilateral exchanges, for example on legal reform, to promote a more enlightened approach by the Chinese authorities.

Copex Fair (Indonesian Representatives)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if representatives of the Indonesian Government will be present at the contingency and operational procurement exhibition—COPEX—fair in Esher, on 5, 6 and 7 November. [420]

Mr. Hanley: The Copex trade fair is a private event. We do not know whether any representatives of the Indonesian Government will attend it.

EU Foreign Affairs Council

Ms Quin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the agenda and outcome of the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 28 October in Luxembourg. [1533]

Mr. David Davis: The A points in document 10968/96, the texts of which will be placed in the House as soon as they are available, were approved. They include draft conclusions on the EU regional approach to developing relations with the countries of the former Yugoslavia and a common position introducing a ban on visas for senior members of the Burmese regime and on high-level bilateral visits to Burma.

The Council noted the resolutions adopted by the European Parliament in document 9600/96. A copy of the document will be placed in the House as soon as it is available.

The Council reached political agreement on a regulation and joint action to counter unacceptable extra-territorial effects of US trade legislation affecting European companies trading with Cuba, Iran and Libya.

After discussion, the Council agreed conclusions on preparations for the world trade ministerial meeting in Singapore in December. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade emphasised that the Singapore meeting should give a boost to trade liberalisation.

Commissioner Marin, Vice-President of the European Commission, gave a short report to the GAC on the state of play in the association agreement negotiations with Egypt and how the Commission hoped to take negotiations forward. This was subsequently discussed at a meeting of the EC–Egypt co-operation council.

After discussion, the Council agreed conclusions announcing the mandate and appointment of Ambassador Miguel Angel Moratinos as the European Union's special envoy to the middle east peace process.

The presidency gave a progress report to the GAC on the European Union observatory to discuss racism and xenophobia. The presidency will produce a draft statute to clarify discussion of the legal base.

The Council agreed that a joint action should be prepared for adoption at or before the 25 November General Affairs Council on support for the democratic process in Zaire, covering establishment of an EU electoral unit and a contribution to the UN trust fund. The Council also issued a statement reiterating the Union's grave concern at the escalation of fighting in eastern Zaire and its potential to worsen further the already serious humanitarian situation existing in the region, calling for an immediate ceasefire, and restating its view that a regional conference on peace, security and stability in the great lakes region under the auspices of the UN and the Organisation and African Unity, has a central role to play in the establishment of a settlement.

The Council had an exchange of views on the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe summit to be held in Lisbon on 2–3 December, in the perspective of which it adopted "EU Guidelines".

On the morning of 28 October, I signed the EC–Korea trade and co-operation agreement on behalf of the UK.

In the margins, there were discussions on the location of the plant variety office and Turkey, both of which will be discussed at the November General Affairs Council, and under any other business there was a brief discussion on the results of the recent EU–southern Africa development community ministerial in Windhoek, and a request from Greece for the Commission to consider humanitarian aid to Bulgaria.

In addition, the presidency, on behalf of the Union, published a declaration on the situation in Afghanistan.

At a ministerial session of the Intergovernmental Conference Ministers discussed the external action of the EU, focusing on common foreign and security policy—CFSP—issues, security and defence, and external economic relations. On CFSP, Ministers exchanged views on a number of practical and institutional questions. On security and defence, Ministers discussed a range of institutional issues. On external economic relations, Ministers considered options designed to ensure that the EU is able to act decisively to promote its interests in external economic forums.

The Ministerial was preceded by an exchange of views with the presidency and representatives of the European Parliament.

BP (Colombia)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the allegations made in the European Parliament on 24 October relating to BP's activities in Colombia; and if he will make a statement. [1211]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We are aware of the allegations. We are not aware of any evidence which gives substance to them.

EU Council

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will detail forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for November; and if he will list major European Union events for the next six months. [2113]

Mr. David Davis: This calender is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

European calendar: November 1996 to April 1997

	Venue	*Event*
November 1996		
4 to 5	Brussels	K4 Committee
7 to 9	Cork	Rural Development Conference
11	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
11 to 15	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
12	Brussels	Health Council
14	Brussels	Industry Council
14 to 15	Dublin	Political Committee

European calendar: November 1996 to April 1997

	Venue	Event
18 to 19	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Brussels	Budget Council
21	Brussels	Education Council
22	Brussels	Development Council
22	Brussels	Fisheries Council
25	Brussels	Consumer Council
25 to 26	Brussels	General Affairs Council
26	Brussels	Internal Market Council
27 to 28	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
28	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
28 to 29	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
December 1996		
2	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
2	Brussels	Social Affairs Council
3	Brussels	Energy Council
5	Brussels	Research Council
6	Brussels	General Affairs Council
9 to 10	Brussels	Environment Council
9 to 13	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
12 to 13	Brussels	Transport Council
13 to 14	Dublin	European Council
16	Brussels	Culture Council
16 to 17	Brussels	Agriculture Council
17	Brussels	K4 Committee
19 to 20	Brussels	Fisheries Council
January 1997		
1		Dutch Presidency begins
7	Brussels	Fisheries Council
13 to 17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
20 to 21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20 to 21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
27	Brussels	Ecofin Council (t.b.c.)
29 to 30	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
31	Amsterdam	Transport Council (Informal)
February 1997		
1	Amsterdam	Transport Council (Informal)
1 to 2	Brussels	Economic Affairs Council (Informal)
5 to 6	Noordwijk	Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)
14 to 15	Rotterdam	Social Affairs Council (Informal)
17	Brussels	Ecofin Council
17 to 18	Brussels	Agriculture Council
17 to 21	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
24 to 25	Brussels	General Affairs Council
28	Amsterdam	Development Aid Council (Informal)
March 1997		
1 to 2	Amsterdam	Development Aid Council (Informal)
3	Rotterdam	Education Council (Informal)
3 to 4	Brussels	Environment Council
6	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
10	Brussels	Internal Market Council
10 to 14	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
11 to 12	Brussels	Transport Council
15 to 16	Apeldoorn	Gymnich (Informal)
17	Brussels	Ecofin Council
17 to 19	Brussels	Agriculture Council
18 to 19	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
24 to 25	Brussels	General Affairs Council
April 1997		
*4 to 6	Noordwijk	Ecofin Council (Informal)
*7 to 10	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
*10	Luxembourg	Consumer Council
*14 to 15	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
*17	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
*18 to 20	Amsterdam	Environment Council (Informal)
*21 to 22	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
*23	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary

European calendar: November 1996 to April 1997

	Venue	Event
*24	Luxembourg	Industry Council
*24 to 25	Luxembourg	ACP/EU
*25	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
*29	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council

Subject: monthly forecast of business for November 1996

1. The following Councils are scheduled:

11 November: Ecofin Council

12 November: Health Council

14 November: Industry Council

18 November: Agriculture Council

19 November: Agriculture Council

19 November: Budget Council

21 November: Education Council

22 November: Development Council

22 November: Fisheries Council

25 November: Consumer Council

25 November: General Affairs Council

26 November: General Affairs Council

26 November: Internal Market Council

28 November: Telecommunications Council

28 November: Justice and Home Affairs Council

29 November: Justice and Home Affairs Council

2. The following subjects are likely to be discussed:

11 November: Ecofin Council

Approval of the provisional agenda.

Approval of the list of "A" points.

Preparation of the European Council:

Recommendations of the Council based on Article 109 J.

Preparation of Stage 3 of EMU:

Report by the Council to the European Council on relations between the Euro area and non-participating member states.

Commission report on the development of tax systems in the European Union.

SEM 2000 Commission presentation of report of personal representatives group.

Other business.

12 November: Health Council

Adoption of the agenda.

Adoption of the list of "A" points.

Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council creating a network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the European Community.

EU–US task force on communicable diseases.

Strategy towards blood safety and self-sufficiency in the European Community: draft resolution.

Reduction of smoking in the European Community: draft resolution.

Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSE): draft conclusions.

Integration of health protection requirements in Community policies: draft resolution.

European health card.

Other business:

Rapid introduction of important new medicinal products (requested by Netherlands delegation).

14 November: Industry Council

At this stage, all of the below would seem likely to be discussed.

EC merger regulation.

Presidency paper on state aids.

Benchmarking.

Communication on competitiveness of chemicals industry.

Communication on competitiveness of automotive industry.

Communication on competitiveness of textiles industry.

Third SME multi-annual programme (1997–2000)—particularly its budget.

Resolution on realising the full potential of SMEs, including very small and micro enterprises.

18–19 November: Agriculture Council

Beef and cereals package.

Reform of the tobacco sector.

Reform of the olive oil sector.

Durum wheat (possible item).

Plant health—solidarity and responsibility (possible item).

BSE (possible item).

Veterinary and Phytosanitary Agency (possible item).

19 November: Budget Council

1997 Budget

Legal base (possible item).

21 November: Educational Council (provisional agenda)

School effectiveness: discussion document and Council conclusions. This will be the topic for the open debate.

Lifelong learning: discussion document and Council conclusions.

Local community development through education: council conclusions.

Quality of higher education: Presentation of recommendation.

Paedophilia conclusions–declaration.

Green Paper on obstacles to mobility: presentation by the Commission.

Quality Assessment of first and second level education systems: oral report from the Commission.

SOCRATES: information from the Commission.

European Commission white paper: Commission report on five thematic conferences.

Transferability of grants: Information on commission proposal for a Council recommendation.

TEMPUS II (Information—Decision depending on timeframe): Proposal for a Council Decision amending Decision 93/246/EEC of 29 April 1993 adopting the second phase of the trans-European co–operation scheme for higher education (TEMPUS II) (1994–1998).

Learning in the information society: information from the Commission.

Meeting with the Education Ministers of the countries of central and eastern Europe (the Council will adjourn its formal business at 1200 to have the formal part of the structured dialogue until 1300. This will continue over lunch and the Council will reconvene formally at approximately 1500 to conclude its business).

22 November: Fisheries Council

Multi-annual guidance programme IV.

Fish prices.

Autonomous tariff quotas.

22 November: Development Council (provisional agenda)

First ministerial exchange of views on ACP/EU relations post Lome IV (Commission green paper).

Further exchange of views on relief, rehabilitation and development.

Resolution on human and social development.

Adoption of a common position on the regulation on north–south co–operation in the fight against drugs.

Adoption of a common position on the regulation on aid for population policies and programmes.

Approval after EP second reading of the regulations on rehabilitation and construction in developing countries, Refugees in Asia and Latin America, environmental measures in developing countries and HIV/AIDS–related operations in developing countries.

Horizon 2000—coherence, complementarity and co–ordination.

25 November: Consumer Council

Draft directive on injunctions (access to justice).

Action plan on access to justice.

Directive on consumer credit (on formula used for APR).

Discussion of green paper on "Financial services: meeting consumers' expectations".

Discussion of green paper on "Commercial Communications".

Presidency paper on vulnerable groups.

Commission presentation on consumer guarantees.

There will also be an open debate on consumers and the information society.

25–26 November: General Affairs Council

Agenda not yet known.

26 November: Internal Market Council

Agenda not yet known.

28 November: Telecommunications Council

Directive on the application of open network provision to voice telephony and on universal service for telecommunications in a competitive environment: Common position.

Directive on common rules for the development of Community postal services and the improvement of the quality of service: Common position (possible item).

Decision regarding the definition and implementation of Community Policy in the field of communications and postal services: adoption.

Illegal material on the Internet: conclusions/recommendations (possible item).

Communication on numbering: presentation (possible item).

Directive on the approximation of the laws of member states concerning the connected telecommunications equipment, including the mutual recognition of their conformity and applicability: presentation (possible item).

28–29 November: Justice and Home Affairs Council

Agenda not yet known.

SCOTLAND

Children's Clubs (Police Advice)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what record is kept of police officers offering advice or assistance in their personal capacity to the organisers of children's clubs; and if he will make a statement. [195]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: There is no central requirement for clubs or police officers to keep such records.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to make alterations to the system under which decisions relating to both the aggregate level and distribution between councils of grant-aided expenditure, Government-supported

expenditure and aggregate external finance are taken with particular reference to the delegation of such decisions to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; and if he will make a statement. [206]

Mr. Kynoch: My right hon. Friend is statutorily obliged to consult the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about both the aggregate level of the local government finance settlement and its distribution among councils, but there is absolutely no question of decisions on those matters having been delegated to the convention as the hon. Member appears to suggest.

Cullen Inquiry

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many officers of Central Scotland police intimated a willingness to give evidence to the Cullen inquiry and subsequently declined to do so; and if he will make a statement. [90]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland appointed Lord Cullen on 21 March 1996 to be a tribunal for the purposes of this inquiry in virtue of section 1 of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921.

Under the provisions of the Act, Lord Cullen had the power to call witnesses and require them to appear at the inquiry. There was, therefore, no question of anyone intimating a willingness to give evidence to the inquiry and subsequently declining to do so.

Police (Freemasons)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what records are kept which show to which masonic lodges police officers belong; and if he will make a statement. [237]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: No such records are kept by the Scottish Office.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the policy of the Central Scotland police in respect of officers being members of the masonic order. [89]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I have no information about any such policy, which would be a matter for the chief constable.

Casualty Animals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received relating to the reluctance of contractors to pick up bulls as casualty animals; and if he will make a statement. [464]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: None.

Thomas Hamilton

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions Thomas Hamilton was found in possession of firearms, other than those included on his firearms certificate; and if he will make a statement. [95]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Lord Cullen's report of the public inquiry into the shootings at Dunblane primary school mentions no such occasions. In particular, I refer the hon. Member to chapter 6 of the report, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Ex-prisoners (Employment)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what percentage of ex-prisoners in Scotland have entered *(a)* paid employment, *(b)* full-time training and *(c)* full-time education within six months of being released from prison in each year since 1990; [1472]

(2) what percentage of ex-offenders in Scotland who received non-custodial sentences have entered *(a)* paid employment, *(b)* full-time training and *(c)* full-time education within six months of completing their sentence in each year since 1990; [1473]

(3) what is the total number and percentage of ex-offenders in Scotland who have entered employment within six months of completion of their sentence in each year since 1990. [1474]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what criteria are used by his Department in assessing requests for additional section 94 consents made by local authorities. [1379]

Mr. Kynoch: Additional section 94 consent is dependent on the availability of uncommitted resources for local authority capital spending. If resources are available, decisions are taken by Ministers in light of the submissions from local authorities and the relative needs and priorities of the councils seeking assistance.

Re-offenders

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the total number and percentage of re-offenders in Scotland in each year since 1990; and if he will provide a breakdown of these figures by category of crime. [1475]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Information is not available in the form requested. The Scottish Office publication "Criminal Proceedings in Scottish Courts, 1994" contains some information on those persons convicted on more than one occasion in the period 1989–1994.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Public Relations

Mr. Allason: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will contract out to the private sector media and public relations work currently undertaken by the Government Information Service. [850]

Mr. Freeman: Decisions on how media and PR campaigns are carried out are for Departments to make.

TRANSPORT

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimates he has made of *(a)* the restructuring costs and *(b)* other costs relating to the letting of the west coast main line rail franchise. [1371]

Mr. Watts: The costs incurred by the franchising director to date on letting the InterCity West Coast franchise are £2.2 million. Any restructuring of the business will be the responsibility of the franchisee.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimates have been made of *(a)* the total costs of consultants, *(b)* the costs of lawyers' fees, *(c)* the costs of accountants' fees, *(d)* the costs of management consultants' fees and *(e)* the costs of publicity, in the letting of the west coast main line rail franchise. [1370]

Mr. Watts: The costs of consultants' fees incurred by the franchising director on letting the InterCity West Coast franchise are:

Lawyers: £0.33 million

Accountants: £1.23 million

Management consultants: £0.28 million

Total consultants costs: £2.20 million

Apart from costs incurred at the time a franchise is awarded, costs on publicity are incurred for franchising generally and cannot be attributed to individual franchise sales.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what costs have been incurred to date on the bidding process in preparation for letting the west coast main line rail franchise, broken down by category. [1369]

Mr. Watts: The costs incurred to date by the franchising director on letting the InterCity West Coast franchise are:

	£ million
Legal	0.33
Financial adviser	0.23
Accountant	1.23
Management consultants	0.28
Engineering	0.13
Total	2.20

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the value of liabilities to be written off as part of the letting of the west coast mainline rail franchise. [1372]

Mr. Watts: The franchising director has written off no liabilities as part of franchising InterCity West Coast.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what has been the expenditure on operation of the west coast mainline *(a)* in each year since 1993–94, *(b)* in the year up to the issuing of the first pre-qualification document by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising and *(c)* in the time since preparation for letting the franchise began. [1373]

Mr. Watts: In 1993–94, the InterCity West Coast business was part of the InterCity division of BR and it is not possible to identify the operating costs of InterCity West Coast separately.

On 1 April 1994 the InterCity division was split in preparation for franchising and InterCity West Coast established as a separate business. From that date, responsibility for funding BR passenger operations has been the responsibility of the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising. Since then, BR has received support for passenger rail services to cover those costs of running the business that are not met from passenger revenue or other income. Opraf has paid the following sums to BR to cover the budgeted deficits of InterCity West Coast.

	£ million
1994–95	99.05
1995–96	84.69
1996–97[1]	92.53
Total	276.27

[1] Annual total.

In 1994–95, BR received £67 million of the support for InterCity West Coast by 14 December 1994 when the first pre-qualification document was issued.

From 1 April 1994 to date, Opraf has paid BR £233 million in respect of InterCity West Coast.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the number of services projected in the passenger service requirement for InterCity West Coast between Watford junction and Milton Keynes. [1468]

Mr. Watts: There is no requirement for services to call at Watford or Milton Keynes in the InterCity West Coast draft passenger service requirement. The draft passenger service requirement for North London Railways includes a specification safeguarding regular services between London, Watford, Milton Keynes and stations on the route to Birmingham. In drawing up the draft passenger service requirement for InterCity West Coast, the franchising director has taken the view that the operator should have the commercial flexibility to determine the number of InterCity services calling at these stations. The consultation period on the draft passenger service requirement for InterCity West Coast ends on 20 November.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the cost of consultants' fees relating to the preparation for letting the west coast main line franchise *(a)* for each year since 1993 and *(b)* to date. [1368]

Mr. Watts: The costs of consultants' fees incurred by the franchising director on letting the InterCity West Coast franchise are:

1993–94 £0.00 million

1994–95 £0.26 million

1995–96 £0.30 million

1996–97 £1.64 million

Total £2.20 million

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the projected number of services listed in the passenger service requirement for the InterCity west coast main line for services between London Euston and Crewe. [1519]

Mr. Watts: The draft passenger service requirement for InterCity West Coast specifies that the operator must provide an hourly service in each direction Mondays to Saturdays. On Sundays there must be an hourly service between Crewe and London Euston, and 14 trains between London Euston and Crewe. The consultation period on the draft passenger service requirement ends on 20 November.

Departmental Parking

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many car parking spaces *(a)* were available at the Department of Transport's former premises at 2 Marsham street and *(b)* are available at the Department's current premises at Great Minster house. [1375]

Mr. Bowis: Approximately 64 car parking spaces within 2 Marsham street were allocated to the Department of Transport on a permanent basis in 1995. The number of car parking spaces available in Great Minster house is 23.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the annual cost per annum of car parking spaces at the Department of Transport's current premises of Great Minster house. [1377]

Mr. Bowis: I refer to the reply I gave to the hon. Gentleman on 28 October *Official Report*, column *44*.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the cost of car parking spaces at the Department of Transport's former premises at 2 Marsham street, on the basis of central London charges, for each year since 1979, in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* real terms. [1376]

Mr. Bowis: Prior to leaving 2 Marsham street in June 1996, the cost of car parking was £192,000 per annum based on central London commercial rates. Information for earlier years is not available.

National Bus Company Pension Scheme

Mr. Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the findings of the Pensions Ombudsman in respect of the National Bus Company employees: superannuation scheme; and what measures he proposes to return the £168 million plus interest received by his Department from the scheme prior to the sale of the Company. [1086]

Mr. Watts: The pensions ombudsman has issued his final determination on a complaint against the trustees of one of the pension funds—the bus employer superannuation trust—of the former National Bus Company. The trustees, to whom the determination is directed, are in touch with my Department about it. My Department is considering the determination and taking legal advice before replying to the trustees. It may be necessary and appropriate to ask the courts to make a ruling on the complex issues involved.

Rail Deregulation

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proposals his Department has to issue deregulation orders in respect of initiatives involving *(a)* level crossings, *(b)* the introduction of new railway stock, *(c)* tramways and *(d)* railway heritage. [1432]

Mr. Watts: There are no plans to use order-making powers to further initiatives in these areas.

Rail Franchising Director

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many official cars are operated by the office of the Rail Franchising Director; and if he will indicate the total expenditure for those vehicles since Opraf was established. [1467]

Mr. Watts: Opraf leases one car from the Government car service. The net costs are as follows:

	£
1993–94	16,510
1994–95	46,254
1995–96	45,527
1996–97[1]	23,793
Total	132,084

[1] To date.

Watford Junction Rail Incident

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what action has been taken by the British Railways Board to investigate the reason for a London to Manchester train on 10 July overshooting Watford Junction station; [123]

(2) what failures in approved safety procedures have been identified by the British Railways Board to explain the reason for a London–Manchester train overshooting Watford Junction station on 10 July; [119]

(3) if all train staff specifically involved in the incident on 10 July when a London–Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station have been asked to offer evidence to an internal inquiry under the auspices of the British Railways Board; [117]

(4) if he will instruct the British Railways Board to publish the fully details of the incident on 10 July when a Euston–Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station; [113]

(5) if he has requested information from the British Railways Board about the incident on 10 July when a Euston–Manchester express train overshot Watford Junction station; [121]

(6) what defect reports on *(a)* the trainset and *(b)* the locomotive which overran Watford Junction station on 10 July were made on the previous day; and what action was taken; [116]

(7) what action has been taken by the British Railways Board following the incident on 10 July when a London–Manchester train overshot Watford Junction Station; [120]

(8) if the results of the British Railways Board internal inquiry into the incident on 10 July when a London–Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station have been made available to the train staff involved; [118]

(9) what explanation has been provided to him by the British Railways Board for the failure of a London–Manchester train on 10 July to stop at Watford Junction station; [91]

(10) what instructions he has given to the British Railways Board about making known full details of the incident on 10 July when a Euston–Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station; [114]

(11) on what date the Health and Safety Executive was notified by his Department about the incident on 10 July when an express train overshot Watford Junction station by five miles; [662]

(12) what action has been taken by the Health and Safety Executive to investigate the reasons for a London to Manchester train on 10 July overshooting Watford Junction station; [101]

(13) what recommendations have been made by the Health and Safety Executive following the incident on 10 July when a London to Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station. [103]

Mr. Watts: The incident on 10 July was reported to the Health and Safety Executive's railway inspectorate by Railtrack within two hours of it occurring. HSE inspecting officers immediately started an independent investigation as to the cause. The train in question was operated by a British Railways Board subsidiary company, InterCity West Coast Ltd., which held an inquiry into technical aspects following an agreement with Railtrack.

As part of its investigation, the HSE has confirmed that the cause of the incident was the brake failure due to a hose blanking cap known as a "top hat" becoming trapped in a brake hose coupling. The "top hat" was able to spin on its axis causing an intermittent failure. The train's braking system was tested at the InterCity depot in Wembley, Middlesex before its journey to Euston, and was tested again immediately before the train's departure from Euston to Manchester. No defects were found. The blockage of the brake coupling hose which caused the brake failure must therefore have developed during the journey.

How the railways' internal inquiry is held, whom it chooses to interview, and to whom the results are made available, are matters for the railway companies involved. The Secretary of State for Transport has no statutory powers to request details of, or to instruct any railway company to make public, the findings of its internal inquiries into any incident. The HSE as the independent safety regulator does have power to require such details, and the Health and Safety Commission advises the Secretary of State for Transport. The HSE is continuing its discussions with the train operating company.

I understand from the HSE that:

(a) a check has been made of other rolling stock to see if any similar potential obstructions exist;

(b) suppliers of brake coupling hoses have now dispensed with the use of "top hat" blanking pieces and are using alternative means of preventing ingress of dirt during storage; and

(c) procedures in depots have been improved to ensure that brake hose couplings are properly checked for any potential obstruction on fitment.

The HSE will not conclude its investigation until it has reviewed the railway's internal report and satisfied itself that issues have been properly resolved.

Mr. Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what are the implications of the Financial Services Act 1986 for the making of a full public statement by the British Railways Board to explain why on 10 July a London to Manchester train overshot Watford Junction station by five miles. [102]

Mr. Watts: The Financial Services Act 1986 requires that any public statement to be issued in the United Kingdom which might constitute an investment advertisement, as defined in the Act, should first be approved by a person authorised under the Act. Until the rail franchising process is completed, British Rail will require its staff to follow guidelines aimed at ensuring that any public statements they make comply with the terms of the Act.

Rail Privatisation

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the cost of legal fees incurred by Her Majesty's Government in relation to the privatisation of Railtrack for legal advice and work provided by solicitors in private practice; and what was the average *(a)* daily and *(b)* hourly rate contracted for the advice. [852]

Mr. Watts: Government expenditure to date on legal fees in relation to the privatisation of Railtrack is £3.9 million, excluding VAT. Information about contracted daily and hourly rates is commercially confidential.

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if all trains currently operated by privatised train operating companies have complied in full with the safety case required by the Health and Safety Executive. [661]

Mr. Watts: I am advised by the Health and Safety Executive that it has no evidence that trains operated by privatised train operating companies are not in compliance with safety case obligations.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list those companies on the pre-qualified bidders' list for railway franchises. [1471]

Mr. Watts: No. This information is commercially confidential.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the hourly rates paid to *(a)* Samuel Montague, *(b)* Kleinwort Benson, *(c)* KPMG, *(d)* Coopers and Lybrand and *(e)* Linklaters and Paines by the office of the rail franchising director for work undertaken in relation to rail privatisation. [1511]

Mr. Watts: No. It is not the Government's policy to divulge the hourly fee rates for their advisers.

Railway Rolling Stock

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many railway rolling stock leases involving mark I passenger carriages are currently in existence; and in respect of each lease, what is the name of the rolling stock company owning the vehicles, what is the name of the train operating company leasing them, how many mark I vehicles are covered by that lease and what is the date to which the train operating company is committed to leasing these mark I vehicles. [760]

Mr. Watts: The latest figures held centrally show the position as at 31 March 1995 and these are attached. The rolling stock companies were privatised last year and the current position is a matter for them.

Summary of Mark 1 Rolling Stock on lease as at 31 March 1995. All leases commenced 1 April 1994

Vehicle class	*Units on lease as at 31 March 1995*	*Lease length*
ROSCO—Angel Train Contracts		
101 (Heritage)	54 vehicles to RRNW	3 years
	1 two car unit to RR SW and W	4 years
	22 vehicles to ScotRail	4 years
117 (Heritage)	3 two car units and spare vehicle to RRSW and W	4 years
	21 vehicles to ScotRail	4 years
	6 vehicles to RRCentral	14 months
	11 two car units to North London Railways	4 years
121 (Heritage)	3 vehicles to North London Railways	4 years
	1 vehicle to North London Railways	14 months
303	43 three car units to ScotRail	4 years
	2 three car units to ScotRail	18 months
305	6 three car units to RRNW	3 years
	9 three car units to RRNW	[1]6 months
	5 four car units to ScotRail	4 years
308	21 three car units to RRNE	3 years
309	8 four car units to RRNW	6 years
421	73 four car units to Network South Cen.	8 years
	5 four car units to Network South Cen.	4 years
	2 four car units to Network South Cen.	19 months
	4 four car units to Network South Cen.	14 months
423	66 four car units to South Eastern	10 years
ROSCO—Porterbrook Leasing		
205	1 two car unit to South Eastern	5 years
	10 three car units to Network South Central	4 years
207	4 two car units to South Eastern	5 years
411	35 four car units to South Eastern	[2]—
	71 four car units to South Eastern	5 years
412	7 four car units to South West Trains	5 years
422	15 four car units to Network South Central	4 years
423	35 four car units leased to Network South Central	8 years
	4 four car units leased to Network South Central	4 years
	8 four car units leased to Network South Central	14 months
ROSCO—Eversholt Train Leasing Company		
302	28 four car units to London Tilbury and Southend	2 years
304	6 three car units to Regional Railways Central	2 years
	4 four car units to Regional Railways North West	19 months
421	34 four car units to South West Trains	8 years
	21 four car units to South Eastern	6 years
423	44 four car units to South West Trains	8 years
	33 four car units to South West Trains	4 years
Mk1 coaches	12 to Regional Railways North West	6 years
Mk1 catering	4 to Anglia	2 years
	3 to Anglia	3 years
Motorail	4 side loaders to Inter City West Coast	1 year
	41 GUVs to Inter City West Coast	1 year
	6 GUVs to Cross Country Trains	14 months
Brake Guards Vans	3 to Great Western	4 years
	19 to Inter City West Coast	1 year
	5 to Cross Country Trains	14 months

[1] Extendable to 5 years at 2 months notice.
[2] Expired 31 October 1995.

Vehicles (Illegal Operators)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on what date his Department issued draft legislative proposals to allow the vehicles of illegal operators to be impounded. [1518]

Mr. Bowis: We have not yet done so.

Traffic Congestion

Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will now update the maps of current congestion and projections of future congestion referred to in his answer of 26 February, *Official Report*, column *320*, and include detailed forecasts of congestion for trunk roads in the south west of England and in particular for key links on the motorway network in the region. [1081]

Mr. Watts: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply on 17 October to the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner), *Official Report*, columns *1100–01*. [1101]

Airport Security Staff

Mr. George: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proposals there are to extend the vetting of *(a)* in-house and *(b)* contract security staff at airports in the United Kingdom by permitting access to the police national computer; and if he will make a statement. [1028]

Mr. Bowis: Ministers agreed in August of this year that all security staff working at UK airports, whether in-house or contractors, should be subject to formal counter-terrorist checks against Government records,

including criminal records held by the police. This is additional to the existing requirement for references to be obtained.

Rail Franchises

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each rail franchise *(a)* the cost of advisers, *(b)* the training operating companies' passenger revenue in 1995–96, *(c)* the subsidy paid by the franchising director prior to privatisation, *(d)* the subsidy paid at the date the franchise was let and *(e)* the projected subsidy for each of the last two years of the franchise. [1513]

Mr. Watts: The information is provided in the tables.

£ Million

	Cost of advisors	*1995–96 Budgeted passenger revenue*	*Support paid to BR prior to franchising*[1]	*Support paid at franchising (Year 1)*	*Year 2*	*Year 3*	*Year 4*	*Year 5*	*Year 6*
Gatwick Express	2.14	31.00	nil	–4.53	–6.17	–7.85	–9.66	–10.48	–11.24
South Eastern Trains	2.19	241.90	138.92	125.40	97.67	64.99	52.78	42.12	35.99
LTS	1.94	54.30	34.50	29.61	26.61	24.00	22.53	21.15	19.85
Midland Main Line	1.90	83.20	16.76	17.48	7.31	1.92	–0.78	0.66	–2.61
Great Western	2.44	197.00	60.83	61.93	56.63	51.97	46.10	40.54	37.15
Thames[3]	1.05	59.90	43.80	40 32	33.25	24.11	16.54	13.28	7.43
Cardiff Railway	1.46	6.70	22.20	21.50	19.85	17.63	16.64	15.37	14.61
South Wales and West	1.64	48.80	84.80	80.78	70.94	60.52	55.86	50.04	46.27
InterCity East Coast	2.33	268.60	74.74	66.39	52.75	33.73	14.49	5.30	1.80
Chiltern	2.04	28.30	18.56	16.64	13.00	11.86	8.60	5.57	4.12
Network South Central	2.15	178.50	101.99	86.67	70.58	49.97	44.89	41.67	36.08
South West Trains	2.26	273.60	85.43	62.72	60.66	58.38	53.41	48.75	43.60
Island Line	0.31	1.00	2.56	2.01	1.92	1.84	1.79	1.75	[2]—
Total	23.85	1,472.80	685.09	606.92	505.00	393.07	324.76	274.30	233.66
Savings on BR Support	—	—	—	78.17	180.09	292.02	360.33	410.79	448.87
Cumulative savings	—	—	—	78.17	258.27	550.29	910.62	1,321.41	1,770.28

£ million

	Year 7	*Year 8*	*Year 9*	*Year 10*	*Year 11*	*Year 12*	*Year 13*	*Year 14*	*Year 15*
Gatwick Express	–11.72	–13.05	–14.40	–15.87	–16.37	–17.88	–19.41	–21.03	–22.65
South Eastern Trains	26.83	26.83	18.69	18.66	12.52	9.48	5.69	0.00	–2.78
LTS	18.64	17.49	16.42	15.42	14.47	13.58	12.75	11.37	11.24
Midland Main Line	–4.41	–6.22	–8.13	–10.05	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Great Western	35.23	33.60	32.60	31.60	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Thames[3]	3.74	0.00	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Cardiff Railway	13.93	13.26	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
South Wales and West	42.88	38.14	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
InterCity East Coast	0.00	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Chiltern	2.87	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Network SouthCentral	34.64	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
South West Trains	40.27	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Island Line	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Total	202.90	110.05	45.17	39.76	10.62	5.18	–0.97	–9.06	–14.19
Savings on BR Support	479.65	291.78	205.84	211.25	182.80	168.24	174.38	182.48	187.81
Cumulative savings	2,249.91	2,541.67	2,747.51	2,958.76	3,121.57	3,289.80	3,464.20	3,646.67	3,834.29

[1] Figures are for 1996–97 except for SWT and GW where the figures are for 1995–96.
[2] Not covered by the franchise.
[3] The Year 1 franchise payment is the full year equivalent of the contractual amount to allow for accurate comparisons.
Franchise years are not the same as financial years.
Therefore there is an overlap between the amount paid to BR and the franchise payment year 1.
Payments to the Franchising Director appear as negative amounts.
All payments are real amounts.

Air Traffic Control

Sir Peter Fry: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for what reasons the Civil Aviation Authority has not appointed a preferred bidder for the new Scottish centre air traffic control project. [1169]

Mr. Bowis: Decisions on the tenders for the new Scottish centre project are contingent on the review of the two-centre strategy for provision of air traffic control services currently being carried out by the CAA's subsidiary company, National Air Traffic Services Ltd. That review is not yet complete.

Northolt Station

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the safety of Northolt station for its users; and if he will make a statement. [961]

Mr. Bowis: London Underground Ltd. is responsible for the safe operation of its stations. Following its normal procedures, I understand that it has assessed the safety of Northolt station and instigated the appropriate level of inspections to monitor the condition of the structures.

Air Accident Reports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each air accident investigation report published in the last five years those recommendations that have yet to be implemented. [1436]

Mr. Bowis: The Civil Aviation Authority's progress report 1996 (CAP 666) lists the action taken in response to recommendations addressed to the CAA and the Department in 1995 and to earlier recommendations which have action outstanding.

HGVs and PSVs

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many presentations to magistrates on the enforcement of heavy goods vehicles and public service vehicles have been made by *(a)* the traffic area network unit and *(b)* traffic commissioner's offices in each of the last 12 months. [1517]

Mr. Bowis: The Department of Transport's programme of road traffic presentations to magistrates is co-ordinated by the traffic area network unit in consultation with the local traffic commissioner and the vehicle inspectorate. A total of 22 presentations has been arranged so far in response to requests from local magistrates associations. The number held in each of the last twelve months is as follows:

November 1995: 1
December 1995: 0
January 1996: 1
February 1996: 0
March 1996: 2
April 1996 : 1
May 1996: 0
June 1996: 0
July 1996: 2
August 1996: 0
September 1996: 1
October 1996: 2

Fatal Road Accidents

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the number and proportion of fatal road accidents involving heavy lorries in the most recent year for which figures are available. [1498]

Mr. Bowis: In 1995, there were 530 reported fatal road accidents involving heavy goods vehicles, accounting for 16 per cent. of all fatal road accidents.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) under what statutory powers he has placed the Benefits Agency out to tender; [408]

(2) if he will list the functions of the Benefits Agency which are to be contracted out. [409]

Mr. Roger Evans: The Benefits Agency has not been put out to tender.

On 19 July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced proposals for three initiatives involving greater collaboration with the private sector as the next stage of the Department's drive to review and improve the delivery of social security.

Those concerning the Benefits Agency include, first, an invitation to the private sector to submit proposals for taking over the operation of the child benefit centre in Washington, Tyne and Wear.

The second initiative will involve three private companies—or consortiums—appointed following open competition to work in conjunction with the Benefits Agency in running benefit delivery in three of its 13 areas—Yorkshire, West Country and East London and Anglia directorates—for 12 months. All three companies will assist the Benefits Agency with the development of new business processes and information technology. They will be invited during the 12-month period to submit proposals for any elements of the agency's business which could be run differently, including the possibility of further parts of the operation being run by the private sector.

In addition, the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services will be contracted out. A contract is expected to be awarded in April 1997.

The award of contracts under these proposals will be in compliance with the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 and the Public Services Contracts Regulations 1993.

Invalidity and Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants received all forms of *(a)* invalidity benefit for each year since 1990 and *(b)* incapacity benefit for (i) 1995 and (ii) 1996. [733]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the table.

Benefit	*Number of beneficiaries*
Invalidity benefit at 31 March 1990	1,209,000
Invalidity benefit at 30 March 1991	1,306,000
Invalidity benefit at 4 April 1992	1,439,000
Invalidity benefit at 3 April 1993	1,508,000
Invalidity benefit at 2 April 1994	1,681,000
Invalidity benefit at 12 April 1995	1,767,000
Incapacity benefit short-term higher rate and long-term rate at 31 May 1995	1,721,000
Incapacity benefit short-term higher rate and long-term rate at 31 May 1996	1,677,000

1. Figures for invalidity benefit are taken from a 1 per cent. sample of all claimants at the specified date.

2. Figures for incapacity benefit are taken from a 5 per cent. sample of the computer system at the specified date and exclude a small number of cases not held on the system.

3. When incapacity benefit was introduced on 13 April 1995 it replaced sickness benefit and invalidity benefit.

4. The information for incapacity benefit provides the numbers of recipients of short-term higher rate and long-term rate which are the direct equivalent of invalidity benefit in order to provide comparable figures.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the level of benefit fraud in the Bolton area; and what targets have been set for the anti-fraud team in Bolton. [125]

Mr. Heald: Reliable estimates of benefit fraud and incorrectness are derived from the benefit review programme, which is looking at all the major benefits over a five-year period. For example, it was announced in July 1995 that the benefit review of income support and unemployment benefit estimated 9.7 per cent. of claims to be fraudulent, representing an annual value of £1.4 billion. However, review results are statistically valid only on a national basis, and levels of fraud can not be derived for individual geographical areas.

In 1995–96 benefit savings from fraud investigation and initiatives under the security and control programme for the Bolton area amounted to £6,165,825.82.

Following the merger of the benefit fraud investigation teams serving Bolton and Wigan, a savings target has not been set separately for the Bolton area for 1996–97. The savings target for the area covering both the Bolton and Wigan areas for fraud investigation and initiatives under the security and control programme for 1996–97 is £9,423,363.

Benefit Appeals

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals against a decision that the claimant is capable of work have been *(a)* lodged and *(b)* decided during the year April 1995 to April 1996; and of those decided, how many were found in the claimant's favour. [416]

Mr. Burt: As at 31 March 1996, 40,665 appeals against a decision that a claimant was capable of work following an examination under the all-work test had been lodged. Of these, 7,671 had been heard and 3,549 were revised in favour of the appellant.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate his Department has made of the numbers of claimants receiving income support as a result of the rejection of their claim for incapacity benefit. [728]

Mr. Burt: As at 31 August 1996, 113,000[1] incapacity benefit recipients had been found capable of work following an examination under the all work-test. Of these, it is estimated that around 37,000[2] will become newly entitled to income support.

Notes:

1. Source: 100 per cent. count of cases on the incapacity benefit computer system. Excludes a small number of cases not held on the system.

2. Estimate based on family expenditure survey data, rounded to nearest 1,000 cases.

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* IB50 questionnaires were (i) issued and (ii) returned and *(b)* how many examinations for the all-work test were (1) scheduled and (2) took place during the year April 1995 to April 1996. [411]

Mr. Burt: The information is not available in the format requested as information on the return of questionnaires is not routinely collected. However, a recent sampling exercise indicated that 93 per cent. of questionnaires are returned within six weeks. The available information is in the table.

	Number
Questionnaires issued (13 April 1995 to 31 March 1996)	1,317,715
IB examinations scheduled (13 April 1995 to 31 March 1996)	683,760
IB examinations conducted (13 April to 31 March 1996)	434,817

Notes:

Figures for examinations scheduled and conducted include a small number of examinations for the own occupation test and all-work test examinations for severe disablement allowance claimants.

Source:

Benefits Agency medical services.

Out-of-hours Service

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what funds have been *(a)* made available and *(b)* expended on maintaining the out-of-hours service since the completion of the consultation exercise; and when he plans to announce a decision on the service. [124]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Peter Thurnham, dated 30 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what funds have been (a) made available and (b) expended on maintaining the Out of Hours Service (OOHS) since the completion of the consultation exercise; and when he plans to announce a decision on the service.

The consultation stage of the review of the OOHS took place during August 1996. The total budget allocated to budget holders for the administration of the OOHS for the financial year 1996/97 is £1.834m, of which £1m was issued on 10 October to enable managers to continue the service pending the results of the review.

The amount expended on maintaining the Out of Hours Service during this financial year is not separately identified by all budget holders and could only by obtained at a disproportionate cost.

The review of the OOHS is currently under way and as part of this review, the Benefits Agency has sought the views of all interested parties including social services. Those views will be taken into account in reaching the final decision. No decisions have yet been made about the OOHS. I am unable to confirm when an announcement will be made though it is hoped this will be before the end of the year.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Child Support Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what measures he has put in place to ensure that confidentiality is not breached by Post Office staff opening letters to the Child Support Agency; [66]

(2) what safeguards he has put in place to ensure that Post Office staff opening letters to the Child Support Agency are not allowed to read them; [56]

(3) what safeguards he has put in place to ensure that Post Office staff involved with the Child Support Agency in a private capacity are precluded from opening letters to the Child Support Agency at work. [57]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 30 October 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about confidentiality safeguards regarding the opening of Child Support Agency post.

Client confidentiality is of the utmost importance to the Agency, and safeguarding information was an important consideration for the Agency before taking the decision to contract out its post opening requirements to the Royal Mail.

All Royal Mail staff are required to sign the Official Secrets Act, just as are staff employed by the Child Support Agency. The sorting service provided by Royal Mail is identical to the procedure previously undertaken by Agency staff.

Mail for the Agency is opened in a separate, secure room at each Royal Mail delivery office. The office is kept locked and staff are required to sign on entry to the room. The postal workers who open Agency post sign a confidentiality agreement relating to this work. The mail opening is continually supervised by a manager and monitored by close-circuit TV. After being opened, the mail is sorted into individual office addresses nominated by the Agency and then put in sealed pouches ready for delivery to Agency offices. The volumes involved and the large scale use of machinery in the process makes the reading of individual letters and forms an impractical proposition.

I hope this is helpful.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints he has received from people using the Child Support Agency relating to breaches of confidentiality in each of the last five years. [65]

Mr. Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 30 October 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about breaches of confidentiality relating to the Child Support Agency.

It is not possible to answer your Question in precisely the form that you have requested, as statistics on the number of complaints are not recorded by category.

However, any apparent breach of confidentiality by Agency staff (whether it emerges via a complaint or our internal checks) is treated very seriously and thoroughly investigated. All staff are made aware of the importance of this aspect of the Agency's work. Since its launch in 1993, the Agency has handled over 1.7 million cases: the total number of confidentiality breaches resulting in disciplinary action is 47. The table below shows a yearly breakdown of this figure. The vast majority of cases were the result of human error, e.g. wrongly directing mail. In one case confidentiality was breached knowingly: this led to the dismissal of the person involved.

Year	*Number of confidentiality breaches*
1993–94	0
1994–95	4
1995–96	28
1996 to date	15

I hope this is helpful.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what consultations he undertook before giving permission for Post Office staff to open letters from people writing to the Child Support Agency. [67]

Mr. Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 30 October 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security regarding consultations about the opening of Child Support Agency post.

Following a feasibility study, the Agency decided to contract out its post opening requirements to the Royal Mail. The Agency ran a six month pilot exercise to test procedures and issues such as security and client confidentiality.

Full consultations were undertaken with local and national Agency Trade Union representatives before this decision was taken; Agency staff and managers involved in post opening duties were also fully consulted.

I hope this is helpful.

National Insurance

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the annual cost to the Exchequer of raising the starting point for paying employee national insurance contributions to the weekly earnings equivalent of the annual sum of £3,765; and what is his estimate of the number of individuals who would cease to be liable to pay employee national insurance contributions if such a change were made. [815]

Mr. Heald: The estimated loss in revenue from employee national insurance contributions would be some £775 million in a full year. On average, about 0.8 million employees in any week would no longer be liable to pay contributions.

Source:
Government Actuary's Department.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the additional revenue yield in a full year which would result from extending employers national insurance contributions to all fringe benefits currently liable to income tax only; and if he will make a statement. [648]

Mr. Heald: An estimated £250 million would be raised by extending employer national insurance contributions to taxable benefits in kind.

Source:
Inland Revenue.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the revenue lost to the Exchequer in *(a)* 1990-91, *(b)* 1992-93, *(c)* 1995-96, *(d)* 1996-97 and *(e)* 1997-98 from the avoidance of employers national insurance contributions by companies who have paid annual bonuses in benefits in kind as opposed to cash; and if he will make a statement. [649]

Mr. Heald: Information is not available. Not all payment practices using benefits in kind are aimed solely or largely at unfair avoidance of national insurance contributions, and employers are not required to identify bonus payments, annual or otherwise, separately from other payments.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the revenue yield from employers national insurance contributions on fringe benefits in *(a)* 1990-91, *(b)* 1992-93, *(c)* 1995-96, *(d)* 1996-97 and *(e)* 1997-98; and if he will make a statement. [650]

Mr. Heald: The main benefits in kind provided by employers are cars and fuel and class 1A contributions are charged on them.

Information regarding receipts from employer's class 1A national insurance contributions—NICs—is in the table.

£ millions

Year	*Employers' class 1A NICs (including NHS contribution)*
1990–91	[1]—
1992–93	470
1995–96	[2]469
1996–97	[2]476
1997–98	[2]491

Notes:
[1] Class 1A came into operation from April 1991.
[2] Figures are estimated.

Source:
Government Actuary's Department.

A number of other payments in kind have been brought into class 1 NICs—paid by employers and employees—including certain share payments, options, assets, gilts and certain life assurance policies. No separate figures are available for the yield from these sources.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to change the law on the liability of employers to pay national insurance. [319]

Mr. Heald: We plan to legislate to mirror pay-as-you-earn settlement agreements in national insurance contributions at the earliest suitable opportunity. We remain committed to aligning further the rules for tax and NICs in the future except where there are clear reasons why they should differ.

TREASURY

Endangered Species

12. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what efforts are being made by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise to stamp out the illegal trade in endangered species of flora and fauna. [325]

Mr. Oppenheim: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise plays a key enforcement role in the United Kingdoms long-standing obligations under CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. This entails not only monitoring and regulating legitimate trade with other countries but seizing unlawful goods and, where appropriate, prosecuting those engaged in illegal trading.

Tax Rebates

13. **Ms Lynne:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to ensure that formerly unemployed people who have paid too much tax receive their full tax rebate. [326]

Mr. Jack: Existing procedures ensure that any tax overpaid would be repaid in the normal way.

Single Currency

14. **Mrs. Bridget Prentice:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations have been made to him on the criteria for joining the European single currency. [327]

Mr. Clarke: The Government's economic policy objectives of permanently low inflation and sound public finances are fully consistent with the Maastricht convergence criteria. These criteria make economic sense in their own right, and are essential for economic success with or without EMU.

The precise interpretation of the criteria will be for the Council of Ministers to decide in early 1998, when the decision is taken on which countries have qualified to join the single currency.

Inflation

16. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the prospects for inflation into the next decade. [329]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The prospects are excellent. In recent years we have enjoyed the lowest inflation rate for almost half a century, and the Government are determined that it should remain low.

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the average rate of inflation *(a)* between March 1974 and May 1979 and *(b)* since May 1979; and if he will make a statement. [995]

Mrs. Knight: The average rate of year-on-year inflation measured by the retail prices index all items excluding mortgage interest payments was 16 per cent. between March 1974 and May 1979. The average rate since May 1979 has been 6.3 per cent. Since the Government's inflation target rate was set in October 1992, the average rate has been 2.8 per cent.

Personal Taxation

17. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the latest available figures for total personal taxation as a percentage of the total tax take; what was the equivalent figure in 1978–79; and if he will make a statement. [330]

Mr. Waldegrave: Total personal taxation was 69½ per cent. of total non-North sea taxes and national insurance contributions in both 1978–79 and 1995–96.

The Government are committed to low taxation and a tax system that raises revenue in ways that do least damage to the economy and encourage enterprise. Government tax reforms since 1979, particularly the switch from direct to indirect taxation, have allowed people to keep more of the money they earn to spend or save as they choose. By sharpening work incentives and encouraging wealth creation, the Government have laid the foundation for sustained long-term improvement in general living standards.

Private Finance Initiative

18. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his forecast for investment through private finance projects over the next three years. [332]

19. **Mr. Gallie:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total value of agreements announced under the private finance initiative to date. [333]

Mr. Jack: The latest available forecasts can be found in table 6.4 of the "1996–97 Financial Statement and Budget Report", and showed that the Government forecast private sector capital investment of £1.9 million in 1996–97, £2.6 million in 1997–98, and £2.8 million in 1998–99 at the time of the last Budget. The latest projections for the three years from 1997–98 will be published in the next "Financial Statement and Budget Report", on 26 November. Just over £7 billion worth of deals have been agreed to date.

Taxation (Cigarettes)

20. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will increase the tax levied on cigarettes. [334]

Mr. Oppenheim: That is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget statement.

Poor Families

21. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what method he consults the views of poor families prior to reaching decisions on tax and other measures to be included in the Finance Bill. [335]

Mr. Jack: We receive many letters from all sections of the community, including those who are less well off, setting out their ideas for the forthcoming Budget. All representations are looked at carefully and inform the final Budget decisions.

Public Sector Borrowing Requirement

22. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what, at the latest possible date, is the figure for the PSBR. [336]

Mr. Waldegrave: The PSBR in September was £3.4 billion. The PSBR in the first half of 1996–97 was £16.1 billion, compared with £20.1 billion in the first half of 1995–96. The summer economic forecast projected a PSBR of £26.9 billion in 1996–97 as a whole.

23. **Mr. Wareing:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the current stage of the public sector borrowing requirement. [337]

Mr. Waldegrave: The PSBR in the first half of 1996–97 was £16.1 billion, compared with £20.1 billion in the first half of 1995–96. The summer economic forecast projected a PSBR of £26.9 billion in 1996–97 as a whole, a decline of nearly £5 billion compared with the PSBR in 1995–96.

Incomes

Mr. Evenett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the income of a family on average earnings *(a)* in April 1992 and *(b)* in April 1997. [324]

Mr. Jack: Real take-home pay for a one-earner family on average earnings was £292 per week in 1991–92 and is expected to rise to £305 per week in 1996–97. That is a total rise of around £700 a year. The 1996–97 income of a family on average earnings is up £700 a year after the effects of tax and inflation when compared to that of 1991–92.

Scottish Economy

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met representatives of the business community in Scotland to discuss recent trends in the Scottish economy. [328]

Mrs. Angela Knight: My right hon. and learned Friend keeps in regular touch with representatives of the business community from all parts of the UK, including Scotland. His last meeting with Scottish business men and women was on Tuesday 29 October.

Mortgage Tax Relief

Mrs. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cost to the Exchequer of mortgage interest tax relief in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98. [805]

Mr. Jack: The estimated total cost of mortgage interest relief in 1996–97 is £2.3 billion. This estimate is provisional. It is based on the assumption, by convention, of no change from the current estimated average building society interest rate of 6.5 per cent. The cost of the relief in 1997–98 would depend on future interest rates and the future distribution of the number and value of outstanding mortgages.

Income Tax

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the full-year cost of reducing the income tax rate on the existing 20 per cent. band to *(a)* 15 per cent., and *(b)* 10 per cent. [806]

Mr. Jack: The estimated full-year cost at 1997–98 income levels of reducing the income tax rate on the existing 20 per cent. band to 15 per cent. is about £4.5 billion and to 10 per cent. is about £9 billion. The estimates assume that the income tax rate on savings and dividend income is reduced to 15 and 10 per cent. and that the estimates take account of the effects of the change on receipts of advanced corporation tax and on consequential liability to mainstream corporation tax.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the full year cost per person of raising the standard rate of income tax by 1p in the pound for *(a)* each adult in the United Kingdom and *(b)* each income tax payer in the United Kingdom. [813]

Mr. Jack: The average tax increase at 1996–97 income levels of increasing the basic rate of income tax by 1p is about £35 for each adult—aged 18 and over—and about £63 for every income tax payer in the United Kingdom.

Profit-related Pay Tax Relief

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is his estimate of the cost to the Exchequer of the tax relief on profit-related pay in *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97, *(c)* 1997–98 and *(d)* 1998–99; and if he will make a statement; [807]

(2) how many individuals are participating in profit-related pay schemes qualifying for tax relief; and what is his estimate of the number of such individuals who pay income tax at the top marginal income tax rate of 40 per cent. [808]

Mr. Jack: Available estimates of the cost of income tax relief for profit-related pay schemes in 1995–96 and 1996–97, and the number of participants up to the end of March 1996, are published in table 1.6 and table 6.3 respectively of "Inland Revenue Statistics 1996", a copy of which is in the Library.

Reliable information on the number of participants at each marginal rate is not available.

Ecus (Minting)

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to further regulate the minting of ecus by local authorities. [320]

Mrs. Angela Knight: No changes are needed. The Coinage Act 1971 sets out clearly that only the Royal Mint may issue coins in the United Kingdom.

Government Procurement

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made in improving value for money in Government procurement. [1986]

Mrs. Angela Knight: A report by the Treasury's procurement group on progress made in Government procurement is published today.

The main developments in the procurement field in 1995–96 were the publications of the Government's procurement strategy: "Setting New Standards" (Cm 2840) and the efficiency scrutiny: "Construction Procurement in Government". These set a framework for Departments to develop forward-looking and challenging objectives.

The report provides an overview of the progress made by departments in implementing both the strategy and scrutiny—in particular:

progress in developing (and implementing) procurement change programmes—designed to integrate procurement into all non-pay, non-transfer expenditure;

the development of best practice guidance for handling all aspects of large service and private finance initiative contracts;

the establishment of interdepartmental networks where Departments collaborate to share ideas on achieving value for money;

in the construction area: the establishment of eight interdepartmental working groups to implement the scrutiny's recommendations;

the introduction of a benchmarking programme; and

the establishment of an external advisory panel to the central unit on procurement to provide continuity of advice, being ideas to public procurement and ensure rapid assimilation of best private sector practice.

The report also records that, in 1994–95, Departments achieved value-for-money improvements of some £112 million on a total spend of £3.2 billion—3.4 per cent.

The main message of the report is that, although significant progress has been made, much remains to be done.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Paymaster Agency

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for that part of the Paymaster agency which is to remain in the public sector. [2110]

Mr. Oppenheim: The then Paymaster General announced on 15 July 1996, *Official Report,* columns *372–73,* that the Government were accepting the recommendations of a prior options review concerning the privatisation of the Paymaster agency. He acknowledged that a small part of the agency's banking business must stay in the public sector.

This element, which will maintain the formal title of the Office of HM Paymaster General—OPG—will be separated from the agency on 1 November, when the present head of the National Investment and Loans Office—NILO—will be appointed assistant paymaster general and become responsible for the management of the Paymaster General's accounts at the Bank of England. The OPG will remain a separate statutory body within NILO, will manage the future contract for the provision of banking services once the agency is privatised next spring, and will ensure the protection of market-sensitive data.

Drug-related Deaths

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his most recent calculation of the numbers of people who have died in each of the past five years as a result of using *(a)* cocaine, *(b)* ketamine, *(c)* khat, *(d)* amphetamines, *(e)* magic mushrooms, *(f)* solvents and *(g)* glue. [989]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from John Fox to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 31 October 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Director of the ONS to reply to your recent question asking for the numbers of people who have died in each of the past five years as a result of using (a) cocaine, (b) ketamine, (c) khat, (d) amphetamines, (e) magic mushrooms, (f) solvents and (g) glue.

The Director has asked me to respond in his absence.

The numbers of deaths in 1991 and 1992 as a result of using cocaine, ketamine, khat, amphetamines, magic mushrooms, solvents and glue are published in Table 10 of "Mortality statistics: injury and poisoning, England and Wales", Series DH4, nos 17 and 18, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

The information for 1993, 1994 and 1995 could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

VAT Refunds

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Custom and Excise implementation of a three-year limit for VAT refunds for local authorities. [789]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* The three-year cap on VAT refunds will apply to local authorities in the same way as to other VAT-registered bodies. Refunds of tax made to local authorities that are not VAT registered, on their non-business activities, will be unaffected.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Hospital Trusts

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the population served by each of the hospital trusts within the Eastern area health and social services board; and what is the capital expenditure proposed for this year and each of the next three years in each hospital trust. [64]

Mr. Moss: Under the Government's reforms it is the responsibility of purchasers, boards and GP fundholders, to secure services for the population. Trust can provide only services in line with contracts agreed with purchasers. The catchments of hospital trusts are dictated by the combination of contracts agreed with purchasers.

Capital expenditure approved for each trust in the Eastern Board area for 1996–97 is as follows:

	General capital £	Major projects £
Belfast city hospital trust	1,376,000	—
Down lisburn trust	1,005,000	—
Green park trust	171,000	—
Mater hospital trust	95,000	—
Royal group of hospitals trust	2,064,000	8,236,000
Ulster north down and ards hospital trust	912,000	—

My Department aims to maintain a broadly similar level of general capital expenditure in each trust over the next three years. Funding for other major projects will be dependent on the overall level of funding and the outcome of the tests for private finance now required by Government.

Parades

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has the total cost of policing the parades which took place in Northern Ireland from 1 April to 30 September 1996. [137]

Sir John Wheeler: The policing of marches and demonstrations is part of normal police duties and as such separate costings for these activities are not held centrally. Where the public order situation demands, it may be necessary to incur additional costs, and it is a matter of public record that the additional costs arising from the marches and demonstrations in July and August amounted to some £13 million.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many walks to services and special occasions held by lodges under the auspices of the Loyal Orange Institution of Ireland were held on dates other than 12 July during the last three years for which figures are available. [105]

Sir John Wheeler: The RUC does not record statistics on walks to services or parades held by specific organisations. It does, however, keep statistics under the broad generic headings of loyalist, nationalist and other groups. The figures for loyalist parades which include marches held under the auspices of the Loyal Orange Institution of Ireland are as follows:

1994–2057: (excluding 12 July)

1995–2034: (excluding 12 July)

1996–1895: (up to 30 September, excluding 12 July).

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many parades took place in Northern Ireland from 1 April to 30 September 1996. [135]

Sir John Wheeler: The total number of parades which took place between those dates is 2,603.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many walks or processions, under the auspices of lodges in the Loyal Orange Institution of Ireland, were held in Northern Ireland on 12 July for the last three years for which figures are available. [104]

Sir John Wheeler: The RUC does not record statistics on walks or processions held by specific organisation. It does, however, keep statistics under the broad generic headings of loyalist, nationalist and other groups. The figures for loyalist parades on 12 July, the overwhelming majority of which are likely to have been held under the auspices of the Loyal Orange Institution of Ireland, are as follows:

12.07.94: 463

12.07.95: 547

12.07.96: 304.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list (i) the location and (ii) the organisers of each parade which took place in Northern Ireland from 1 April to 30 September 1996. [136]

Sir John Wheeler: It is not practical to identify the individual or group which organised each of the 2,603 parades which took place during this period. The location of each parade is recorded by RUC sub-division. The table sets out a breakdown of the number of parades in each sub-division identified by the general term loyalist, nationalist and others.

Summary of parades 1 April 1996 to 30 September 1996

Sub-division	Loyalist	Nationalist	Other	Total
Musgrave Street	44	2	15	61
Mountpottinger	24	2	1	27
Donegall Pass	34	1	3	38
Dunmurry	11	0	4	15
Grosvenor Road	0	3	0	3
Lisburn	61	0	11	72
Woodbourne	4	1	0	5
North Queen Street	27	6	2	35
Antrim Road	3	4	0	7
Antrim	68	6	7	81
Newtownabbey	35	0	3	38
Carrickfergus	40	0	7	47
Tennent Street	31	0	4	35
Bangor	30	0	9	39
Strandtown	21	0	6	27
Castlereagh	9	0	2	11
Newtownards	69	0	8	77
Downpatrick	56	3	15	74
Newcastle	49	7	8	64
Armagh	166	8	19	193
Newry	60	17	7	84
Portadown	42	5	7	54
Lurgan	74	6	7	87
Banbridge	115	1	12	128
Cookstown	64	15	5	84
Dungannon	133	2	11	146
Enniskillen	88	1	11	100
Lisnaskea	102	1	6	109
Omagh	117	7	6	130
Strand Road	12	5	6	23
Strabane	56	3	7	66
Waterside	17	0	5	22
Coleraine	109	1	20	130
Limavady	59	6	5	70
Magherafelt	99	17	7	123
Ballymena	77	3	19	99
Ballymoney	152	2	8	162
Larne	34	2	1	37
Total	2,192	137	247	2,603

Motor Cyclists (Licensing)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proposals he has to change the system of licensing motor cyclists; if he will make

a statement on the A1 licence; what are the EU requirements in this area; and if he will make a statement. [244]

Mr. Moss: The second EC directive on the driving licence requires member states to have two motor cycle driving licence categories and associated tests. Category A will give entitlement to drive any motor cycle with a power output up to 25kW or a power to weight ratio not exceeding 0.16kW/kg. Passing the category A test will also confer entitlement to drive larger motor cycles after two years. A sub-category (A1) will give entitlement to drive a light motor cycle up to 125cc, with a power output of 11kW. The minimum age for driving motor cycles will remain 17.

In implementing the directive in Northern Ireland, it is proposed that the existing category A test—which allows a person to take a motor cycle test in a vehicle up to 250cc—will continue until 1 July 1997 on which date learner motor cyclists will be restricted to vehicles of up to 125cc in line with current arrangements in GB. It is also proposed to introduce the sub-category A1 test along with other provisions of the directive on 1 January 1997.

Primary Health Care

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to develop research and development for primary health care in Northern Ireland. [107]

Mr. Moss: The imminent appointment of the first director of research and development for the health and personnel social services as head of a new office of R and D, and plans radically to revise funding mechanisms in line with Great Britain developments emanating from the Culyer report are designed to ensure that R and D in primary care receives equitable access to available funds for R and D.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what sums were spent on research and development for primary health care in Northern Ireland in the last year for which figures are available. [106]

Mr. Moss: The Department of Health and Social Services currently provides support for research and development in the health and social services in Northern Ireland via a variety of mechanisms. Departmental funds are not reserved for specific areas of research, but are available for application across all priority areas.

During 1995–96, the Department provided £75,000 in direct support of R and D in the area of primary health care.

In addition to this, indirect support for primary health care was further provided through the provision of research funds to the four core-funded research units at the Queen's university of Belfast. The units undertake a broad portfolio of research, comprising issues directly and indirectly associated with primary health care: for example, a primary concern for the drug utilisation research unit is the prescribing of drugs by general medical practitioners. Figures for expenditure by the units on specific research projects are not available centrally.

Casualty Animals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representation he has received relating to problems associated with the payment by farmers for the collection and removal of casualty animals; and if he will make a statement. [462]

Mrs. Browning: I have received a number of representations from producers expressing concern about charges made for the collection and disposal of animals slaughtered on farm. Charges are generally higher for animals entering the over-30-month scheme than those applied to casualty animals before its introduction. The reasons for the increases are that there is now no residual value for the collectors in the hides or in the trimmings while their costs have actually increased as a result of the generally longer distances travelled to incineration sites. Against this, producers receive the full compensation rate under the OMTS rather than, as previously, a salvage value taking account of unusable parts of the carcass.

Beef Imports

Mr. Richards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries which export beef and beef products to the United Kingdom; and what measures are in place to ensure all imported products conform with current public health criteria. [211]

Mrs. Browning: In 1996, beef—including beef carcass meat, bovine offal and preparations of beef meat and bovine offal—originating from the following countries has been exported to the United Kingdom.

Argentina
Australia
Botswana
Brazil
Canada
Mauritius
Namibia
New Zealand
Paraguay
Romania
Swaziland
USA
Uruguay
Zimbabwe.

Separate information is not available for exports of beef products into the United Kingdom. However, meat products—which may or may not have contained beef—originating from the following countries have been exported to the United Kingdom.

Argentina
Botswana
Brazil
Canada
Croatia
Hong Kong
Hungary
New Zealand
Norway

Poland

Singapore

Thailand

USA.

Note:

This information, as recorded in overseas trade statistics, is provisional.

Separate information covering imports from other member states is not readily available.

All consignments of fresh meat imported into the UK, whether from other member states or third countries, must have been produced in accordance with harmonised Community rules laid down in Council directive 64/433/EEC (as amended). In the case of meat products the harmonised rules are laid down in Council directive 77/99 (as amended).

Community rules require that all imports of third country animal products enter the Community through approved border inspection posts where they are subject to official checks to verify compliance with public and animal health import conditions.

For imports from other member states, the member state of origin is responsible for ensuring that exported goods comply with Community rules. Those receiving such goods are also required to check and report any discrepancies to the competent authority in the member state of destination.

Aquatic Environment Monitoring

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what biological and physiological parameters are monitored by his Department, in order for the Department of the Environment to assess the cumulative impacts of discharges from offshore oil and gas installations on marine wildlife and habitats. [506]

Mr. Boswell *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* Through the Directorate of Fisheries Research, the Department contributes to the extensive national monitoring programme which seeks, among other things, to identify any harmful effects of human activities on the marine environment. The monitoring includes chemical analysis, incorporating measurements of hydrocarbons in water and sediments, and biological effects testing. Aquatic environment monitoring reports which detail the monitoring programme and its findings are issued annually and are available in the Library of the House.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 1 November 1996

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has to change the cash limits for the Overseas Development Administration for 1996–97. [2372]

Dr. Liam Fox: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class II, vote 5 will be increased by £30,570,000 from £1,591,466,000 to £1,622,036,000. The increase is in respect of: a rollover of underspending against the 1995–96 external assistance vote; a balance of underspending against European Community budgetary aid in 1994; the early redemption of outstanding loan repayments by the Crown Agents to the National Loans Fund; advisers fee related to the privatisation of the Crown Agents; and the reimbursement of costs incurred in 1995–96 and costs for 1996–97 in respect of the Gibraltar social insurance fund. The increase will be charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Departmental Minutes

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the departmental minutes which the Overseas Development Administration laid before the House on 20 August. [1650]

Dr. Liam Fox: The departmental minute reported the assumption of contingent liabilities arising from tax indemnities given to the commercial banks which are making concessional loans to developing countries to finance the following projects:

Country	*Project*	*Estimated maximum liability* £
1 Indonesia	Advancement of SI Science and Technology	1,432,665
2 China	Guangzhou Metro Ventilation System	416,051

It was necessary to give the indemnities urgently during the parliamentary recess to avoid delaying the start of these two projects.

The departmental minute also reported that the contingent liability for the China Guangzhou metro overhead catenary system project had been underestimated by £88,317 in the earlier departmental minute laid before the house on 16 April 1996. This project is already being implemented. The financing agreement for this project will be increased. The contingent liability is now estimated to amount to a maximum of £916,354 instead of the £833,037 previously notified.

These projects are being supported by the Overseas Development Administration under the aid and trade provision soft loan financing arrangements which enable the banks to lend at concessional rates.

The departmental minute was placed in the Libraries of both Houses on 20 August and copies were sent to the Public Accounts Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Departmental Cash Limits

Lady Olga Maitland: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what changes she proposes to make to her Department's cash limits and running cost limits for 1996–97. [2432]

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class X, vote 1 will be increased by £14,107,000 from £948,760,000 to £962,867,000 and running costs limit is increased by £3,340,000 from £26,137,000 to £29,477,000. This is to increase provision for assets accepted in lieu of tax; within the new project ceiling, to increase provision to fund works required to complete the British Library St. Pancras building; to provide for payments from the National Heritage lottery fund to the royal commission for historical manuscripts for assessment work; to provide for additional expenditure on the royal estate and to transfer responsibility to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for maintenance work connected with ceremonial works; to provide for payments from the Department of the Environment—class VI, vote 5—towards the cost of refurbishing Somerset house for the housing of the Gilbert collection; to provide for additional appropriations from rents and other income from properties on the royal estate; to provide for the transfer of responsibility for costs of the Whitehall heating system for the Banqueting house to the Historic Royal Palaces agency; to provide for additional appropriations from sales of published material by the Royal Fine Art Commission; to provide for a reduction in expenditure on research and other services; to provide for an increase in running costs expenditure in line with entitlement to end year flexibility, to effect the transfer of responsibility for voluntary services from the Home Office and to transfer provision from the Security Facilities Executive agency for advisory services; to effect transfers from Home Office for grants for reducing racial disadvantage and for assistance to the National Association of Lay Visitors; and to provide for the expenses of the Department in the privatisation of the BBC transmission services. The increases will be offset by transfers, savings and charges to the reserve, and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

ENVIRONMENT

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list for each division of the Health and Safety Executive trends in staff levels relative to levels three years ago. [660]

Sir Paul Beresford: The following table shows the number of staff employed by the Health and Safety Executive in each of the last four years.

	1 April 1993	*1 April 1994*	*1 April 1995*[1]	*31 March 1996*[2]
Health and Safety Commission (Support)	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Director General's Office	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00
Solicitor's Office	17.00	18.00	17.00	19.00
Resources and Planning Division	665.50	663.00	662.00	574.00
Safety Policy Division	124.00	124.00	121.00	113.00
Strategy and General Division	150.50	140.00	141.00	136.00
Health Policy Division	89.00	94.00	86.00	96.00
Field Operations Division	1,960.50	1,939.00	1,859.00	1,741.00
HM Railway Inspectorate	63.00	71.00	85.00	82.00
HM Inspectorate of Mines	60.00	52.00	48.00	42.00
Offshore Safety Division	319.50	375.00	343.00	309.00
Nuclear Safety Division	271.50	281.00	263.00	268.00
Technology and Health Sciences Division	333.00	335.00	330.00	330.00
Health and Safety Laboratory	415.00	382.00	364.00	365.00
Electrical Equipment Certification Services	54.00	56.00	57.00	61.00
Total staff	4,537.50	4,545.00	4,391.00	4,151.00

[1] Figures given are full-time equivalent counts. A revised Treasury methodology for calculating full-time equivalent figures for staff in part-time posts came into operation from 1.4.95. From that date all part-time staff were counted pro-rata according to hours worked. Previously part-time staff who worked 10 hours or more were all counted as 0.5.
[2] From 1.4.96 HSE Divisions were restructured. Staff in post data for 31.3.96 is listed to provide comparison with previous years.

Homelessness

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many people were statutorily recognised as homeless at the latest available date; and of those how many are estimated to have accommodation with, (i) specific inadequacies and (ii) insecurity; how many are housed in emergency hostels; and how many are without any form of shelter. [1015]

Mr. Clappison: I refer my hon. Friend to the quarterly information bulletin entitled, "Households found accommodation the homelessness provisions of the Housing Act 1985: England" for the available information. Copies of the bulletin, the latest of which provides statistics for the second quarter of 1996, are in the Library.

Lead Pipes

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his policy with regard to securing the replacement of lead pipes in the domestic water supply network. [1024]

Mr. Clappison: The Government's policy is to seek to reduce levels of lead in drinking water. Action is being taken by water suppliers to help reduce lead levels at consumers' taps, but responsibility for domestic pipework rests with property owners. To help them, the Government have recently published a leaflet which informs householders about the risks from lead in drinking water and gives advice on the action that they can take to reduce exposure. We are currently considering what further measures could be taken to provide information and promote awareness.

Occupational Dermatitis

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many people have been diagnosed as contracting occupational dermatitis in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [1136]

Sir Paul Beresford: The industrial injuries compensation scheme administered by DSS tends to record the most serious cases of (non-infective) dermatitis. The numbers of new cases assessed at 1 per cent. or more disability, based on a 100 per cent. count of cases from 1985–86 to 1994–95 are as follows:

Year	*Number of cases of dermatitis*
1985–86	785
1986–87	464
1987–88	368
1988–89	285
1989–90	301
1990–91	434
1991–92	411
1992–93	419
1993–94	392
1994–95	368

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what additional measures are being evaluated to protect construction workers employed on the London Underground Jubilee line extension from contracting occupational dermatitis. [1139]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Health and Safety Executive has completed a follow-up survey on one site. This showed that where the full range of measures was used, cases of dermatitis had reduced by 80 per cent.

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many construction workers employed on the London Underground Jubilee line extension have been diagnosed as contracting occupational dermatitis. [1137]

Sir Paul Beresford: Of the 133 men examined by HSE's employment medical adviser, 10 showed signs of occupational dermatitis.

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what measures were taken at the outset of the London Underground Jubilee line extension to protect construction workers from occupational dermatitis. [1138]

Sir Paul Beresford: Protective measures are the responsibility of the contractors engaged in the project. I am informed by the Health and Safety Executive that washing facilities were provided at all Jubilee line extension sites. It is not possible to state the extent to which other measures such as protective clothing, skin creams and training were made available by contractors.

Health and Safety

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many guilty verdicts have been recorded, in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available, under health and safety law, following the serious injury of an employee. [1132]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information is not available, or available only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment for what reason each of the individuals cited in his answer of 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *1075*, were sent to prison following convictions under health and safety at work law; and what was the length of the sentence in each case. [1133]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information requested about the three cases of individuals sent to prison following convictions under health and safety at work law is as follows:

Reason	*Length of prison sentence (months)*
1. Breaches of the Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983 and the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	3
2. Contravention of a prohibition notice issued under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (HSWA)	4
3. Contravention of a prohibition notice issued under HSWA	4

Mental Illness (Stress)

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps have been taken to reduce instances of mental illness caused at work, following the 1995 court case in which an employee sued his employer for a nervous breakdown brought on by stress. [1140]

Sir Paul Beresford: In May 1995, the Health and Safety Executive published guidance "Stress at Work: A Guide for Employers" which explained that mental illness is one ill health condition that has been associated with stress. HSE is carrying out research in order to provide employers with more detailed guidance on this issue.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the rules governing the spending of capital budgets by local authorities during the transitional period to unitary authorities. [1087]

Sir Paul Beresford: Authorities in the transitional period before reorganisation are governed by the same rules on capital spending as other authorities, but in addition are subject to the prudential code of financial management, jointly published in 1994 by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the local authority associations, and approved by the Audit Commission. I have arranged for a copy of the code to be placed in the Library.

Asbestos

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the Health and Safety Commission's current review of the legislation on asbestos will be completed; and when its conclusions will be published. [1441]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Health and Safety Commission undertook a wide-ranging review of health and safety legislation including asbestos legislation in 1993–94, the results of which were published in 1994. As a result of the review, HSC published a discussion document in May 1996 on the future of the lead and asbestos regulations and is currently considering the responses received. It is expected that HSC will complete this work in 1997, and will issue a consultative document on any legislative changes it considers are needed as soon as possible thereafter.

Industrial Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list in rank order the 10 most common causes of deaths from industrial diseases and the numbers of deaths from those diseases. [866]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information in the table is limited to those diseases that have a strong occupational link. These are diseases caused by the inhalation or swallowing of various kinds of mineral or organic dusts. The numbers of such deaths reported on death certificates in Great Britain in 1994 were as follows:

	Number
Mesothelioma	1,235
Pneumoconiosis (other than asbestosis)	276
Asbestosis (excluding certificates also mentioning mesothelioma)	174
Farmer's lung and other occupational allergic alveolitis	10
Byssinosis	7

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list for the most recently available date *(a)* the 10 districts in Great Britain which have the highest rates of death from asbestos-related diseases and *(b)* the national rate of death from these diseases. [867]

Sir Paul Beresford: The only asbestos-related disease for which the data are available is mesothelioma, and the district breakdown is available only for the period 1976–91. The 10 districts in Great Britain with the highest rates of death from mesothelioma in this period are, in descending order: Clydebank, Barrow in Furness, Plymouth, Barking and Dagenham, Portsmouth, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Southampton, Newham and Gillingham.

The average crude rate of death from mesothelioma in Great Britain in the same period was 11 per million. In 1994, the crude death rate from mesothelioma in Great Britain was 22 per million.

These tragic deaths are because of asbestos exposures of anything between 15 and 60 years ago, before the current stringent controls on asbestos were introduced.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what annual death rates from asbestos-related diseases the Health and Safety Executive has forecast over the next 25 years. [868]

Sir Paul Beresford: The estimated number of males dying annually from the asbestos-related cancer mesothelioma in 10 years time could range from between 1,300 and 2,100; in 20 years time between 1,300 and 3,000 and in 30 years time between 1,000 and 3,200. These estimates are based on a paper "The Continuing increase in mesothelioma mortality in Britain" which was published in *The Lancet* on 3 March 1995. This paper discusses the uncertainties attached to the projections which increase very significantly beyond about 2010. It is therefore inappropriate to forecast a figure for each separate year. Projected figures for females are not available.

Currently, there are estimated to be one or two deaths from asbestos-related lung cancer for each death from mesothelioma. The falling prevalence of smoking is likely to reduce this ratio in the future.

DEFENCE

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the changes to the class 1 cash limits and defence operating costs limit for 1996–97. [2375]

Mr. Soames: Subject to parliamentary approval of the winter supplementary estimates, the following changes will be made:

£000s

Class 1 vote	*Current cash limit*	*Change*	*Revised cash limit*
1	11,005,788	–10,891	10,994,897
2	4,662,170	25,000	4,687,170
3	5,761,870	288,000	6,049,870

The changes to class 1, votes 2 and 3 reflect the take up of entitlement to end-year flexibility. The reduction on class 1, vote 1 reflects the net effect of transfers to other Government Departments. In addition entitlement to end-year flexibility on class 1, vote 1 has, in accordance with Supply procedure, been funded through the partial appropriation of receipts from the sale of the MOD married quarters estate in England and Wales. The balance of the receipt from the sale will be brought to vote, subject to parliamentary approval, in the 1996–97 spring supplementary estimate.

The final outturn on the Ministry of Defence cash limit in 1995–96 was £21,522 million which was £48 million higher than the provisional outturn announced in Cmnd 3318. The Minister of Defence's entitlement to carry forward provision under the Defence operating costs and capital costs schemes has, therefore, been reduced by £48 million over the totals announced on 12 July, *Official Report*, columns 326–31. Thus all of the Ministry of Defence's entitlements to end-year flexibility arising the 1994–95 and 1995–96 will have been brought onto vote through the 1996–97 winter supplementary estimate. A total of £142 million of the additional provision on vote 3 in the winter supplementary estimate has been drawn down from provision eligible for carry forward under the Defence operating costs scheme.

The impact of these changes on the Ministry of Defence operating costs limit is as follows:

£000s

Class 1 vote	*Current cash limit*	*Change*	*Revised cash limit*
1	11,000,243	–10,891	10,989,352
2	4,662,170	25,000	4,687,170
3	806,347	—	806,347

Northern Ireland

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost of maintaining the British Army in Northern Ireland in each year since 1969. [1105]

Mr. Soames: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of the letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Gulf War (Illness)

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of his Department's work in relation to illnesses among service men and women who served in the Gulf war. [865]

Mr. Soames: I will write to the right hon. Member and a copy of the letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

War Widows' Pensions

Mr. Skinner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will rescind the regulations reducing war widows' pensions because their husbands died of smoking-related causes; and if he will make a statement. [880]

Mr. Heald: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Pembroke (Mr. Ainger) on 30 October, *Official Report*, column *162*.

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet Office (Cash Limits)

Mr. Key: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals there are to change the 1996–97 cash limit or running cost limit for the Cabinet Office: other services vote. [2433]

The Prime Minister: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit of the Cabinet Office: other services, class XVIII, vote 1, will be increased by £4,354,000 from £37,682,000 to £42,036,000 and the running cost limit will be increased by £2,567,000 from £40,586,000 to £43,153,000.

The increases reflect the transfer of provision of £645,000—running costs—and £1,457,000—capital—from the Office of the Public Service, class XVII, vote 1, to cover the cost of new repayment services; the transfer of certain administrative functions, the OPS's contribution to the cost of early staff departures and new IT systems and the increase of £70,000 in both running costs and receipts to account for staff loaned to Inland Revenue on repayment terms.

The increases also include the transfer of provision of £105,000—running costs—and £400,000—capital—from the reserve to fund new services and essential building works.

The vote is eligible for a cash limit increase of £1,788,000 in respect of end-year flexibility for running costs expenditure. The supplementary estimate will give effect to £1,738,000 of the increase.

All the increases are either offset by interdepartmental transfers or have been charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration (Philippines)

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons born in the Philippines are estimated to reside in the United Kingdom; how many have the right of settlement; and which immigration laws permit *(a)* entry and *(b)* settlement. [1090]

Mr. Kirkhope: The labour force survey carried out in spring 1996 estimates that there are 29,000 persons born in the Philippines who are usually resident in the United Kingdom. Information on the number who may be eligible to apply for settlement is not available. Information on the number granted settlement each year between 1985 and 1995 is published in table 6.5 of the "Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom 1995" (Cm 3353), a copy of which is in the Library. Entry into and settlement in the United Kingdom is governed by the Immigration Act 1971 and the immigration rules made under it.

Extradition

Mr. Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the numbers of *(a)* requests made by United Kingdom authorities for the extradition of persons to the United Kingdom, *(b)* requests for extradition received from other countries for the extradition of persons out of the United Kingdom, and *(c)* individuals actually extradited to and from the United Kingdom for each year since 1992. [876]

Mr. Kirkhope: The Home Secretary is responsible for extraditions to and from England and Wales and from Northern Ireland. The information that follows relates to such cases.

(a) Number of requests made by United Kingdom authorities for the extradition of persons to England and Wales:

1992: 45

1993: 33

1994: 45

1995: 48.

(b) Number of requests for extradition received from other countries for the extradition of persons out of England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

1992: 78

1993: 100

1994: 100

1995: 101.

(c) (i) Number of individuals actually extradited to England and Wales:

1992: 25

1993: 21

1994: 29

1995: 14.

(ii) Number of individuals actually extradited from England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

1992: 36

1993: 27

1994: 35

1995: 31.

A number of extradition cases from 1994 and 1995 have not yet been resolved.

The figures refer to extradition to and from countries other than the Republic of Ireland. Extradition between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland takes place under the Backing of Warrants (Republic of Ireland) Act 1965 and the corresponding legislation of the Republic of Ireland. The Home Secretary is responsible where the case involves seeking the return of a fugitive who has been convicted by a court in England or Wales, while the Attorney-General is responsible where the case involves seeking the return of a person accused of an offence in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. I will write to the hon. Member with the statistics for such cases.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for changes to the 1996–97 cash limits within his responsibilities. [2374]

Mr. Howard: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, the cash limit for class VII, vote 1—Home Office administration, police probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales—will be increased by £2,388,000 from £4,597,305,000 to £4,599,693,000 and for vote 2—prisons, England and Wales—will be increased by £120,646,000 from £1,521,670,000 to £1,642,316,000.

The increase for vote 1 is the net effect of transfers from the Ministry of Defence in respect of charging for meteorological services, from the Security Facilities Agency in respect for charging for its services, to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in respect of drug prevention; to the department for Education and Employment and Welsh Office in respect of sponsorship of probation students; to the Department of Health in respect of drugs challenge funding; from the Department for Education and Employment and Welsh Office in respect of provision of closed circuit television in schools; to the Department for National Heritage in respect of the transfer of responsibility for voluntary services; from the Prison Service in respect of boards of visitors' training and to non-cash limited police special grant within this vote in respect of pilot private finance initiative projects.

For vote 2 the increase is the net effect of additional provision of £120,650,000 from the reserve to meet the costs of the implementation of phase 2 of the recommendations of the Woodcock report and to increase the capacity of the Prison Service to meet the projected increase in the prison population, which includes the take-up of £750,000 end year flexibility towards the costs of Colchester young offenders institution; and the transfer of £4,000 to class VII, vote 1, Home Office, for external training of staff of the boards of visitors secretariat.

The non-voted cash limit—HO/LACAP—is reduced by £490,000 from £98,382,000 to £97,892,000 due to a transfer to non-cash limited police special grant within vote 1 in respect of pilot PFI projects.

In consequence of the changes the Home Office gross running cost limit will be increased by £12,334,000 from £1,801,481,000 to £1,813,815,000.

The increases will be offset by savings, transfers or charges to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Asylum Seekers

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people who had applied for asylum were deported from Scottish prisons during 1994, 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those deported; [1526]

(2) how many people who had applied for asylum were detained in Scottish prisons during 1994, 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those detained. [1525]

Mr. Kirkhope *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The specific information requested is not available.

LORD CHANCELLORS'S DEPARTMENT

Law Commission

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary , Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the draft bills published by the Law Commission in the last five years. [1664]

Mr. Streeter: During the years 1991 to 1996 the Law Commission has published 26 reports with draft Bills attached. They are listed in the table.

List of Law Commission Reports in 1991–96 with Drafts Bills annexed

Report No	*Report*
	1991
199	Transfer of Land: Implied Covenants for Title
202	Criminal Law: Corroboration of Evidence in Criminal Trials
204	Transfer of Land: Land Mortgages
	1992
207	Family Law: Domestic Violence and Occupation of the Family Home
208	Landlord and Tenant: Business Tenancies—a periodic review of the Landlord and Tenant Act
	1993
215	Sale of Goods Forming Part of a Bulk
216	The Hearsay Rule in Civil Proceedings
217	Family Law: The Effect of Divorce on Wills
218	Legislating the Criminal Code: Offences Against the Person and General Principles
219	Contributory Negligence as a Defence in Contract
	1994
220	The Law of Trusts: Delegation by Individual Trustees
221	Landlord and Tenant: Termination of Tenancies Bill
222	Binding Over
224	Structured Settlements and Interim and Provisional Damages
226	Administrative Law: Judicial Review and Statutory Appeals
227	Restitution: Mistakes of Law and Ultra Vires Public Authority Receipts and Payments
228	Criminal Law: Conspiracy to Defraud
	1995
229	Legislating the Criminal Code: Intoxication and Criminal Liability
230	Legislating the Criminal Code: The Year and a Day Rule in Homicide
231	Mental Incapacity
235	Transfer of Land: Land Registration
236	Fiduciary Duties and Regulatory Rules
	1996
237	Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter
238	Landlord and Tenant: Responsibility for State and Condition of Property
242	Privity of Contract: Contracts for the Benefit of Third Parties
243	Offences of Dishonesty: Money Transfers

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the role of the Law Commission. [1663]

Mr. Streeter: The Law Commission has a single, central purpose: promoting the reform of the law, so that the law will be simpler, fairer, more modern and cheaper to use.

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the estimated outturn figure for the 1995–96 budget for the Law Commission. [1661]

Mr. Streeter: The estimated figure for the financial year 1995–96 is £2,960,537. This does not include charges for accommodation.

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the number of permanent staff at the Law Commission; and how are they appointed. [1662]

Mr. Streeter: There are currently 39 permanent established staff working at the Law Commission and 19 established staff on short, fixed term appointments. This includes five parliamentary counsel assigned to the Law Commission from the parliamentary counsel's office.

All staff at the Law Commission are civil servants, recruited through open competition in accordance with the civil service commissioner's recruitment code.

Public Record Office

Mr. Gill: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what changes he plans to make to the running costs limit of the Public Record Office, class VIII, vote 3 for 1996–97. [2373]

Mr. Streeter: The running cost limit has been reduced by £189,000 from £22,711,000 to £22,552,000, to reflect a transfer from running costs to capital. The capital expenditure will be defrayed on the fitting out of central London office premises, through which the office provides services to the public.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Terrorism

Miss Hoey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the Government's reasons for not providing compensation for victims of terrorism in England. [1342]

Mr. Nelson: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Eastham) on 27 June 1996, *Official Report*, column 202.

Miss Hoey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate he has made of the cost of providing, in each of the three years before the commencement of the IRA ceasefire and in 1996 to date, compensation for losses caused by terrorism in England, Scotland and Wales on a similar basis to that provided in Northern Ireland. [1419]

Mr. Nelson: There is no justification for a compensation scheme because, unlike Northern Ireland, insurance cover is readily available elsewhere in the United Kingdom. No estimate of the cost of such a scheme has therefore been made.

Miss Hoey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the regulation of the premiums for terrorism insurance levied on people living or working in inner London. [1354]

Mr. Nelson: Individuals living or working in Inner London will normally be covered for any losses caused by acts of terrorism by their personal domestic household policies and/or comprehensive motor policies, as appropriate. Premiums are determined by normal competition between insurers.

Insurance policies for businesses or other non-personal policyholders will normally have a limit on the level of claims payable, unless the policyholder has bought full terrorism cover. Were insurance is provided by a member of the scheme established in accordance with the Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993, the additional terrorism premium is set by the Pool Reinsurance Company Ltd. in the light of advice of consultant actuaries and after consultation with my Department.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Hargreaves: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what changes will be made to cash and running cost limits within class IV of the estimates for 1996–97. [2431]

Mr. Lang: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 1—programmes and administration—will be increased by £13,930,000 from £1,301,655,000 to £1,315,585,000. This net increase results from:

(i) to take-up of running cost and capital end-year flexibility (£17,437,000) as announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996 (Official Report, cols 326–331);

(ii) agreed changes to NIREX payments (£1,760,000);

(iii) an adjustment to the classification of Gas Consumer Council receipts from appropriations-in-aid to consolidated fund extra receipts (£2,894,000); and

(iv) other miscellaneous changes (£194,000);

offset by

(v) a net reduction to provision in respect of AEA Technology privatisation costs (–£3,855,000); and

(vi) the movement of provision from the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme to the non-cash limited Shipbuilding Intervention Fund (–£4,500,000).

Within this total, the gross running costs limit for the Department of Trade and Industry is being increased by £17,782,000 from £364,037,000 to £381,819,000. This change comprises:

(i) the take-up of running costs end-year flexibility (£15,654,000);

(ii) an adjustment in Insolvency Service fee income required for accounting purposes (£1,500,000);

(iii) the transfer of all Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service provision to running costs (£659,000);

offset by other minor net transfers of provision (–£31,000).

A further increase to consolidated fund extra receipts of £215,000,000 is also expected following privatisation of AEA Technology.

The net effect of all the agreed changes to NIREX payments—including reductions to nationalised industries external financing limits of £2,990,000, which are not reflected in this vote—gives an overall benefit to the Exchequer of £1,230,000.

Also, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 11—Office of Telecommunications—will be increased by £1,118,000 from £9,094,000 to £10,212,000 and the running cost limit will be increased by £1,059,000 from £8,677,000 to £9,736,000. The increase is required to meet new requirements, arising from European and UK legislation, to ensure that pro-competition policies are implemented and to meet additional litigation costs.

In addition, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 12—Office of Gas Supply—will be increased by £2,000,000 from £7,743,000 to £9,743,000 and the running costs limit similarly increased from £8,452,000 to £10,452,000. The requirement results from additional running costs associated with the extension of domestic competition, further assessment of network code and the referral to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission on price controls.

Additionally, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 13—Office of Electricity Regulation—will be increased by £4,150,000 from £10,232,000 to £14,382,000 and the running costs limit by £4,100,000 from £10,694,000 to £14,794,000. These changes reflect the extra resources required by the Director General of Electricity Supply to fulfil his obligations under the Electricity Act 1989.

All such increases will be charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Security

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been allocated to each local education authority to *(a)* improve school security and *(b)* meet the recommendations of the Government working party on school security. [1493]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Government have accepted all the recommendations of the working group on school security, including for provision of substantial additional funding to improve school security through the grants for education support and training—GEST—programme from 1997–98. The grant will be distributed according to the number of pupils and the number of schools in each authority. Local education authorities will be informed in December of their allocations for the coming financial year.

This new specific grant will be in addition to the funding already available to local education authorities generally for capital and current spending on schools. That will continue to allow for expenditure on school security.

Class Sizes

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will instruct Ofsted to open its data base derived from inspection of schools to accredited researchers, with particular reference to those investigating the effect of class size on the quality of education. [2322]

Mr. Robin Squire: No. This is a matter for Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools. I know that he takes every opportunity to bring the information held by Ofsted into the public domain.

TREASURY

Taxation (File Access)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Inland Revenue's policy in respect of overseas computer access to British taxpayers' confidential files after the commencement of tax self-assessment. [959]

Mr. Jack: I refer to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Banks) on 16 October, *Official Report*, columns *912–13*.

Unemployment Statistics

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish, by region *(a)* the unemployment claimant count statistics and *(b)* the unemployment statistics as measured by the labour force survey, showing the percentage difference between the two in each case. [832]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Dennis Roberts to Mr. Ian McCartney, dated 1 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Director of the ONS to reply to your parliamentary question on regional unemployment. The Director has asked me to reply in his absence.

The latest LFS estimates of unemployment for the standard regions of Great Britain on the internationally standard ILO definition relate to Summer (June–August) 1996 and are published in Table 16 of the *Labour Force Survey Summer 1996 First Release*. The corresponding average levels of unadjusted claimant unemployment for the same three month period can be obtained on-line from the Nomis database. Both the LFS publication and access to the Nomis database are available from the House of Commons Library.

National Investment and Loans Office

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the cash and running costs limits for 1996–97 for the national investments and loans office. [2379]

Mrs. Angela Knight: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class XVI, vote 10 will be increased by a token amount to £341,000. Following a machinery of Government change in preparation for the privatisation of the Paymaster Agency, a small residuary body, to be known as the Office of HM Paymaster General—OPG—will remain in the public sector to perform the non-divestible functions. This token supplementary is required to allow for the transfer of OPG's functions from class XVI, vote II to NILO. The running costs limit will be increased by £104,000 to £1,366,000 with a corresponding reduction in the provision for class XVI, vote 11. The increase will be offset by savings or charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding the private finance initiative. [314]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* I have received many. I warmly welcome opportunities to talk to PFI practitioners in all sectors and to listen to their views on the initiative. As a result, we have made legislative and regulatory changes to facilitate the deal process. We have also published several sets of guidance, including case studies and standard terms of conditions of PFI contracts and we are working with the private sector to provide PFI training for officials. Most recently, we have responded in detail to recommendations put forward by the CBI, with whom we are working in partnership to push the PFI forward.

Income Tax

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the additional annual full-year revenue which would be raised by the introduction of a 50 per cent. rate of income tax on earnings over £100,000 per annum; how many people would pay additional tax as a consequence; and what is the distribution of those persons by area of residence in the United Kingdom. [804]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Income tax rates are applied to taxable income—that is the total income for income tax purposes—including earnings—less those allowances and deductions which are allowable at marginal rates. The estimated full year yield at 1996–97 income levels of introducing a new rate of 50 per cent. on taxable incomes above £100,000 is £1.1 billion. The yield includes the consequential effects on the yield of capital gains tax after allowing for likely changes in the volume of disposals. It does not take account of any behavioural effects which might result from the introduction of the new rate of tax. About 120,000 taxpayers would be affected.

It is not possible to provide a reliable breakdown below United Kingdom level for 1996–97. The latest available information is for 1994–95.

Taxpayer Records

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if separate arrangements are made for the handling of secure cases with special reference to the files of hon. Members. [1079]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* Yes.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the security arrangements governing the handling of taxpayer records at Oracle facilities abroad. [1073]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* The handling of confidential taxpayer data is governed by the strictest possible security arrangements to safeguard against misuse. It would not be appropriate to make public the precise safeguards which are being put in place.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the batches of taxpayer records that may be available to staff at Oracle facilities abroad may include information about any matter relevant to tax in the case of any identifiable person. [1074]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* Diagnostic and remedial work undertaken to support the self assessment computer system may at times necessitate specialist staff—either in the UK or, exceptionally, or Oracle facilities abroad—having access to copies of batches of taxpayer records. Such data will not be in a readily intelligible form.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Schools

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many and what percentage of schools in Northern Ireland have 1 per cent. or more of the school roll from a minority community. [970]

Mr. Ancram: Within Northern Ireland 328—26 per cent.—schools have 1 per cent. or more of the school roll from a minority community.

Terrorism

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his policy on Government claims or counter-claims against individuals in relation to damage and injury caused by those individuals as a result of their involvement in terrorist acts. [1204]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Compensation Agency under its chief executive, Mr Dennis Stanley. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from D.A. Stanley to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 31 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to reply, on behalf of the Compensation Agency, to your recent Question regarding policy on claims or counter-claims against individuals in relation to damage and injury caused by individuals as a result of their involvement in terrorist acts.

The Agency pays Compensation in Northern Ireland under either the Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 or the Criminal Injuries (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988. The legislation directs that no compensation can be paid

to any person who has been a member of an unlawful association at any time whatsoever, or is such a member, or who has been engaged in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism at any time whatsoever, or is so engaged. The only exception being that the Secretary of State may, if he considers it to be in the public interest to do so, pay such sum as does not exceed the amount of the disallowed compensation. This latter power is infrequently used and is exercised personally by the Minister of State on behalf of the Secretary of State.

In addition, the Agency has power under the legislation to pursue an offender for recovery of any compensation paid out by the Agency to a victim, irrespective of whether acts of terrorism were involved or not. Since being established in April 1992, the Agency has recovered £1.2 million from such offenders.

Education Department Headquarters

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the construction of a new headquarters for the Department of Education; what is the cost of the building; and what was the value for money of this project evaluated against other building priorities in education. [226]

Mr. Moss: The headquarters of the Department of Education in Bangor, County Down comprised a high rise building and a number of temporary annexes which were past their useful life. The new building at the headquarters site is a replacement of these temporary structures and the estimated cost is £3.657 million. This project was evaluated against other Government office priorities, but not against other building priorities in education.

Handguns

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many handguns are legally held in Northern Ireland; and if he will provide a geographical breakdown of their locations. [227]

Sir John Wheeler: At 30 September, 1996, the number of handguns held on firearm certificates in Northern Ireland was 12,872. Information on the geographical breakdown of their locations can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the difference in respect of guidelines relating to the legal possession of handguns in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* Great Britain. [228]

Sir John Wheeler: Under the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order, 1981, the Chief Constable is responsible for the administration of firearms licensing. His policy in relation to sporting handguns which was agreed with the Secretary of State is that a person cannot acquire a handgun unless he is able to show good reason for acquiring such a firearm and he has been a member of a registered firearms club for a minimum of 12 months; the application is supported by the secretary of the firearms club; and the police are content that he is a suitable person to hold such a weapon. In addition, the Chief Constable may approve the issue of a handgun where a person's life is believed to be under a serious and specific terrorist threat. In these circumstances the Chief Constable must satisfy himself that the individual is in all regards suitable to hold such a firearm and that his possession of the firearm does not pose a threat to the wider public safety.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has lead policy responsibility for firearms legislation in Great Britain.

Incorporated Colleges

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent provision he has made for accountancy services for incorporated colleges, broken down by *(a)* human and *(b)* technical support services, and what he estimates to be the cost of these services in this and the next financial year. [998]

Mr. Ancram: Additional provision of £510,000 has been made in the current financial year for use in strengthening their financial systems. No separate provision has yet been made for 1997–98.

The existing baseline also includes provision for the enhancement of colleges' financial management systems through improved computer hardware and financial accounting software. Estimated costs are as follows:-

	1996–97 £	*1997–98* £
Capital	384,000	—
Recurrent	555,000	376,000

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the extra costs to his budget will be this year of funding the incorporation of the further education colleges; and if he will itemise that expenditure. [999]

Mr. Ancram: A budget of £1 million has been made available in the current financial year. It is estimated that this will be used as follows:

Strengthening college financial systems: £510,000

Project management and other college preparations: £395,000

Consultancy support, conferences, training and guidance for colleges: £95,000.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* decisions have been made and *(b)* procedures have been followed in respect of the appointment of a private company to fund the nursery voucher scheme; and what estimate he has made of the initial and annual costs of this administration. [1000]

Mr. Ancram: Following a competitive tendering process a contract to administer the nursery education voucher scheme on a UK-wide basis was awarded to Capita Management Services Ltd.

Legislation is currently being prepared to permit the extension of the nursery voucher scheme to Northern Ireland and the contract with Capita Management Services includes an opt-in clause for this purpose.

Consultation on the scheme in Northern Ireland ended on 7 June and I will make an announcement on the outcome later in the autumn. The cost of administering the scheme for Northern Ireland is estimated at a total of £300,000 over three years.

Integrated Schools

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the likely capital costs of site acquisition and building integrated schools in the next three years. [1001]

Mr. Ancram: Expenditure on integrated schools likely to qualify for capital grant is estimated as follows:

	£ million
1997–1998	8.3
1998–1999	13.3
1999–2000	9.0
Total	30.6

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the average delay for each claimant of *(a)* invalidity benefit and *(b)* incapacity benefit for each year since 1990. [735]

Mr. Burt: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

	Clearance time target	*Performance achieved*
1990–91 (SB/IVB)	average clearance time of 9 days	average clearance time of 9 days
1991–92 (SB/IVB)	average clearance time of 9 days	average clearance time of 7 days
1992–93 (SB/IVB)	65 per cent. in 10 days 95 per cent. in 30 days	77 per cent. in 30 days 95.1 per cent. in 10 days
1993–94 (SB/IVB)	65 per cent. in 10 days 95 per cent. in 30 days	72.5 per cent. in 10 days 94.3 per cent. in 30 days
1994–95 (SB/IVB)	65 per cent. in 10 days 95 per cent. in 30 days	77.4 per cent. in 10 days 95.7 per cent. in 30 days
1995–96 (IB)	65 per cent. in 10 days 85 per cent. in 30 days	78.9 per cent. in 10 days 96 per cent. in 30 days

Notes:
1. Figures are from successive Departmental and Benefits Agency Reports.
2. Up until 1992–93 the performance on the processing of claims was measured by the average time taken to clear claims. From 1992–93 the method of measuring performance changed to set percentages within 10 and 30 day targets.

Abbreviations:
SB = Sickness Benefit.
IVB = Invalidity Benefit.
IB = Incapacity Benefit.

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants of *(a)* incapacity benefit who were formerly receiving invalidity benefit, *(b)* incapacity benefit since April 1995, *(c)* severe disablement allowance and *(d)* credits only have been disallowed benefit during the year April 1995 to April 1996 by reason of (i) being found capable of work following the own occupation test, (ii) being found capable of work following the all work test (iii) failure to return IB50 questionnaire (iv) failure to attend medical examination and (v) other reasons. [417]

Mr. Burt: Information is not available in the format requested. It is not yet possible to provide reliable data on the numbers disallowed in each of the groups specified. The available information, for the period 13 April 1995 to 31 March 1996, is in the table.

Reason for disallowance of benefit	*Incapacity benefit recipients*
Capable of work following own occupation test	1,288
Capable following all work test	66,367
Failure to return questionnaire without good cause	7,710
Failure to attend medical examination without good cause	2,416

Source:
100 per cent. monthly count from the incapacity benefit computer system. Excludes a small number of cases not held on the system.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if, following the introduction of incapacity benefit in 1995 and the requirement for claimants to undergo a medical examination, he will publish *(a)* the number of medical exemptions, *(b)* the number of cases automatically exempted because the clients are in receipt of the higher rate of DLA, *(c)* the number of cases allowed after medical scrutiny, *(d)* the number of cases allowed after medical examination, *(e)* the number disallowed after examination and *(f)* the numbers disallowed for failure to attend examination sessions. [758]

Mr. Burt: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Table 1: Exemptions from the all work test

Grounds for exemption	*Numbers of incapacity benefit claimants at 31 May 1996*
Severe sickness or terminally ill	129,000
In receipt of highest rate care component of disability living allowance	21,000

Source:
5 per cent. sample from the incapacity benefit computer system. Excludes a small number of cases not held on the system.

Table 2: All work test outcomes

	Numbers up to 30 September 1996
Allowed after medical scrutiny or examination[1]	960,000
Disallowed following medical examination (Incapacity Benefit recipients only)	122,000
Disallowed following failure to attend medical examination without good cause (Incapacity Benefit recipients only)	5,000

Note:
[1] It is not possible to distinguish those allowed benefit following medical scrutiny from those allowed following examination. Figures include a small number of severe disablement allowance cases.

Source:
100 per cent. count of cases on the incapacity benefit computer system. Excludes a small number of cases not held on the system.

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many examinations for the all work test

have *(a)* been carried out and *(b)* scheduled but not yet taken place during the year April 1995 to April 1996 for each of the regional medical centres. [419]

Mr. Burt: The administration of incapacity benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Alan Howarth, dated October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many examinations for the All Work Test have (a) been carried out and (b) scheduled but not yet taken place during the year April 1995 to April 1996 for each of the regional medical centres.

The information is not available in the format requested. Figures for the All Work Test were not recorded separately until August 1995. Appendix A provides details of the All Work Test examinations carried out for the period August 1995 to March 1996. Appendix B provides details of the examinations scheduled, these include both All Work Tests and Own Occupation Tests as the tests are not recorded separately.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Appendix A: All work test examinations carried out for the period August 1995 to March 1996

	August	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*	*January*	*February*	*March*	*Total*
Birmingham	2,782	4,263	6,876	6,811	4,268	3,534	3,423	3,814	35,771
Bootle	3,048	3,412	4,305	3,795	2,725	4,146	3,870	4,446	29,747
Bristol	2,301	2,604	2,859	2,553	1,471	2,930	2,773	2,801	20,292
Cardiff	3,321	4,170	4,155	4,692	2,079	3,914	2,985	3,611	28,927
Edinburgh	1,570	2,024	2,551	2,530	1,476	2,453	2,718	2,776	18,098
Glasgow	3,343	3,532	4,251	5,002	3,263	4,181	4,692	5,697	33,961
Leeds	3,505	5,128	5,717	4,134	3,159	6,281	6,268	6,308	40,500
Manchester	2,663	4,150	4,219	2,094	2,595	5,320	5,776	6,349	33,166
Newcastle	2,473	3,399	3,539	3,723	2,594	4,049	3,835	3,251	26,863
Sutton	2,869	3,293	3,909	4,456	2,328	5,743	5,410	3,187	31,195
Wembley	3,510	3,941	3,778	3,907	2,990	3,669	3,943	4,293	30,031
Total	31,385	39,916	46,159	43,697	28,948	46,220	45,693	46,533	328,551

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Appendix B: Examinations scheduled but not yet taken place as at 30 September 1996

	Number
[illegible]	9,330
[illegible]	10,837
[illegible]	6,338
Cardiff	14,612
Edinburgh	2,629
Glasgow	5,048
Leeds	12,750
Manchester	10,799
Newcastle	5,639
Nottingham	6,013
Sutton	9,245
Wembley	11,374
Total	104,614

Figures are provisional and subject to change. The figures given for the cases scheduled refer to cases scheduled during August and September that have not yet taken place. Cases scheduled earlier than this will have already been examined.
These figures include both All Work and Own Occupation Tests.

State Pension

Sir Andrew Bowden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the level of the basic state pension, *(b)* average weekly earnings and *(c)* the percentage of average weekly earnings represented by the basic state pension, for each year since 1966. [881]

Mr. Heald: I refer the hon. Member to tables 3.3 and 6.1 of the "Abstract of Statistics for Social Security Benefits and Contributions and Indices of Prices and Earnings", 1996 Edition; a copy of which is available in the Library.

Comparative information for the years 1966 to 1970 is not available because the new earnings survey did not begin until 1970.

Funeral Payments

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to review the provision of social fund funeral payments. [2550]

Mr. Roger Evans: Major changes were introduced in June 1995. I have been monitoring their effects. Expenditure has been significantly reduced from £63 million during 1994–95 to £49 million during 1995–96.

I now propose to develop the scheme further. From April 1997, help will be targeted more precisely on those most in need and the scheme will be made simpler. The proposed scheme will allow up to £600 for funeral expenses. The allowable items will no longer be specified leaving the person responsible for arranging the funeral free to decide which elements should be included. Certain disbursements— for example burial or cremation costs— will be paid in addition to the capped amount. Likewise, provision will be made where additional costs are likely to arise in exceptional circumstances, for example transportation costs for distances in excess of 50 miles. Under the proposed changes, both the person responsible for making the funeral arrangements and the funeral director will have a clearer understanding of the level of help available from the social fund.

In addition, a new test will help the adjudication officer to decide if it was reasonable for the person to have taken responsibility for the funeral expenses. In a case where there is no surviving partner, where a parent, son or daughter of the deceased exists, and neither they nor their partner are in receipt of a qualifying benefit it will be considered unreasonable for the person receiving the qualifying benefit to take responsibility for the funeral expenses.

Discussions have been taking place with funeral directors' associations at regular intervals and the proposed changes will be discussed with them shortly.

These proposals will be submitted to the Social Security Advisory Committee.

Departmental Estate (Transfer)

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on progress with the transfer of his Department's estate to the private sector. [2551]

Mr. Lilley: Three potential suppliers have been selected and will be invited to take part in the next stage of the project.

They are:

Partnership Property Management Ltd (previously named as Goldman Sachs International);

Mapeley Holdings Ltd (previously named as Nations Bank);

OPUS (previously named as Nomura International plc).

Each of the three consortia will be invited to submit a bid which details how they propose to meet the Department's requirements. The bids will be evaluated in early 1997 to identify the most suitable supplier.

Benefits Agency Medical Services

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases before the Benefits Agency Medical Services remain outstanding; and when he estimates his Department will have cleared any backlog. [729]

Mr. Burt: The administration of the Benefits Agency Medical Services is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Richard Burden, dated 31 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary question asking how many cases for Benefits Agency Medical Services remain outstanding; and when he estimates his Department will have cleared any backlog.

At 30 September 1996, Benefits Agency Medical Services have a total of 257,367 cases, of which 219,292 are Incapacity Benefit (IB) references. Of these, 9,522 are requiring specific medical advice from the customer service desk, 34,996 are for scrutiny to see if a medical examination is appropriate, a further 70,160 await an appointment and 104,614 have an appointment scheduled. Of the remaining 38,075 cases, 36,540 are Industrial Injuries, Prescribed Diseases and Respiratory Disease cases, 934 are Independent Tribunal Cases and 601 are cases referred from other Government Departments for medical advice. These figures are provisional and subject to change.

BAMS work to a target of clearing cases within 45 days. At the present time, cases are being cleared within 58 days. This gap has been closing in recent months, and is likely to continue to do so. This is because the number of clients in receipt of Invalidity Benefit who are awaiting consideration of the IB All Work Test continues to reduce. If present BAMS productivity holds up, then it is anticipated that the target of 45 days will be reached across the country by January 1997.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

New Claims Visits (Bolton)

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which office is responsible for the new claims visits in the Bolton area; and what has been the performance record of that office. [127]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Peter Thurnham, dated 31 October 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking which office is responsible for the new claims visits in the Bolton area; and what has been the performance record of that office.

The office responsible for the New Claim Visits in the Bolton area is the Bolton District office which also covers the surrounding areas of Little Hulton, Kearsley and Horwich and includes a Branch office at Farnworth. The figures provided are for Bolton District.

Up to the 30 September 1996 the Bolton District had undertaken 1644 visits against a target for the year of 4350. As a result of these visits the office has achieved savings of £1,264,051.00. Their saving target for 1996/97 is £2,511,221.00. The figures are provisional and subject to change.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

"Civil Service Statistics 1996"

Mr. Faber: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when "Civil Service Statistics 1996" will be published. [2376]

Mr. Willetts: "Civil Service Statistics 1996" was published today and copies have been placed in the Library. This publication highlights key trends in civil service staffing for the period up to 1 April 1996. It shows that the number of permanent civil servants fell by 4.5 per cent. from 517,000 on 1 April 1995 to 494,000 on 1 April 1996.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Spring: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proposals there are to change the 1996–97 cash limit or running costs limit for the Office of Public Service. [2377]

Mr. Freeman: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for the Office of Public Service—class XVII, vote 1—will be increased by £4,653,000 from £173,974,000 to £178,627,000 and the gross running cost limit will be increased by £8,548,000 from £74,101,000 to £82,649,000. The changes reflect the take up of running cost end-year flexibility— £8,775,000—and capital EYF—£645,000—under the end-year flexibility scheme announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report,* columns *326-31;* and certain other transfers between Departments. Provision is also made for the privatisations of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Recruitment and Assessment Services, the Occupational Health and Safety Agency, and the custody guards service. The increase in the cash limit will be met from the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the total of planned expenditure.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has to change the cash limit of the Central Office of Information for 1996–97. [2378]

Mr. Freeman: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for the Central Office of Information class—XVII, vote 3—will be increased by £5,200,000 from £1,182,000 to £6,382,000. The change is to provide a subsidy to the COI trading fund to cover anticipated redundancy and other costs arising from the COI trading fund's exit from the provision of certain services, following the prior options review of COI.

HEALTH

Mr. Roy Hemming

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the additional annual cost to the NHS pension fund arising out of the payment of £50,000 to Mr. Roy Hemming of Doncaster Family Health Services Authority. [447]

Mr. Horam: The costs to the national health service pension scheme correctly reflected the level of benefits properly paid to Mr. Hemming on his retirement.

Community Care (Staffordshire)

Sir Ivan Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the cost to Staffordshire county council of a community care place in a residential home run *(a)* by the county council and *(b)* by the private sector. [1051]

Mr. Burns: Staffordshire county council has told us that the net cost of a placement in one of its own homes is £198 and in the independent sector varies between £88 and £130. The reason for the cost differences includes the payment of residential allowance of £54, outside London rate, by the Department of Social Security which is made only to residents in the independent sector.

The gross cost of a placement in one of their own homes is £279 and for the three categories of placements in the independent sector are residential old age, £204, very dependent elderly, £236 and physical handicap elderly, £246.

NHS Number System

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the NHS number system identifying each patient individually will be operational. [1119]

Mr. Horam: The new national health service number system is being introduced through a phased programme across the NHS.

The NHS central register has created New NHS numbers for the whole population of England and Wales and these have been incorporated into health authority primary care patient registers.

New numbers are now being rolled out into general practitioner practice patient registers. At the end of September, this process had been completed in 65 per cent. of practices. By the end of 1996 full operational use of the new NHS number is scheduled in all breast screening office registers. The comparable date for cervical cytology, call and recall systems, diabetes screening systems and child health registers in mid 1997.

Inclusion of the new NHS number in in-patient contract minimum datasets will be mandatory from 1 April 1997.

GP Partnership Vacancies

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many partnership vacancies currently exist for general practitioners in *(a)* Leeds, *(b)* Newcastle, *(c)* London, *(d)* Manchester and *(e)* Liverpool. [1109]

Mr. Malone: This information is not held centrally.

GP Fundholders (Patient Refunds)

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of patients referred to *(a)* Great Ormond Street, *(b)* the Royal Marsden, *(c)* the Royal Free and *(d)* University College hospitals were referred by fundholding general practitioners. [1115]

Mr. Malone: This information is not held centrally. The hon. Member may wish to contact the chairmen of the individual trusts for information.

School Health Service

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total amount spent on the school health service for each of the past five years. [1100]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected centrally.

Family Health Centres

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many family health centres per 1,000 population there are in *(a)* Inner London, *(b)* Greater London, *(c)* Birmingham, *(d)* Newcastle, *(e)* Liverpool, *(f)* Leeds and *(g)* Manchester. [1124]

Mr. Horam: The available information is set out in the table.

Area	*Resident population*[1]	*Number of Health Centres*[2]	*Number of Health Centres per 1,000 population*	*Number of Health Centres per 100,000 population*
Inner London[3]	2,009,366	51	0.025	2.54
Greater London[4]	6,910,828	124	0.018	1.79
Birmingham	1,004,258	28	0.028	2.79
Newcastle	275,217	8	0.029	2.91

Area	Resident population[1]	Number of Health Centres[2]	Number of Health Centres per 1,000 population	Number of Health Centres per 100,000 population
Liverpool	466,864	12	0.026	2.57
Leeds	719,880	20	0.028	2.78
Manchester	433,706	11	0.025	2.54

Source:
[1] Office of National Statistics population estimates for mid 1993.
[2] GP census, 1 October 1993.
[3] Inner London comprises the following Family Health Services Authorities: Kensington; Chelsea and Westminster; Camden and Islington; City and East London and Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham.
[4] Greater London comprises the following Family Health Services Authorities:- Barnet; Brent and Harrow; Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow; Hillingdon; Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster; Barking and Havering; Camden and Islington; City and East London; Enfield and Haringey; Redbridge and Waltham Forest; Greenwich and Bexley; Bromley; Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham; Croydon; Kingston and Richmond and Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth.

The latest available data on the number of health centres are at 1 October 1993. Data have not been collected since then.

NHS Repair and Maintenance

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the outstanding repair and maintenance backlog at all NHS facilities by district health authority for each year since 1991. [1128]

Mr. Horam: Outstanding repair and maintenance backlogs at all national health service facilities are not collected by district health authority.

NHS Administrative Register

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cost of the NHS administrative register to date. [1120]

Mr. Horam: The expenditure to date on the national health service administrative register is £8.8 million.

Waste Incineration

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current cost of incinerating non-clinical waste in the NHS. [1108]

Mr. Horam: This information is not held centrally.

Elective Surgery

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which hospital trusts have indicated that they will not carry out elective surgery before the end of the current financial year. [1112]

Mr. Horam: The information is not available centrally.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes will be made to the cash limits of his Department in 1996–97. [2552]

Mr. Dorrell: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class XI vote 1—hospital, community health, family health and related services, England—will be increased by £125,517,000, from £27,682,304,000 to £27,807,821,000. This allows for increases of £124,373,000 in respect of the take up of the end year flexibility entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996 at columns *326–31;* £1,758,000 for the drugs challenge fund made up of a claim on the reserve (£879,000) and by transfers from class VII, vote 1—Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales—(£308,000, class IX, vote 1—Department of Education and Employment: programmes and central services—(£263,000) and class XI, vote 2—Department of Health administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England—(£308,000); and £65,000 from class XI, vote 2 for Mental Health Act Commission accommodation charges.

The overall increase is partially offset by transfers of £311,000 to class XIII, vote 4—hospital, community health, family health, other health services and welfare food, Scotland—for services provided by the former London postgraduate teaching hospitals (£292,000) and for GP fundholders cross boundary flows (£19,000); £185,000 to Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland for supraregional services (£175,000) and services provided by the former London postgraduate teaching hospitals (£10,000); £111,000 to class XIV, vote 4—Hospital, community health, family health services and other health services (part), Wales—for services provided by the former London postgraduate teaching hospitals and £72,000 to class XI, vote 2—Department of Health administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England—in respect of a transfer of capital assets to the Public Health Laboratory Service.

The cash limit for class XI, vote 2—Department of Health, administration, miscellaneous health services and personal social services, England—will be reduced by £857,000 (from £1,209,456,000 to £1,208,599,000). This reduction allows for transfer of £373,000 (£65,000 running costs) to class XI, vote 1 as detailed above; £240,000 for publicity campaigns made up of transfers to class XIII, vote 4—Education, industry, arts and libraries, Scotland—(150,000), Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland (£45,000), class XIV, vote 4—Hospital, community health, family health services and other health services (part), Wales—(£45,000); also a further transfer to class XIV, vote 4 of £234,000 to obtain advice and information about medical devices; £67,000 (running costs) to class XVI, vote 12—Office for National Statistics—for legal services and £15,000 (running costs) to class IV, vote 1—Departmental of Trade and Industry; programmes and administration—for Human Genetics Advisory Committee. The overall reduction is partially offset by a transfer of £72,000 from class XI, vote 1 as mentioned above.

The non-voted cash limit for supplementary credit approvals for personal social services—DoH/LACAP—in England is to be increased by £1,305,000 from £14,700,000 to £16,005,000 in respect of the take up of the end-year flexibility entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996 at columns *326–31*.

The Department's gross running cost limit will be reduced by £147,000 from £280,204,000 to £280,057,000 as mentioned above.

All increases will either be offset by savings, increased receipts or transfers to or from other Votes or charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Health and Social Services

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment his Department has made of the working relationships between health authorities and social services departments; if he will list examples of successful joint action in providing care in the community for people with special needs; what proposals he has for encouraging closer working together; and if he will make a statement. [1383]

Mr. Burns: Joint working between health and social services is a key feature of our community care monitoring. This shows that, although there are still improvements to make, there are many examples of good practice around the country covering groups of people with a range of needs. To assist authorities develop their collaborative working we published "Practical Guidance on Joint Commissioning" in 1995, copies of which are available in the Library. A development programme, which includes a series of locality workshop to encourage and enable authorities to develop their joint commissioning further, is taking this work forward.

CAMS Ltd.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if notice of termination has been given to CAMS Ltd. in relation to the company's contract with the national health service centre for coding and classification at Loughborough; if the National Audit Office draft report into the terms of the contract and other matters has been received by the NHS executive; and if he will make a statement. [1619]

Mr. Horam: Notice of termination has not been given to CAMS Ltd. with respect to its contract with the Department of Health for the licensing and support of Read codes in the national health service.

The review commissioned by the NHS Executive from Silicon Bridge Research into these licensing and support arrangements has been completed and the report has been received. Its findings are being considered.

GP Fundholders

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of NHS patients are covered by GP fundholders in the Northern and Yorkshire regions. [1660]

Mr. Malone: Fifty-three per cent. of the population of Northern and Yorkshire region are currently served by a fundholding general practitioner.

Nurses

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the specific training period for a state-registered nurse. [1952]

Mr. Horam: Training leading to registration with the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting as a general nurse is of three years duration comprising 4,600 hours of theoretical and practical instruction in compliance with European Communities Council directive 77/453/EEC.

EU Maternal and Child Health Budget

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many applications have been received for the EU maternal and child health budget line, B7–5407, for 1997; from which agencies and non-governmental organisations; if he will indicate *(a)* how much funding each applicant is requesting and *(b)* which allocations have already been made; and if he will make a statement. [469]

Dr. Liam Fox: I have been asked to reply.

No maternal and child health budget line has been proposed for the 1997 EU budget.

WALES

Cattle Cull

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received relating to problems faced by Welsh farmers in obtaining access to local slaughterhouses; and if he will make a statement. [456]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: We have received a number of representations from farmers. The Intervention Board has instructed abattoirs to source 50 per cent. clean cattle and 75 per cent. cull cows from markets, in line with historical patterns of marketing. From 4 November only registered animals will be slaughtered until the backlog is cleared; this will enable the Intervention Board to target those areas of Wales where there is greatest need.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the Welsh Development Agency concerning the preparation of alternative scenarios for 1997–98 funding; if he will give the percentage reductions relative to preferred budget estimates which he has requested the agency to prepare; and what estimates the agency has given of the impact of those alternative budget strategies on its level of operations in 1997–98 and 1998–99. [1963]

Mr. Hague: My 1966 strategic guidance letter asked the agency to prepare a corporate plan based on 80, 100 and 120 per cent. of the 1996–97 baseline expenditure of

£126.8 million. The agency prepared its plan on this basis and included other funding options. I met the chairman and the board on 2 October to discuss the plan.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the Welsh Development Agency in relation to the recent agency appointment of a part-time business adviser in Japan to help expand market opportunities for Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises. [1959]

Mr. Hague: None. This is entirely an operational matter for the Welsh Development Agency.

Beef Export Ban

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to secure early relaxation of the beef export ban from grass-fed specialist Welsh beef herds with full passporting; and if he will make a statement. [1961]

Mr. Hague: The United Kingdom will continue to work within the Florence framework for progressive lifting of the export ban. As the next step we are exploring the scope for exports under a certified herd scheme, such as the beef assurance scheme or a variant of it.

South-East Wales Ambulance Trust

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has received a copy of the district auditor's reports into the accounts of the South-East Wales Ambulance trust; what consultations he has had with the chairman of the trust concerning reference to the relevant constabularies; and if he will make a statement. [1962]

Mr. Hague: I have had no discussions with the chairman but my officials have seen the reports in draft. I understand that they will be presented to the board of the trust on 4 November. Any follow up action on specific points is a matter for the trust.

University Hospital of Wales

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the university hospital of Wales in relation to the provision of private finance initiative capital for the modernisation of sterile supplies at the university hospital of Wales site in Cardiff. [1960]

Mr. Hague: None. The scheme falls within the trusts delegated limits and will be for the trust board to take forward.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes he is proposing to make to the cash limits for his Department and the office of Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools in Wales in 1996–97. [2430]

Mr. Hague: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, the cash limit on class XIV, vote 1 will be reduced by £3,500,000 from £25,655,000 to £22,155,000; the cash limit on class XIV, vote 2 will be increased by £14,906,000 from £689,272,000 to £704,178,000; the cash limit on class XIV, vote 3 will be increased by £5,961,000 from £518,909,000 to £524,870,000; the cash limit on class XIV, vote 4 will be increased by £30,390,000 from £1,879,735,000 to £1,910,125,000; the cash limit on class XIV, vote 5 has been decreased by £150,000 from £2,305,358,000 to £2,305,208,000.

The Department's running costs limit will be increased by £2,511,000 from £72,667,000 to £75,178,000. The running costs limit for Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools in Wales will be increased by £157,000 from £3,150,000 to £3,307,000.

The local authority capital cash limit, WO/LACAP, has been increased by £4,473,000 from £513,733,000 to £518,206,000.

The cash limit decrease in vote 1 results mainly from lower-than-expected claims for agri-environmental and farm conservation schemes.

The cash limit increase in vote 2 results mainly from a net increase in grant in aid to the Welsh Development Agency of £25,313,000—including the transfer of urban investment grant—and the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlement, partly offset by reductions elsewhere in the vote and a transfer of £3,500,000 to class XIV, vote 3.

The net cash limit increase on vote 3 results mainly from an increase in the grant in aid for Cardiff Bay development corporation of £7,599,000, the transfer of £3,882,000 of urban investment grant to the Welsh Development Agency in class XIV, vote 2, and the take-up of end-year flexibility of £1,177,000. The increase in the running costs limit includes extra provision to cover the estimated costs of the north Wales child abuse inquiry and BSE.

The increase in the cash limit for vote 4 results from the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlement of £30,000,000 and transfers from class XI totalling £390,000.

The cash limit decrease on vote 5 results from lower than expected expenditure by the Valuation Office Agency.

The increase in the local authority cash limit, WO/LACAP, results from the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlement.

None of the proposed changes will add to the planned total of public expenditure.

SCOTLAND

Scottish Homes

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list for each year from 1989–90 to 1995–96 for each district and islands council area the total number of starts of *(a)* new build and *(b)* rehabilitation by housing associations for rent within Scottish Homes approved for development programme; [1615]

(2) if he will list for each year from 1989–90 to 1995–96 for each district and islands council area the total number of completions of *(a)* new build and *(b)* rehabilitation by housing associations for rent within Scottish Homes approved development programme. [1618]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The information requested is held by Scottish Homes. I have asked its chairman, Mr. John Ward, to write to the hon. Member.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what changes he intends to make to the cash limits and running costs provision for 1996–97 within his responsibility. [2553]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, I intend to make changes to nine voted cash limits, three non-voted cash blocks and nine running cost limits:

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 1—agriculture, fisheries and environmental services, Scotland—will be increased by a total of £5,184,000 from £359,091,000 to £364,275,000. Provision for running costs on this vote will be increased by £482,000 from £16,553,000 to £17,035,000. The changes include take-up of end-year flexibility entitlement for capital of £2,085,000 as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*, in respect of the new fisheries research vessel, take up of end-year flexibility for the running costs for the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency of £330,000 and for the Scottish Agricultural Science Agency of £152,000; and increase in fisheries grants of £1,126,000; a transfer from class XIII, vote 3 of £1,349,000 for rural partneriship fund; and a transfer from class VI, vote 3 of £142,000 for local authorities' costs associated with air quality duties.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 2—local government, housing, transport, other environmental services and European funds, Scotland—will be increased by a net total of £33,423,000 from £5,568,583,000 to £5,602,006,000. The net increase reflects a claim on the reserve of £15,058,000 in respect of the AEF guarantee scheme, an increase in Scottish Homes grant-in-aid of £14,528,000 met by a transfer of provision from SO/LA2; a reduction in Scottish new towns of £422,000; and a net increase of £1,972,000 for Historic Scotland—covering an increase in gross running cost provision of £1,607,000 from £13,609,000 to £15,216,000 reflecting the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlements, £1,143,000 capital and £691,000 running costs; a transfer from class XIII, vote 6 of £138,000 for running costs, further increases in provision of £778,000 for running costs, £1,322,000 for current expenditure and £1,487,000 for capital expenditure are offset fully by increased appropriations in aid—additional provision of £1,000,000 will be made available to Highlands and Islands Airports Limited to fund its assuming responsibility for operations at RAF Machrihanish and will be met by a transfer of provision from the Ministry of Defence; additional provision of £800,000 in revenue deficit grant to Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd. will be met by a corresponding reduction in grant for capital investment; and the take up of end year flexibility for the roads and transport programme of £1,287,000.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 3, education, industry, arts and libraries, Scotland, will be increased by £17,414,000 from £1,596,530,000 to £1,613,944,000. The increased cash limit takes account of £16,146,000 in respect of end year flexibility arrangements for capital expenditure relating to the National Museums of Scotland, the Scottish Office Pensions Agency and regional selective assistance. The increase also includes £334,000 in respect of end year flexibility arrangements for running costs expenditure relating to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the Scottish Office Pensions Agency. The changes include transfers from class XIII, vote 6 totalling £255,000 in respect of both agencies. The changes also reflect an increase in provision of £2,028,000 in respect of Scottish Enterprise, which has been offset by a corresponding reduction in SO/LA2, and a reduction of £1,349,000 which is transferred to class XIII, vote 1 in respect of rural parterships fund. Provision for pre-five education has been increased by £850,000 offset by a corresponding amount in appropriations in aid. Running cost provision increases by £579,000 from £7,736,000 to £8,315,000.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 4, hospital, community health, family health, other health services and welfare food, Scotland, will be increased by a net total of £59,538,000 from £3,476,975,000 to £3,536,513,000. The increase includes £66,264,000 reflecting the take up of end year flexibility; a transfer of £292,000 from class XI, vote 1 for services previously funded directly by Department of Health; a transfer of £19,000 from class XI, vote 1 for GP fundholding cross border flows; a transfer of £150,000 from class XI, vote 2 for HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns; a transfer of £140,000 from class XIII, vote 6 following the transfer of responsibility for the regional dental service to the Common Services Agency, a transfer of £541,000 to class XIII, vote 3 for placement allowances and travel expenses for student nurses; and a transfer of £283,000 to class XIII, vote 6 for increased accommodation and IT costs for the Mental Welfare Commission. In addition there is an increase of £100,000 for the setting up of the Scottish drugs challenge fund and some adjustments to reflect changes to anticipated appropriations-in-aid. The NHS trusts' external financing limit has also been increased by £7,117,000 from £41,723,000 to £48,840,000.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 5 will be increased by £7,529,000 from £624,399,000 to £631,928,000 and the running costs provision will be increased by £4,635,000 from £141,669,000 to £146,304,000. The cash limit increase is the net effect of the take up of EYF entitlement of £1,700,000 under the capital scheme and £5,435,000 under running costs and £1,494,000 under the HPSS scheme, offset by transfers of £800,000 to class XIII, vote 9 in respect of the running costs of the Dunblane inquiry and £300,000 to SO/LA1 in respect of additional capital allocations for Grampian Joint Police board. The increases will be offset by forecast underspends on criminal injuries compensation within the existing vote total.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 6—Scottish Office administration—is being increased by £7,050,000 from £160,928,000 to £167,978,000. Within this total, the running cost provision for Scottish Office Administration is being increased by £6,180,000 from £146,120,000 to £152,300,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility predominantly to fund staff early departure costs and inter-vote transfers. The capital provision is also being increased as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility and inter-vote transfers. The additional capital provision is to cover expenditure on IT associated with the Department's response to BSE and also procurement of a computer system by the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 7, General Register Office for Scotland, is being increased by £93,000 from £5,186,000 to £5,279,000. This increase relates entirely to the capital provision for GRO(S), and results from the take-up of end-year flexibility to cover additional costs of the refurbishment of New Register house.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 8, Scottish Record Office, is being increased by £1,359,000 from £5,006,000 to £6,365,000. Within this total, the SRO running costs limit is being increased by £752,000 from £4,563,000 to £5,315,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility to cover additional expenditure on computer anti-virus measures, building repairs and the cleaning of records and record storerooms and also potential litigation costs. The increase in capital provision results from the take-up of end-year flexibility to cover cots of refurbishment work at General Register house.

The cash limit element for class XIII, vote 9,—administration of justice, Scotland—will be increased by an overall figure of £1,875,000 from £47,366,000 to £49,241,000. This reflects an increase in gross running cost limit of £1,400,000 to £42,144,000. Of that, £600,000 will be met by the take-up

of end-year flexibility for expenditure on essential maintenance of court buildings and £800,000 will be transferred from class XIII, vote 5,—law, order and protective services, police grant and social work services, Scotland—to meet the costs of setting up and running the Dunblane public inquiry. Capital provision will be increased by £475,000 to £20,975,000 reflecting the take-up of end-year flexibility for expenditure on essential work on court buildings to bring them up to current health and safety regulations standard.

The overall running costs limit for the Scottish Office, together with its Agencies and Associated Departments, is being increased by £15,624,000 from £377,775,000 to £393,399,000. This results from the take-up of end-year flexibility, increased provision for Historic Scotland being covered by increased income, and a transfer from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in respect of work being transferred from their Tory laboratory to Scottish Office fisheries research services.

The non-voted cash limit SO/LA1, which covers non-housing capital expenditure by local authorities, is to be increased by £15,300,000 from £426,620,000 to £441,920,000, reflecting part take-up of end-year flexibility amounting to £15,000,000 and an increase of £300,000 transferred from class XIII, vote 5.

The non-voted cash limit SO/LA2 which covers housing capital expenditure by local authorities and capital expenditure by new towns will be decreased by a net total of £4,815,000 from £111,210,000 to £106,395,000. The decrease reflects a transfer of provision to Scottish Homes of £14,528,000 and Scottish Enterprise of £2,028,000 for which complementary increases are included in the winter supplementary estimates for class XIII, vote 2 and class XIII, vote 3 respectively and the take-up of end year flexibility of £11,741,000.

The non-voted cash limit SO/ERDF which covers European regional development fund payments in Scotland will be increased by £32,105,000 from £97,079,000 to £129,184,000 reflecting the take-up of end year flexibility.

The increases will be offset by savings or charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cattle Slaughter

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to ensure that a twin-bladed saw is used to remove the spinal column from all cattle carcases destined for human or animal consumption. [234]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: A prototype twin-bladed saw is still under development and evaluation. A number of technical and practical issues have yet to be overcome. Not until these have been successfully resolved will we be in a position to consider the circumstances in which such equipment might be used.

Agriculture Council

Mr. French: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 28 and 29 October; and if he will make a statement. [1836]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: I represented the United Kingdom at this Council in Luxembourg, accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Welsh Office. Agreement was reached by qualified majority, Germany voting against—on a package of measures to re-adjust the EU beef market in the wake of the BSE crisis.

The Council invited the Commission to allocate a total sum of 500 million ECU to EU beef farmers whose incomes have fallen as a result of problems on the beef market. The United Kingdom's share of this sum, which is proportionate to our share of the total number of beef cattle in the EU, will be 13.1 per cent. This will provide some £50 million as further help to UK beef producers. The precise method of allocation of the funds will be decided in the light of further consideration in the Council and consultation with the UK farming unions on the preferred approach.

The Council agreement also made some important changes to the operation of the EU beef regime so as to bring production more closely into line with present and foreseeable demand. In particular the calf processing scheme, which has operated in the United Kingdom since April this year, is to be extended to include male calves of all breeds, not just dairy breeds as at present. This scheme, coupled with a scheme to pay an early marketing premium for calves sold as veal, is intended to reduce the number of calves going for beef production by some 1 million animals and hence limit the need for costly market management measures such as intervention purchasing. The Council also decided to cut the regional ceilings for payment of beef special premium in most member states in order more closely to align production with demand. However I successfully resisted any cut in the United Kingdom's regional ceiling in view of the fact that in the United Kingdom applications for this premium have regularly exceeded the ceilings fixed.

Amongst other features of the Council's agreement was a welcome boost for extensive beef production in the form of a new premium of 52 ecu per head for producers with a stocking density of less than one livestock unit per hectare. I estimate that this could be worth as much as £15 million to UK producers. The Council also agreed to a raising of the ceiling on intervention purchases in 1966 and 1997. Following pressure from the United Kingdom and other member states, the Council also committed itself to a more fundamental reform of the EU beef regime to be completed in the course of 1997.

As to the funding of this package of measures, there will be no immediate cut in arable area payments. However the Council made clear its intention to postpone payments of oilseed advances in 1997 in order to allow beef market-related costs to be met in the course of this budget year without breaching the agricultural guideline. Moreover, in respect of additional costs falling in 1998, the Council agreement stated explicitly that all necessary measures would be taken to ensure that expenditure on agriculture in that year remains within guideline. These assurances were important for the United Kingdom in view of the paramount need to observe budgetary discipline.

The Council also had a presentation by the Commission of a proposal to introduce an EU-wide system of cattle traceability, with a linked proposal on the labelling and

promotion of beef products. The United Kingdom attaches importance to reaching an early agreement on the cattle traceability proposal, and will work constructively to achieve that end. I also raised in the Council the need for rapid implementation of the Council directives on the protection of animals in transport, in particular requesting the Commission to bring forward urgently its proposals for Council decisions on staging points and livestock vehicle standards. I also pressed for the rapid discussion and implementation of the rules governing producer organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector in the wake of the reform of the regime earlier this year.

Cattle Cull

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many *(a)* abattoirs and *(b)* incinerators are designated for use for casualty animals under the 30-month scheme; [1455]

(2) how many *(a)* markets, *(b)* abattoirs and *(c)* incinerators are designated as collection centres under the 30-month scheme. [1454]

Mr. Douglas Hogg *[holding answer 31 October 1996:]*: There are *(a)* 61 abattoirs *(b)* 200 markets and *(c)* 13 incineration plants designated as collection centres under the over 30-month scheme.

All the abattoirs and incineration plants, together with one additional incinerator, are also designated to take casualty animals under the scheme.

Animal Passports

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from what date animal passports have been mandatory for all United Kingdom cattle. [1459]

Mr. Douglas Hogg *[holding answer 31 October 1996]*: Passports have been mandatory for all cattle born or imported into Great Britain on or after 1 July 1996. Passports are not required in Northern Ireland because a movement permit system operates there.

BSE

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many feed mills have *(a)* had samples tested and *(b)* had samples that were found to be in breach of BSE controls in each month of 1996; [1458]

(2) what was *(a)* the number of samples and *(b)* the number of unsatisfactory samples taken from feed mills and tested for breach of BSE controls in each month of 1996. [1457]

Mr. Douglas Hogg *[holding answer 31 October 1996]*: The table sets out the results of the current programme of feed sampling visits, which began in February, up to September—the last full month for which data are available. The premises visited include feed mills, farms using on-farm feed mixers and any site where feed, or ingredients for feed, are produced or stored. Unfortunately we are not able to isolate data for feed mills.

ELISA—the laboratory test used—indicates the presence of mammalian protein in samples. The feeding of mammalian protein to non-ruminant animals, such as pigs and poultry, in forms other than meat and bone meal is still allowed. Samples which test positive or inconclusive for mammalian protein do not therefore necessarily indicate a breach of the legislation.

Every positive or inconclusive test result is investigated by the State Veterinary Service. Enforcement action is a matter for local authorities. The SVS liaises closely with the relevant enforcement authority whenever a possible contravention of the legislation comes to light. It would be for the relevant local authority to consider legal action where sufficient evidence of an offence is available.

Updates on the results of the feed sampling programme are published monthly in the "BSE Enforcement Bulletin", copies of which are placed in the House Library. The bulletin will also publish details of any prosecutions taken by local authorities and notified to us.

The figures shown are subject to adjustment as test results from the laboratory are updated.

Month 1996	*Total visits*	*Total samples taken*	*Test Results*		
			Positive	*Negative*	*Inconclusive*
February	206	426	4	422	0
March	225	502	1	498	3
April	333	687	4	682	1
May	415	732	5	725	2
June	338	673	8	664	1
July	337	628	10	614	4
August	341	644	2	640	2
September	155	298	3	295	0
Total	2,350	4,590	37	4,540	13

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was *(a)* the number of visits and *(b)* the number of unsatisfactory visits to (i) slaughterhouses, (ii) hunt kennels and knackeries, (iii) rendering plants and (iv) incinerators made by the state veterinary service in each month since June 1996. [1456]

Mr. Douglas Hogg *[holding answer 31 October 1996]*: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary gave to the hon. Member for Romsey and Waterside (Mr. Colvin) on 24 July 1996 at column *625*.

The information requested on surveillance visits made by the state veterinary service to monitor compliance with the controls on specified bovine materials is published monthly in the "BSE Enforcement Bulletin". Copies of this document are placed in the Libraries of both Houses. I am arranging for the hon. Member to be sent a personal copy of the third issue of the bulletin which has just been published.

TRANSPORT

Ticketing

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will set up an impartial information and advice service to provide guidance to the public about ticket prices and through ticketing availability; and if he will make a statement. [1756]

Mr. Watts: Impartial advice on ticketing is already a requirement of the licences issued to train operators by the independent rail regulator. The regulator has all the powers he needs to ensure that train operators comply with their licence obligations.

Passenger Travel Statistics

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many public transport passenger miles were travelled in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [1861]

Mr. Watts: The following table summarises the available figures:

Billion passenger kilometres

Year	*Buses and coaches*[1]	*Rail*[2]	*Air*[3]	*All public transport*[4]
1990	46	40	5	91
1991	44	38	5	87
1992	43	38	5	86
1993	43	37	5	85
1994	43	35	5	83
1995	43	37	6	86

[1] For buses and coaches, changes are estimated by deflating passenger receipts by the most appropriate price indices available. This method can only give a broad guide to trends.
[2] Rail data given for financial years. Comprises British Rail, former British Rail companies and urban rail systems.
[3] Revenue passenger kilometres on scheduled and non-scheduled services. Includes Northern Ireland and Channel Islands. Excludes air taxi services, private flying and passengers paying less than 25 per cent. of the full fare on scheduled and non-scheduled services.
[4] Excludes travel by taxi, for which figures are not readily available.

Exhaust Emissions

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research he has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned regarding the device being developed by Dyson for removing particulates from the exhaust emissions of diesel engines; and if he will make a statement. [1837]

Mr. Bowis: None.

Channel Tunnel

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the number of incursions into restricted zones at *(a)* the international channel tunnel rail terminal and *(b)* the tunnel site since the sites became operational. [1509]

Mr. Watts: At Waterloo international terminal there have been 27 incursions, including illegal immigrants, into the restricted zones. At Ashford international terminal there have been a further two incursions. At the tunnel site there have been four incursions into the restricted zones; two at the Cheriton site and two at Dollands Moor. In all cases the incursions were identified promptly and dealt with appropriately.

Drivers' Hours

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to promote legislation which will allow drive hours records to be handed over to vehicle inspectorate staff. [1504]

Mr. Bowis: The Government will consider what further clarification of the powers of inspectors to inspect and remove tachograph charts is necessary and, if appropriate will propose amending legislation in due course.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what factors underlay his Department's decision not to reduce the maximum number of drivers' hours; and what research his Department evaluated in this area. [1506]

Mr. Bowis: In the absence of any research evidence to suggest that the existing European Union limits on maximum driving time and minimum rest requirements are in themselves a cause of accidents, the Government have no reason to doubt that the existing drivers' hours rules strike a reasonable balance between road safety and operational flexibility.

Domestic Drivers

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects his Department to make an announcement on the abolition of domestic drivers' hours rules. [1503]

Mr. Bowis: It is too soon to say.

Bridges

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many bridges have been identified as unable to bear 40 tonne vehicles, to date. [1447]

Mr. Watts: Of those that have been assessed, there are three bridges supporting trunk roads in England which are unable to carry 40 tonne vehicles at the present time. These are:

M1 Junction 2 slip road viaduct in north London;
A13 Movers Lane flyover in east London; and
A40 Golden Valley flyover in Gloucestershire.

Improvements are planned in each case.

A number of bridges carrying local roads are also unable to bear 40 tonne vehicles. It is for the local highways authority concerned to decide whether improvements are required.

Transec

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list those train operating companies inspected by Transec to ensure compliance with security standards and regulations; [1510]

(2) if he will list the number of covert inspections undertaken by Transec on each mainline London railway station for each of the last three years. [1507]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack oversees the security system for the national railway network, with the close involvement of the British Transport police. This system is mandatory on all train operating companies through their operating licences. Transec has not so far carried out any security inspections of train operating companies or of Railtrack.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each of the last three years the number of covert inspections undertaken by Transec staff on *(a)* the Port of Dover and *(b)* the channel tunnel. [1434]

Mr. Watts: Most inspections are unannounced but cannot in their nature be covert. All tests are covert. Transec staff also observe operations on other occasions, including when they are undertaking security audits.

The number of tests and inspections carried out on port operations at Dover, excluding tests and inspections of shipping companies using the port, were:

1993–94: 10

1994–95: 15

1995–96: 11.

The number of tests and inspections in relation to all channel tunnel services were:

1993–94: None

1994–95: 126

1995–96: 293.

Rail Privatisation

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the amounts paid to contractors involved in rail privatisation in success fees, indicating the contractors to whom the fees were paid. [1516]

Mr. Watts: Neither the Department of Transport nor the Office of the Rail Regulator has paid any success fees to contractors involved in rail privatisation. The Office of Passenger Rail Franchising has paid a total of £2.25 million to HSBC Samuel Montagu and Kleinwort Benson Ltd. in connection with letting passenger rail franchises.

Rail Fares Database

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if staff at the national train inquiry bureau access to a computer database of national rail fares. [1520]

Mr. Watts: All staff working in rail telephone inquiry bureaux have access to the "National Railway Fares Manual", prepared by Rail Settlement Plan Ltd. which lists the fares charged by train operators. The majority of telephone inquiry bureau staff have access to this information through on-line computer systems.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Carrington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proposals he has to change his Department's cash limits and running cost limits for 1996–97. [2434]

Sir George Young: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, the following changes will be made:

(i) the cash for class V vote 1—Highways Agency—will be increased by £21,113,000 from £1,641,172,000 to £1,662,285,000. The increase in the cash limit includes the take up £21,064,000 capital end year flexibility entitlement and £4,000,000 running costs end year flexibility entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*, offset by adjustments in running costs funding between this vote and class V vote 2, relating to the consolidation of the Highways Agency's role. Running costs provision for this vote increases by $4,468,000 from £71,516,000 to £75,984,000.

(ii) the cash limit for class V vote 2—Administration and Transport Services—will be increased by £25,869,000 from £129,008,000 to £154,877,000. The increase in the cash limit includes the take up £2,000,000 capital end year flexibility entitlement from vote 2; £2,000,000 capital end year flexibility entitlement from class V vote 4 and £4,997,000 capital end year flexibility entitlement from class V vote 5; and £15,834,000 running costs entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*; the transfers of funds to class V vote 1 for restructuring and streamlining in the Highways Agency and relocation of some of the agency's research and development work to the central transport group; transfers of funds between this vote and class V vote 5 for new London road studies and an emerging shortfall in receipts; transfer of funds to class V vote 6 for network services; the transfer of some census and survey work to the Office of National Statistics; and transfers relating to accommodation changes and security responsibilities from the Office of Public Service and the Security Facilities Executive agency. Running costs provision for this vote increases by £15,302,000 from £92,685,000 to £107,987,000.

(iii) the cash limit on class V vote 5 will be increased by £2,458,000 from £389,580,000 to £392,038,000. The increase in the cash limit includes the take up of £2,470,000 capital end-year flexibility—EYF—entitlement, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*, offset by intervote transfers between this vote and class V vote 2 and class XVI vote 12 of the Office of National Statistics and internal transfers to allow payment of £1,458,000 for audit adjustments to metropolitan railway grant 1995–96 outturn.

(iv) the cash limit on class V vote 6 will be increased by £4,701,000 from £81,364,000 to £86,065,000. The increase is accounted for by a transfer of provision from the Ministry of Defence for payments to the Meteorological Office trading fund and a transfer for network services from class V vote 2. Running costs provision for this vote increases by £75,000 from £38,766,000 to £38,841,000.

(v) the Department of Transport local authority capital cash limit will be increased by £4,530,000 from £308,114,000 to £312,644,000. This partially take up the capital end-year flexibility entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*.

(vi) the Department of Transport gross running costs limit will be increased by £19,845,000 from £376,078,000 to £395,923,000 as a consequence of the above changes, mainly for voluntary early retirements.

(vii) in addition the cash limit on class V vote 7—passenger rail services—will be increased by £137,000,000 from £1,650,668,000 to £1,787,688,000. The additional provision is required under British Rail's budget for the provision of passenger rail services in 1996–97.

The overall increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

M20 Widening (Sandling)

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if all the outstanding accounts for the widening of the

M20 on the stretch at Sandling have now been settled; what was the final outturn; and what was the original estimate. [1910]

Mr. Watts: All the outstanding accounts have not yet been settled so the final outturn is not yet known. The original estimate at November 87 prices was £70 million—"Trunk Roads into the 1990s".

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions concerning environmental issues and sustainability have taken place at the EU intergovernmental conference. [1205]

Mr. David Davis: Environmental issues have been discussed on a number of occasions in the intergovernmental conference, most recently in the personal representatives working party on 29 October. A number of member states have put forward proposals in this area and the presidency has circulated negotiating papers. These have been deposited in the Library of the House.

Thailand

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what efforts are made by British embassy and consular officials to investigate disappearances and deaths of British citizens in Thailand. [1207]

Dr. Liam Fox: We expect the Thai authorities to investigate fully the disappearance or death of British citizens. We take every opportunity to press them for results. We also carry out a search of our own records and check with immigration authorities, police, hospitals and morgues.

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many reports have been received by the British embassy in Thailand of British citizens *(a)* going missing and *(b)* alleged to have committed suicide over the past five years. [1206]

Dr. Fox: Since 1991 our embassy in Bangkok has received over 215 missing persons inquiries. Nine suspected suicides were reported over that period.

Hungary and Romania (Treaty)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the treaty on understanding, co-operation and good neighbourhood signed on 16 September by Hungary and Romania, with particular reference to the implications for other European states of *(a)* the mutual recognition of territorial integrity and *(b)* the prohibition on territorial claims contained in article 4 of that treaty. [1162]

Dr. Liam Fox: We welcome the treaty of Understanding, co-operation and good neighbourliness between Hungary and Romania as a notable achievement which will contribute to good relations between the two countries. The treaty does not create rights of duties for other European states and is a matter for the two contracting parties alone.

Bosnia

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money the Government contributed to the OSCE elections fund for the Bosnian elections; for what purposes; and if he will make a statement on the criteria governing the use of public money in such situations. [1190]

Mr. David Davis: Her Majesty's Government contributed £3 million to the OSCE elections fund for the Bosnian elections. We specified that this money should be used to provide ballot papers and other election materials. Elections were a key step in the Dayton peace process which Her Majesty's Government supports. They were essential to give Bosnia democratically elected leaders and joint institutions. These are the foundation for an integrated peaceful Bosnia.

Tony Bradbury

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received about the situation of Tony Bradbury, currently held in prison in Israel following an industrial accident; and if he will make a statement. [1192]

Dr Liam Fox: Mr. Bradbury is not in prison. He was remanded on bail on his own surety and cannot leave Israel. He has been charged with causing death by negligence. The date for his trial has been set for 13 January 1997.

British Embassy, Moscow

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the contract to build the new British embassy in Moscow and on the future of the present building. [1210]

Mr. Hanley: The contract to build new embassy offices, staff accommodation, amenities and ancillaries has been awarded to Taylor Woodrow in joint venture with the Finnish firm, Skanska. Construction will start this month and is scheduled to take 30 months. The value of the contract is about £60 million. The buildings will be a major improvement on the present cramped and unsatisfactory working and living conditions and totally inadequate visa-issuing facilities.

The lease on the present premises, which includes the ambassador's residence, was renewed for 99 years in 1993. The residence will be retained and the vacated offices will be converted into further residential accommodation for embassy staff.

EU (Common Policies)

Mr. Marlow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provisions based on majority voting govern the development of common policies by a group of EU countries in new areas using the services of existing European institutions. [1667]

Mr. David Davis: There are no general provisions of this kind. However, the social protocol annexed to the EC treaty allows the other 14 member states to use the existing institutions to pursue social policy measures in accordance with the agreement annexed to that protocol. In addition article 130K of the EC treaty allows a group of less than the 15 member states to participate in supplementary programmes under the research and development multiannual framework programme.

The broader issue of flexibility is currently under discussion at the intergovernmental conference. The UK has made clear that access by a group of EU countries to European Community institutions and mechanisms including the budget could only be considered where this was agreed by all.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further changes he proposes to make in his Department's diplomatic wing cash limits and running costs limits for 1996–97. [2429]

Mr. Hanley: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates the following changes will be made.

The cash limit for class II, vote 1—Overseas Representation—will be increased by £8,349,000 from £663,010,000 to £671,359,000. The increase results mainly from the take up of the end-year flexibility entitlement of £7,543,000 announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*. There are also net transfers totalling £806,000, which includes inward transfers of £1,522,000 from the Department of Environment (£1,175,000 running costs), £432,000 from PACE (£432,000 running costs), £100,000 from the Home Office (£100,000 running costs), £17,000 from the Department of National Heritage (£17,000 running costs) and £10,000 from SAFE (£10,000 running costs) with an outward transfer of £1,275,000 to class II, vote 3 (£75,000 running costs). Additionally, there is a transfer between subheads of £24,000 from running costs into other current expenditure.

The gross running costs limit on class II, vote 1 increases by £1,635,000, from £519,058,000 to £520,693,000.

The cash limit for class II, vote 2—Other External Relations—will be increased by £20,202,000 from £209,096,000 to £229,298,000. Parliamentary authority will be sought for additional expenditure in respect of certain international organisations and contributions to peacekeeping operations. This increase will be met partly by increased appropriations in aid and partly from a claim on the reserve.

The cash limit for class II, vote 3—BBC World Service—will be increased by £2,465,000 from £169,638,000 to £172,103,000. The increase is required to take up £1,190,000 under the end-year flexibility scheme announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report* columns *326–31*. Additionally there is a transfer from class II, vote 1 of £1,275,000 to take on responsibility for the FCO relay stations in Cyprus and Oman and in the UK at Orfordness, Suffolk.

All the increases in provision will be offset by transfers or charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 4 November 1996

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Profession

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the extent to which the legal profession in the United Kingdom is open to candidates from all social backgrounds. [277]

Mr. Streeter: The Lord Chancellor's responsibilities in this field extend only to England and Wales. The criteria for entry into the legal profession are set by the professional bodies and I have made no such assessment. However, both the Law Society and the Bar Council have adopted anti-discrimination measures to seek to ensure that fair recruitment practices are followed.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1250]

Mr. Streeter: For the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Court Service and the Public Trust Office, the information is as follows:

Total male: 4,205

Total female: 7,370

Proportion of total: 63.7 per cent.

Young Offenders

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average length of time from the charging of alleged young offenders to their cases being tried in *(a)* Manchester and *(b)* Trafford magistrates and youth courts in each of the last five years; and what is the national average figure. [1394]

Mr. Streeter: The information requested is not available. The magistrates courts time intervals survey collects information on defendants in indictable—including triable either way—cases against whom proceedings are completed in three sample weeks a year—in February, June and October. The June survey also collects information about proceedings in summary cases. In cases where the defendant is charged, this date is collected. However, the start date of any summary trial is not. Further information on the survey is available in Lord Chancellor's Department information bulletins which are held in the House of Commons Library.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1283]

Mr. Streeter: Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such data. For the period 1 October 1995 to 30 September 1996, however, subsidised employee child care was provided for 94 women who are mothers and 26 men who are fathers in the Lord Chancellor's Department, Court Service and Public Trust Office. Help is also available with additional child care costs incurred owing to breaks in normal working patterns and special leave given to parents for domestic emergencies. Advice on finding child care is contained in the "Childcare Handbook" provided to all maternity leavers.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1265]

Mr. Streeter: My Department has no specific public relations budget. Expenditure on publicity and promotions in each of the last five financial years was as follows:

1992–93: £40,000

1993–94: £46,667

1994–95: £78,961

1995–96: £117,684

1996–97: (to end September): £40,061.

Expenditure on official hospitality in each of the last five financial years was as follows:

1992–93: £20,697

1993–94: £20,477

1994–95: £26,159

1995–96: £27,694

1996–97: (to end September): £6,165.

The only advertising that this Department carries out is for recruitment. This information is not collected centrally and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Prosecutors

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to restrict prosecutors in the Crown court to Crown Prosecution Service staff; and if he will make a statement. [268]

Mr. Streeter: Rights of audience are determined under the procedure laid down in the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990. There is no question of restricting prosecutors in the Crown court to Crown Prosecution Service staff.

Rather, our policy is to allow for a wider provision of legal services, while maintaining the proper and efficient administration of justice.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agricultural Development Advisory Service

Sir Anthony Durant: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when ADAS is to be privatised; and what the objectives for the privatisation will be. [2641]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: ADAS is on course to meet its financial targets for 1996–97, including the target of 100 per cent. cost recovery on its advisory services. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I have therefore decided to proceed as quickly as possible with the sale of the business. We will invite expressions of interest from potential bidders for the business as a whole or any or all of its constituent parts—consultancy, research and development and the laboratory—although our preference is to dispose of the business as a whole.

Our objectives for the privatisable functions of ADAS will be:

(1) To transfer the privatisable functions of ADAS, and the associated risks, to the private sector on the best available terms—that is, terms which optimise the risk adjusted net benefit to the taxpayer;

(2) To ensure that the services to be provided to MAFF and the Welsh Office from the private sector can be delivered continuously, economically, efficiently and effectively;

(3) To provide for a "clean break" between Government and the privatised organisation(s), or failing that, to minimise any contingent liabilities falling on the Government.

In pursuing these objectives, we will have regard to the need to ensure that the staff concerned in the transfer are treated fairly, in accordance with the relevant legislation.

Departmental Cash Limits

Sir Anthony Durant: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes are proposed in his departmental cash limits for 1996–97. [2642]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class III, vote 1, section B—the Intervention Board executive agency—will be increased by £7,641,000 from £56,817,000 to £64,458,000. The increases are to cover the administration costs associated with the implementation of emergency measures to protect against bovine spongiform encephalopathy in the United Kingdom for expenditure on IT services. The running costs cash limit will be increased by £3,350,000 from £36,818,000 to £40,168,000. Agents' services will be increased by £4,291,000 from £18,427,000 to £22,718,000. The supplementary will also give partial effect to the running costs end flexibility entitlement of £2,814,000 announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*. At this stage it is proposed to take up £565,000 of this increase to cover expenditure on IT systems.

The increase will be charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class III, vote 2—Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: operational expenditure, agencies and departmental administration—will be increased by £5,057,000 from £911,318,000 to £916,375,000. The £5,057,000 relates mainly to the take-up of capital end-year flexibility entitlement of £5,189,000 as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*.

The following departmental transfers are also included; to the Scottish Office, administration (class XIII vote 6) £20,000 BSE-related running costs and £255,000 research and development expenditure, and from the Security Facilities Executive and the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate, £143,000 running costs.

The gross running costs limits for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will decrease by £2,806,000 from £354,768,000 to £351,962,000.

The increase in the vote total will be offset by savings or charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Beef Imports (Botswana)

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what amount of *(a)* beef and *(b)* beef products in the United Kingdom are currently imported from Botswana. [1659]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Imports of *(a)* bovine meat and *(b)* prepared and preserved bovine meat into the United Kingdom from Botswana, as recorded in "Overseas Trade Statistics" are, as follows:

	1994		*1995*		*1996*	
	£000	*Tonnes*	*£000*	*Tonnes*	*£000*	*Tonnes*
Bovine meat	12,457	4,058	17,682	6,655	8,996	3,488
Prepared and preserved bovine meat	1,931	777	1,945	723	281	116

All data are provisional.

Basking Shark Fishery

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the commercial value of the basking shark fishery as assessed under the EC–Norwegian exchange agreement. [1151]

Mr. Baldry: Norway has a 100 tonne basking shark liver quota. No assessment of the commercial value of the fishery has been made. However, as nothing was taken in 1991, 1992, 1994 or 1995 and only 5.8 tonnes in 1993, the value is not likely to be great.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the fisheries for basking sharks in United Kingdom waters. [1150]

Mr. Baldry: The Government are not aware of any current fishery for basking sharks in United Kingdom waters.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1276]

Mr. Boswell: Expenditure on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* official hospitality in each of the last five financial years is as follows:

Year	*Advertising* £	*Public relations* £	*Official hospitality* £
1991–92	441,877	4,174,427	64,852
1992–93	191,738	4,225,228	72,986
1993–94	269,821	4,379,768	79,758
1994–95	140,700	4,820,603	64,092
1995–96	144,781	5,280,010	59,646

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1259]

Mr. Boswell: As at 1 October 1996 the total number of women employed by the Department is 3,287. This represents 48.3 percent of the total number of people employed.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1293]

Mr. Boswell: Although the Ministry and its executive agencies collect statistical information on staff employed, this does not include information on the parental status of individual staff. It would not be appropriate to request this information and it would be difficult to justify its collection.

The Ministry and its agencies support 120 nursery places and holiday play schemes are run at a number of sites across the country. Some sites provide information for staff on local child care opportunities. In addition, staff may seek reimbursement of certain additional child care costs associated with a break in the normal working routine such as attendance at training courses.

Farmers' Incomes

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the changes in farmers' incomes in real terms for each month since January 1990; and if he will make a statement. [1588]

Mr. Boswell: Data on farm incomes are collected through the farm business survey on an annual basis. They are published in "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom"—1994–95 being the latest—a copy of which is held in the Library of the House.

Cattle Cull

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps have been taken to ensure that cattle producers in Wales have equal access to the authorised abattoirs in England under the 30-month cattle cull with producers from other cases; and if he will make a statement. [1753]

Mr. Baldry: ABP Shrewsbury and Duggins (Bromsgrove), the two designated abattoirs to which I assume the hon. Member is referring, are required to source a predetermined number of cattle from Wales each week. No other area of the country has this guaranteed and preferential access to the two abattoirs concerned.

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has of the numbers of cattle over 30 months awaiting slaughter; and how this estimate was arrived at. [1955]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* A sample survey by telephone was conducted in September to estimate the number of cattle on farms awaiting slaughter under the over-30-month scheme. The survey indicated that a backlog was then of the order of 400,000 animals in the United Kingdom. We have since introduced a registration system for animals awaiting slaughter which will establish more precisely the size of the backlog.

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the benefits of a full written survey of farmers to ascertain precise numbers of cattle over 30 months awaiting slaughter. [1956]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The registration system for cattle, which are awaiting slaughter as at 2 November under the over-30-month scheme, will enable priority to be given to such animals as from 4 November.

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by county the payments made under the arable payments scheme in *(a)* 1994 and *(b)* 1995. [1620]

Mr. Baldry: The table gives the total arable area payments claimed in 1994 and 1995 on land situated in each county of England. The total amounts paid will have been slightly lower because of reductions made for various reasons. However, since such reductions normally have to be calculated on the basis of the total claim, which may include land in more than one county, it is not possible to give figures for the total amounts paid on a county basis.

In preparing the answer to this question the Department became aware that a similar question tabled by the hon. Member last year had been answered incorrectly—*Official Report,* 1 November 1995, columns *330-31.* The payment rates used to calculate the reply to last year's question were those for 1995–96, but should have been those for 1994–95. The reply to the present question is based on the appropriate payment rate for each year and I should like to apologise to the hon. Member for the error in the earlier reply.

	1994 £	1995 £
Avon	3,834,873	4,912,074
Bedfordshire	16,332,344	20,133,849
Berkshire	9,436,680	12,566,987
Buckinghamshire	13,990,699	18,206,193
Cambridgeshire	49,220,159	61,047,000
Cheshire	6,238,759	7,682,995
Cleveland	3,895,782	4,915,710
Cornwall	8,913,812	11,561,419
Cumbria	3,082,104	4,388,086
Derbyshire	7,847,602	9,933,686
Devonshire	14,784,740	18,550,765
Dorset	14,158,884	17,556,992
Durham	10,048,182	13,237,863
Essex	46,408,137	60,167,194
Gloucestershire	21,198,680	26,464,918
Greater London	1,124,506	1,491,671
Greater Manchester	1,266,424	1,579,463
Hampshire	27,851,347	36,120,786
Hereford and Worcester	23,409,796	30,243,714
Hertfordshire	17,029,233	21,907,019
Humberside	48,579,248	63,134,365
Isle of Wight	2,410,416	3,173,252
Kent	29,148,718	37,661,073
Lancashire	4,101,642	5,481,222
Leicestershire	25,293,521	33,710,741
Lincolnshire	84,091,244	109,053,918
Merseyside	2,368,336	2,830,996
Norfolk	53,904,001	68,677,939
Northamptonshire	28,335,993	37,555,697
Northumberland	21,516,082	29,355,781
Nottinghamshire	22,962,444	29,072,460
Oxfordshire	29,288,191	39,563,388
Shropshire	19,214,700	24,926,532
Somerset	11,739,320	14,331,353
Staffordshire	11,406,725	14,849,617
Suffolk	45,862,431	57,980,137
Surrey	3,644,871	4,686,336
East Sussex	7,762,038	9,657,012
West Sussex	11,810,644	14,302,526
Tyne and Wear	2,176,892	2,980,858
Warwickshire	19,858,598	25,219,284
West Midlands	1,350,564	1,709,376
Wiltshire	29,138,065	36,309,115
North Yorkshire	50,605,566	64,251,530
South Yorkshire	11,150,061	14,004,739
West Yorkshire	5,934,395	7,659,284

BSE

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will request the European Commission to publish the internal documents and correspondence on BSE which have appeared in newspapers in France and Germany. [2442]

Mr. Baldry: No, this is a matter for the European Commission and I see no grounds on which it would be legitimate for me to seek to intervene.

DEFENCE

Northern Ireland

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many female officers served in the British Army in Northern Ireland in each year since 1969. [1104]

Mr. Soames: The number of female officers who served in Northern Ireland in each year since 1974 is as follows:

Year	Number of female officers
1975	22
1976	25
1977	21
1978	34
1979	31
1980	27
1981	32
1982	22
1983	24
1984	27
1985	28
1986	34
1987	54
1988	54
1989	59
1990	57
1991	62
1992	53
1993	79
1994	64
1995	57
1996	43

Figures for 1969–74 are not available and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary for State for Defence how many Army personnel have been stationed in Northern Ireland in each year since 1969. [1106]

Mr. Soames: The number of Army personnel stationed in Northern Ireland in each year since 1975 is as follows:

Year	Number of Army personnel
1975	22,075
1976	22,446
1977	21,241
1978	21,011
1979	20,128
1980	19,116
1981	18,277
1982	17,776
1983	15,588
1984	15,802
1985	15,562
1986	17,419
1987	17,084
1988	16,741
1989	17,199
1990	16,894
1991	17,445
1992	17,996
1993	17,732
1994	17,118
1995	15,954
1996	15,490

Figures given are as of 1 April in the year concerned. They include members of Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment home service component but do not include Navy, Air Force or Territorial Army personnel. Complete figures for 1969 to 1974 are not available.

Tornado Aircraft

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all faults reported for the last two years to Tornado aircraft, indicating in each case the length of waiting time for repairs. [1153]

Mr. Soames: As with any other of the world's large military aircraft fleets, the number of faults found on Tornado aircraft runs into thousands each month, the vast majority of them trivial. The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Military Exercises (Western Isles)

Mr. Macdonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if there was military exercise activity by (i) United Kingdom forces and (ii) non-United Kingdom forces in the vicinity of the Western Isles on the evening of Saturday 26 October. [1343]

Mr. Soames: My Department is not aware of any such activity off the Western Isles on the evening in question.

Low Flying

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many complaints his Department received about military low flying in *(a)* 1993–94 and *(b)* 1994–95. [1744]

Mr. Soames: My Department received 5,520 complaints and inquiries about military low flying between April 1993 and March 1994 and 6,077 between April 1994 and March 1995.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many claims for compensation were submitted to his Department as a result of damage caused by military low flying in each year from 1990 to 1995; and if he will make a statement. [1743]

Mr. Soames: The number of compensation claims received by my Department in each year from 1990 to 1995 as a result of military low flying was:

1990: 568
1991: 383
1992: 431
1993: 400
1994: 412
1995: 366

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many complaints of excessive military low flying his Department received from people resident in Wales in 1995–96; and if he will make a statement. [1745]

Mr. Soames: Records are not maintained in such a way as to identify such complaints separately and details could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1254]

Mr. Arbuthnot: At 1 July 1996 there were 33,976 permanent women civil servants employed by my Department and its agencies, representing some 31 per cent. of the total number of permanent civil servants in MOD.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers, and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1287]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The information is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Plutonium Warheads

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to conduct an environmental impact assessment of the process by which gallium and indium are removed from plutonium warhead pits withdrawn from service. [1831]

Mr. Soames: None.

Manchuria 1946 (Public Records)

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence file WO 208/3736, reports on Russian military activities in Manchuria (1946), will be made available to the Public Record Office. [2227]

Mr. Soames: Arrangements are being made to review WO 208/4736 to see whether release into the public domain is now possible. I will write to the hon. Member on completion of the review process.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1270]

Mr. Soames: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *925*.

PRIME MINISTER

Prince's Trust

Mr. Allen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the Departments which have an interest in the Prince's Trust, indicating in each case the nature of that interest. [1502]

The Prime Minister: At the relaunch of Prince's Trust volunteers on 4 June, I personally pledged Government support to the Prince's Trust's aim of recruiting 25,000 young volunteers per year by the year 2000. I have asked the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to promote the scheme across the civil service.

Government Departments work in partnership with the Prince's Trust to help meet the many and varied needs of disadvantaged young people. The following Government Departments work with the Prince's Trust in a variety of ways, from providing secondees to giving advice on benefits policy:

Department for Education and Employment;
Welsh Office;
Scottish Office;

Northern Ireland Office;

Department of Trade and Industry;

Home Office;

Inland Revenue;

Department of National Heritage;

Department of the Environment;

Department of Health;

Department of Social Security;

Customs and Excise;

Cabinet Office;

Department of Transport;

Foreign and Commonwealth Office;

Ministry of Defence;

Employment Service;

Benefits Agency.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1252]

Mr. Howard: The Home Office and its agencies employ a total of 14,049 women which represents 27 per cent. of the total work force of 52,098 permanent staff. However, if the Prison Service is excluded, 5,956 women, representing 51 per cent. of the total work force, are employed.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1285]

Mr. Howard: Although the Home Office collects statistical information on staff employed in the Department and its agencies, information is not collected on the parental status of individual staff because it is not considered appropriate to do so. Child care assistance is provided in a variety of forms. The Department makes available a number of subsidised nursery and holiday play scheme places, provides advice on out-of-school care and pays additional child care expenses incurred where the normal working routine is broken.

Over a 12-month period to the end of September 1996, 122 women and 58 men have used nursery places and 89 women and 14 men have used play scheme places. Over the same period, excluding the Prison Service, 58 women and two men have received payments in respect of additional child care expenses.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1267]

Mr. Howard: The information requested about advertising and official hospitality is provided in the following table. The Home Office does not spend money on public relations. The communication directorate is responsible for providing information about my Department's policies and activities to the public and the media; providing information and advice to the public about their rights and obligations, and the protection of themselves and their property, for example; advice on fire safety and crime prevention, and of the need to register to vote. It achieves this through a wide range of communications means including news releases; answering the media's and the public inquiries; information campaigns; briefings; exhibitions; publications; and electronic publishing.

Financial Years	*Advertising* £	*Official hospitality* £
1991–92	7,275,940	28,094
1992–93	7,334,635	55,651
1993–94	9,090,222	49,017
1994–95	10,912,008	27,468
1995–96	7,609,227	38,604

Counter-terrorist Legislation

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received Lord Lloyd's report on counter-terrorist legislation; and what is his timetable for its publication. [1985]

Mr. Howard: The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I published Lord Lloyd's report on 31 October. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

Public Houses

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to require the names of public houses to be included within the conditions of the licence issued by the appropriate authorities for the sale and consumption on the premises of alcoholic beverages. [1885]

Mr. Kirkhope: No. Public house names are entirely a matter for the owners and licensees.

Mr. Anthony Okere

Mr. Parry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the present situation relating to the proposed repatriation of Mr. Anthony Okere. [2142]

Mr. Kirkhope: If the hon. Member will provide me with more information, I will write to him.

Detainees (Birmingham Prison)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of those people detained in Birmingham prison under Immigration Act powers were deported during the months of *(a)* July, *(b)* August, and *(c)* September; and what were the nationalities of those deported. [1041]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 4 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking, how many of those people detained in Birmingham Prison under Immigration Act powers were deported during the months of (a) July, (b) August, and (c) September; and what were the nationalities of those reported.

Provisional information shows that 48 people were discharged from Birmingham prison to the Immigration Service for removal under Immigration Act powers during July, August and September. A breakdown by nationality is given in the attached table.

Discharges from Birmingham prison to the Immigration Service for removal under Immigration Act powers in July, August and September 1996 by nationality[1]

Nationality	*Number*
July	
Algeria	2
India	16
Jamaica	2
Others[2]	1
Total	21
August	
Hong Kong	2
India	8
Jamaica	2
Others[2]	3
Total	15
September	
India	4
Morocco	2
Others[2]	6
Total	12

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] Nationalities with only one prisoner are included in "Other".

PC Andrew Whitfield (Trials)

Mrs. Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to the public funds of *(a)* PC Andrew Whitfield's suspension from 12 February 1995 to his acquittal, *(b)* the trial of PC Andrew Whitfield in February, *(c)* the trial of PC Andrew Whitfield in October and *(d)* the work of the Crown Prosecution Service relating to those trials. [1945]

Mr. Maclean: This information is not held centrally.

Gun Clubs

Mr. Marlow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the numbers of *(a)* gun clubs and *(b)* members of gun clubs in (i) Germany, (ii) France, (iii) Italy and (iv) the United Kingdom; and what the security requirements for gun clubs and their members are in each country. [1666]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The total number of shooting clubs approved by the Secretary of State in the United Kingdom is 2,067. The Government have no information on the number of members of approved clubs. Approved clubs must abide by published criteria which require them to store firearms and ammunition securely and to ensure that their members are of good character.

We have no information about gun clubs in Germany, France or Italy.

Asylum Seekers

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many women were detained in Scottish prisons under the powers contained within the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 during 1994 and 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those detained; [1527]

(2) how many people detained in Scottish prisons under the powers contained within the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 were deported during 1994 and 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those deported; [1524]

(3) how many women were deported from Scottish prisons under the powers contained within the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 during 1994 and 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those deported; [1528]

(4) how many people in Scotland who were convicted of a criminal offence, punishable by a prison sentence, were also ordered to be deported as part of their sentence in 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995 and from 1 January of this year to date; and what were the nationalities and genders of those deported; [1522]

(5) how many people were detained in Scottish prisons under the powers contained within the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 during 1994 and 1995 and from 1 January this year to date; and what were the nationalities of those detained. [1523]

Mr. Kirkhope *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The information requested is not available.

Puppy Farms

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many companies and individuals have been prosecuted for operating unlicensed puppy farms since the Breeding of Dogs Act 1991 came into force; and if he will list them and the local authority area in which they are situated; [1684]

(2) how many puppy farms are currently licensed in each local authority area in Wales; [1685]

(3) how many prosecutions have been made against licensed operators of puppy farms for breaches of the licensing regulations relating to puppy farms in the Breeding of Dogs Act 1991. [1686]

Mr. Sackville *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Information on the number of licensed dog breeding establishments in each local authority area in Wales is not available centrally.

Information on prosecutions under the Breeding of Dogs Acts 1973 and 1991 is not collected in the form requested. Details of prosecutions in England and Wales for offences under the Breeding of Dogs Act 1973, as amended, are available as follows:

Number of prosecutions and convictions for offences under the Breeding of Dogs Act 1973, as amended by the Breeding of Dogs Act 1991, by type of defendant 1980–95

Year	*Prosecutions*
1980	2
1981	6
1982	0
1983	2
1984	1
1985	1
1986	5
1987	7
1988	1
1989	3
1990	11
1991	3
1992	23
1993	'5
1994	2
1995 (provisional)	1

Prosecutions are against persons unless stated otherwise.' Includes two companies.

Child Sexual Abuse (Extradition)

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been extradited for trial on charges of child sexual abuse; and to which countries. [1362]

Mr. Kirkhope: The figures for extradition to stand trial on charges of child sexual abuse from England, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1986 are:

To the United States

1986: 1

1987: 1

1993: 1

1996: 1

To Germany

1996: 1

To Holland

1993: 1.

The Home Office has three outstanding requests—two from the United States and one from Belgium—for extradition to stand trial on charges of child sexual abuse.

Violent Videos

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set up a review into the effectiveness of the enforcement of the current law on the availability of violent videos to children. [1208]

Mr. Sackville: The Video Recordings Act 1984 makes it a criminal offence to supply an unclassified video, subject to certain limited exemptions, or to supply a video in breach of the classification certificate issued by the British Board of Film Classification—BBFC.

The operation of the Act is kept under careful review. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 increased the maximum penalties for supplying unclassified videos—to two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine—and for supplying a video in breach of its classification—to six months in prison and/or a £5,000 fines. The 1994 Act also increased the powers of trading standards officers in investigating video offences, and amended the Video Recordings Act 1984 to lay down statutory classification criteria which the BBFC must take into account.

Prisons

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those prisons and detention centres *(a)* built, and *(b)* managed under the private sector. [54]

Miss Widdecombe: The management of four prisons is contracted out to the private sector: they are Blakenhurst, Buckley Hall, Doncaster and Wolds. The private sector has not completed building any new prisons. It is currently building two prisons under the design, construct, manage and finance—DCMF—initiative at Fazakerley and at Bridgend. The third DCMF contract, for Lowdham Grange prison, is expected to be signed imminently.

The management of three immigration detention centres is contracted out to the private sector: they are Campsfield house, Harmondsworth and a smaller, temporary facility at Gatwick airport. The fourth immigration centre, Tinsley house, was constructed by and is managed by the private sector.

Ethnic Minorities Education

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance has been issued to local authorities regarding bids for section 11 grants after March 1997. [149]

Mr. Kirkhope: We have under active consideration the position regarding further section 11 funding from next April onwards. Although we are not yet in a position to make an announcement, I expect to be able to do so shortly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Nuclear Power Stations

Mrs. Beckett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the undiscounted value of post-operational advanced gas-cooled reactor liabilities for each privatised nuclear station which are not covered by the segregated fund; and what are the arrangements for BE to meet these liabilities. [233]

Mr. Lang: The value of British Energy's liabilities as at 31 March 1996 are listed on page 85 and the projected pattern of payments are listed on page 100 of the prospectus for the sale of British Energy, copies of which are in the Library of the House. The segregated fund

covers all of stages 1 to 3 of decommissioning, excluding defuelling, at all of British Energy's station sites. British Energy will meet those liabilities not covered by the segregated fund as part of its day-to-day operating costs.

Radiocommunications Agency

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) when the final phase of building work for staff was completed in New Kings Beem house; what is the estimated cost of the work undertaken; and if he will make a statement; [1540]

(2) when the Radiocommunications Agency will be relocated to South Oxey from New Kings Beem house; and what are the proposed costs involved in relocating; [1541]

(3) if the structural survey has been completed on South Quay 3; if he will place a copy of the document in the Library; and if he will make a statement; [1542]

(4) what are the consequences to staff and business customers of the proposed reorganisation of the Radiocommunications Agency; and if he will make a statement; [1544]

(5) if adequate facilities are provided for the Radiocommunications Agency trade union side in accordance with his departmental facilities agreement. [1545]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* These are day-to-day operational matters for the Radiocommunications Agency and I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mr. Simon Hughes, dated 4 November 1996:

The Minister for Science and Technology has asked me to write to you in response to your Parliamentary Question, concerning the reorganisation in progress within my Agency.

The purpose of the planned re-organisation within the Radiocommunications Agency is to:

(i) enhance customer focus and service;

(ii) give greater responsibility to managers within a 'flatter' organisation;

(iii) ensure the Agency's limited resources are targeted to the maximum effect in facilitating a particularly dynamic area of the UK economy.

The staff of the Agency are fully involved in a consultative process ensuring the detail of the planning and implementation of the re-organisation are carried through to the best effect. The re-organisation will *both* improve the Agency's already good customer service and enhance the quality of work and job satisfaction for staff.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mr. Simon Hughes, dated 4 November 1996:

Question: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, if adequate facilities are provided for the Radiocommunications Agency trade union side in accordance with his departmental facilities agreement.

I have been asked to answer the question you raised on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency.

The Radiocommunications Agency does abide by the terms of the departmental facilities agreement.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mr. Simon Hughes, dated 4 November 1996:

I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency of the DTI to your recent questions relating to New King's Beam House (NKBH) and South Quay Three (SQ3).

Practical Completion for the work carried out on NKBH was achieved on 5 August 1996. The cost of the work inclusive of professional fees was £2.5 million.

I understand that the Landlord has completed the structural survey on SQ3 and will in due course be forwarding a copy of the report to the Agency. As it is the Landlord's document, the Agency will not be placing a copy in the library.

If the repairs are carried out on schedule, the Agency should relocate back to SQ3 in 1999. Under the terms of the lease, the Landlord warrants the performance of the building and therefore his insurance will bear the repair costs. RA's relocation costs for the return to SQ3 should be limited to the cost of furniture removal. It is too early to accurately estimate these costs.

Electro-magnetic Radiation

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what research he has *(a)* commissioned or *(b)* evaluated on the health risks associated with electro-magnetic radiation being emitted from household appliances; and if he will make a statement; [1596]

(2) what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the safety levels for electro-magnetic radiation emitted from household appliances such as *(a)* vacuum cleaners, *(b)* irons, *(c)* fridges and *(d)* microwaves; and if he will make a statement. [2044]

Mr. Ian Taylor: My Department has not commissioned or evaluated research into the health risks associated with electro-magnetic radiation from household appliances, nor have we received representations concerning safety other than in relation to microwave ovens.

The Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 1994 (SI1994/3260) lay down requirements for the safety of household electrical appliances, implementing the low voltage directive (73/23/EEC), and include a requirement that radiation which would cause a danger must not be produced. The European electrotechnical standards body, CENELEC, has produced standards controlling radiation from appliances such as microwave ovens and sunbeds but has not found it necessary to specify requirements for other appliances.

Asbestos

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the laboratories that are accredited by the national measurement accreditation service for the purposes of asbestos sampling. [1439]

Mr. Ian Taylor: Responsibility for the accreditation of laboratories was transferred in 1995 from DTI to the United Kingdom Accreditation Service—UKAS—an independent body which operates under a memorandum of understanding with the Government. I am informed by UKAS that over 30 laboratories are currently accredited for asbestos sampling. I have written to the hon. Member enclosing the addresses and other details concerning these laboratories.

Business Breakfast Tours

Mr. Milburn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the costs of the business breakfast tours to be undertaken by Ministers. [1957]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The costs will depend on the number and size of the events.

Business Link

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many businesses are currently being advised by *(a)* Business Link London South and *(b)* Business Link London Central in (i) central London and (ii) the rest of London. [2349]

Mr. Page: Business links are private sector partnerships, not Government bodies. National statistics on business using business link are available in the quarterly "Report on Business Link and Business Link Regional Supply Network Management Information" and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House. Local statistics are a matter for local business link partnerships and I will ensure that the respective chief executives of Business Link London South and Business Link London Central are aware of the hon. Member's question.

Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment his Department has made of the number of small firms which are aware of the loan guarantee scheme. [1233]

Mr. Page: The Department does not carry out specific research into how many businesses may be aware of the loan guarantee scheme.

Information about the scheme is readily available from all scheme lenders, a wide variety of business support services such as business links, training and enterprise councils, local enterprise companies, enterprise agencies, business shops in Scotland, Business Connect in Wales, Government offices, chambers of commerce, business exhibitions, and intermediaries such as accountancy practices.

Post Offices

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many post offices have *(a)* closed and *(b)* lost Crown status since April 1992. [1229]

Mr. Page: I understand from the Post Office that nationally the number of post offices which closed—net of reopenings—between 1 April 1992 and 30 September 1996 is 855. During the same period, 376 Crown post offices were converted to agency status.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much her Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1272]

Mr. Sproat: The available information requested is given in the following table:

	[1]*1992–93* £	[1]*1993–94* £	[1]*1994–95* £	[1]*1995–96* £	[2]*1996–97* £
Advertising	Nil	Nil	2,009	Nil	20,660
Public relations	Nil	72,850	Nil	5,352	Nil
Official hospitality	22,037	18,277	14,967	25,563	27,840

[1] Actual.
[2] Spend to date.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Torture

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Kenyan Government regarding ratification of the UN convention against torture. [1930]

Dr. Liam Fox: During her visit to Kenya in August, my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Chalker recommended to the Government of Kenya at a senior level that they should ratify this convention.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Israel (EU Aid)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will itemise every form of economic aid and economic and trade preference provided to Israel by the European Union, in each case, where possible, stating the financial value of such aid or assistance. [72]

Mr. David Davis *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* Given Israel's level of development, it does not qualify for bilateral grant aid or structural adjustment assistance. It is eligible for non-subsidised European investment bank loans, EC regional aid and investment support.

In the past seven years the EIB has made seven loans to Israel totalling 165 million ecu.

Israel benefits from EC grant aid for regional co-operation, through initiatives under the new Euro-Mediterranean partnership launched at the Barcelona conference—details can be found in the Commission leaflet which I have placed in the Libraries of the House. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership is allocated 4.685 billion ecu in grants for the period 1995 to 1999 through middle east development and regulation.

Over the first nine months of 1966, a total of 30 million ecu was committed in grants to the 12 Mediterranean partner countries, Israel included, for regional programmes.

Bosnia

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sums from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe elections fund for the Bosnian elections were paid to the Serbian Unity party. [1191]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The Serbian Unity party received DM300,104 for its election expenses. Funds for distribution among all registered political parties and independent candidates were provided by some Governments, but not the United Kingdom, and did not come out of regular OSCE funds or contributions.

New York Assembly Bill

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made after 1 April to the *(a)* New York Assembly and *(b)* other bodies on the Irish Famine as Genocide Education Bill; for what reasons his Department assessed the Bill was unlikely to pass into law; and what statements were issued by the consulate-general on the matter of Governor Pataki's signing ceremony and the invitations thereto in New York. [1158]

Mr. Rifkind: Following the answer that I gave to the hon. Member on 1 April, *Official Report*, column *9*, British officials in New York provided key legislators and their staffs with objective accounts of the history of the famine. They registered the Government's strong concern at the parallel which the New York State Assembly Bill drew between the holocaust and the Irish famine. I have described the circumstances of the passage into law of this legislation in correspondence with the hon. Member.

The embassy in Washington and the New York consulate-general made plain our concern at the passage of the Bill into law, and at Governor Pataki's remarks at the signing ceremony on 8 October. The ambassador, Sir John Kerr, wrote to the governor emphasising the seriousness with which the Government regarded the issue, and explained that, unlike the holocaust, the Irish famine was not deliberate, not premeditated, not man-made and certainly not genocide.

Ireland

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made this year to the Government of the Irish Republic about the protection and security of British citizens resident in border areas. [1159]

Mr. Rifkind: No British national resident in the border areas of the Irish Republic has contacted the embassy in Dublin or this Department this year with concerns about their protection and security. Accordingly the British Government have made no representations on this subject to the Irish Government. If such concerns were expressed, the embassy in Dublin and this Department stand ready to offer appropriate help or advice.

Anglo-Irish Secretariat

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the dates and topics of presentations made by Foreign Office staff to the Anglo-Irish Secretariat since 1 January 1995. [1160]

Mr. Rifkind: None.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1266]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *920*.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1284]

Mr. Hanley: This Department does not collect information on the parental status of individual staff.

The numbers of staff who have used FCO subsidised child care schemes from October 1995 to October 1996 are:

	Women	*Men*
Nurseries in London and Hanslope park (age 3 months—5 years)	17	8
Holiday playschemes in London and East Kilbride (age 5–12 years)	27	8

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1251]

Mr. Hanley: The number of women currently employed by this Department is 2,524. This represents over a third of the total staff—37 per cent.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what studies his Department has undertaken on the European convention on human rights; and if he will make a statement on the implications of writing the convention into United Kingdom law. [1163]

Mr. Howard: I have been asked to reply.

The operation of the European convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms is subject to regular review within Government. Following one such review, my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Sir N. Bonsor) announced proposals on 13 December 1995 for securing improvements in the convention's operation, which are presently under consideration in the Council of Europe. A paper setting out these proposals is available in the Library.

The implications of incorporating the convention into United Kingdom law have been set out on a number of occasions by the Government, most recently by my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and my noble Friend Baroness Blatch during debate in the other place on 3 July 1996 at columns 1451–52 and 1567–68.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Nurseries and Play Schemes

Mr. Allen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list, by Department, the *(a)* nurseries and *(b)* play schemes for children of civil servants. [1194]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 14 October 1996, *Official Report*, columns *662–63*.

Information on the number of civil service nurseries and play schemes, by Department, is not held centrally.

Many civil service nurseries and play schemes currently in operation are run as interdepartmental or local partnerships, often involving other non-civil service employers such as local authorities and businesses.

Recruitment (Age Policy)

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster which Government Departments have policy statements committing them to the recruitment, training and promotion of staff irrespective of age. [1427]

Mr. Freeman: From 1 April 1996, the civil service management code prohibited unfair discrimination on the basis of age. It is the responsibility of Departments and agencies to incorporate this into their own equal opportunities policies. Information on the number of Departments and agencies that have done so is not held centrally.

Staff (Age Profile)

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will produce an analysis of the age profile of all staff employed in all Government Departments for the year 1995–96, together with equivalent figures for 1985–86. [1426]

Mr. Willetts: The information requested was published on 1 November in Figure 11 of "Civil Service Statistics 1996," a copy of which is in the Library.

Deregulation Task Force

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the company directorships of each member of the deregulation task force. [1230]

Mr. Freeman: I am informed by those concerned that the company directorships currently held by members of the deregulation task force are as follows:

The right hon. Francis Maude

Non-executive Director, Asda Group plc;

Non-executive Director, Benfield Reinsurance Co Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Sportfact Ltd.;

Henry Angest

Executive Director, Secure Trust Group plc;

Executive Director, Secure Trust Bank plc;

Executive Director, Flowidea Ltd.;

Executive Director, Arbuthnot Fund Managers Ltd.;

Executive Director, Arbuthnot Commercial Finance Ltd.;

Executive Director, Arbuthnot Latham and Co Ltd.;

Executive Director, Arbuthnot Properties Ltd.;

Executive Director, Arbuthnot Investments Ltd.;

Executive Director, Flowtrade Ltd.;

Maurice Denyer

Director Secretary of Fowler Bros Ltd.;

Michael Fallon

Executive Director, Just Learning Ltd.;

Executive Director, Metermaster Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Quality Care Homes plc.

Mike Fisher

Non-executive Director, Whale Tankers Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Aims of Industry Ltd.;

Teresa Graham

None.

Archie Norman

Executive Director, Asda Group plc;

Executive Director, Asda Stores Ltd. (which is wholly owned by Asda Group plc);

Executive Director, Gazeley Holdings Ltd. (wholly owned by Asda Group plc);

Non-executive Director, Railtrack Group plc.

Tony Rammelt

Executive Director, Regis Europe Limited;

Executive Director, Regis South Africa (Proprietary) Limited;

Executive Director, Regis Suisse Inc;

Executive Director, Essanelle Ltd.;

Executive Director, Steiner Salons Ltd.;

Executive Director, Steiner Hairdressing Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, BAPE Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Barbon Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Bollihope Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Institute of Trichologist Inc;

Non-executive Director, Trichologists Educational and Hospital Trust.

Roger Singleton

None.

Thomas Swan

Executive Director, Thomas Swan and Co Ltd.;

Executive Chairman, Screen Technology Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Casa Chemicals Ltd.;

Non-executive Director, Parallel Photonic Systems Ltd.;

Dan Wright

None.

Peter Wyman

None.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what steps he has taken to avoid conflicts of interest involving members of his deregulation task force. [1231]

Mr. Freeman: The deregulation task force is an independent advisory body, and it is for it to decide which issues it wishes to address in its reports. All recommendations that it makes to the Government are considered entirely on their merits, and in the light of the views of others. In common with other advisory non-departmental public and advisory bodies, members are appointed for the expertise they can provide.

The company interests of members of the deregulation task force, as with members of all non-departmental public bodies, are a matter of public record.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1274]

Mr. Willetts: Expenditure on public relations cannot be separated from that recorded for publicity. Expenditure on advertising was not recorded separately from publicity before 1993–94. Expenditure recorded by the Cabinet Office, excluding the Prime Minister's Office, and the Office of Public Service on external advertising and publicity, and official hospitality in each of the last five financial years for which there are records is shown in the table.

	Advertising £	*Publicity* £	*Official hospitality* £		
			Cabinet Office/OPS	*OPS[1] Agencies*	*Central Office of Information*
1995–96	114,410	301,440	27,575	13,630	15,235
1994–95	116,427	369,495	17,550	16,420	9,200
1993–94	7,442	313,480	27,700	8,030	5,900
1992–93	[2]—	292,380	25,000	1,255	4,600
1991–92	[2]—	637,840	26,600	245	4,400

[1] Coverage changes over the period.
[2] Included in Publicity.

In addition, £234,100 was borne by the OPS in 1991–92 on official hospitality in respect of the 1991 economic summit.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1291]

Mr. Willetts: Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such data.

The number and proportion of staff receiving assistance in the Departments and agencies for which my right hon. Friend is responsible are as follows:

	Total staff	*Number assisted*	*Per cent.*
Cab/OPS	1,139	28	2.46
CCTA	261	10	2.61
CSC	258	15	5.8
SAFE	1,049	nil	—
TBA	123	nil	—
PACE	253	1	0.4
COI	423	14	3.3

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1257]

Mr. Willetts: There are 558 women employed within the central of the Cabinet Office and Office of Public Services which represents 46.4 per cent. of the work force. There are a total of 1,013 women within the whole of the Cabinet Office and Office of Public Service and agencies which represents 32.4 per cent. of the work force. The divergence is attributable to the Security and Facilities Executive where the majority of employees are male security guards.

ENVIRONMENT

Self-employed People (Accidents)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the number of non-fatal recorded accidents to self-employed people in *(a)* the construction industry, *(b)* all manufacturing industry and *(c)* service industries; and if he will list the number of over three-day injuries reported by self-employed people in categories *(a)* to *(c)*. [657]

Sir Paul Beresford: The number and incidence rate of non-fatal injuries to self-employed people in the construction, manufacturing and service industries, as reported to health and safety enforcing authorities, were as follows:

Major injuries

Year	*Numbers*			*Rates per 100,000*		
	Construction	*Manufacturing*	*Services*	*Construction*	*Manufacturing*	*Services*
1986–87	443	89	80	91.0	42.6	4.9
1987–88	561	100	105	103.5	40.7	5.9
1988–89	753	134	124	127.0	52.1	6.8
1989–90	927	132	138	128.4	47.1	7.1
1990–91	931	129	119	129.7	47.6	6.0
1991–92	729	119	126	89.4	42.8	6.4

Major injuries

Year	Numbers			Rates per 100,000		
	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Construction	Manufacturing	Services
1992–93	684	121	139	93.7	45.0	7.4
1993–94	768	105	202	102.5	39.3	10.7
1994–95	755	137	223	97.2	55.0	11.4
1995–96[1]	671	134	165	85.3	55.1	8.4
Total	7,222	1,200	1,421			

[1] Provisional.

Over three-day injuries

Year	Numbers			Rates per 100,000		
	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Construction	Manufacturing	Services
1986–87	704	99	104	144.6	47.4	6.4
1987–88	763	122	156	140.8	45.5	8.8
1988–89	969	128	245	163.4	49.8	13.4
1989–90	1,310	148	251	181.4	52.9	13.0
1990–91	1,554	146	226	216.4	53.9	11.4
1991–92	1,231	140	232	151.0	50.4	11.8
1992–93	1,291	164	474	176.8	61.0	25.4
1993–94	1,576	185	573	210.4	69.3	30.3
1994–95	1,532	218	846	197.2	87.6	43.1
1995–96[1]	1,388	204	496	176.4	84.0	25.3
Total	12,318	1,554	3,603			

[1] Provisional.

Total non-fatal injuries

Year	Numbers			Rates per 100,000		
	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Construction	Manufacturing	Services
1986–87	1,147	188	184	235.6	90.0	11.3
1987–88	1,324	222	261	244.3	86.2	14.7
1988–89	1,722	262	369	290.4	101.9	20.2
1989–90	2,237	280	389	309.8	100.0	20.1
1990–91	2,485	275	345	346.1	101.5	17.4
1991–92	1,960	259	358	240.4	93.2	18.2
1992–93	1,975	285	613	270.5	106.0	32.8
1993–94	2,344	290	775	312.9	108.6	41.0
1994–95	2,287	355	1,069	294.4	142.6	54.5
1995–96[1]	2,059	338	661	261.7	139.1	33.7
Total	19,540	2,754	5,024			

[1] Provisional.

Asbestos

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many companies have introduced an asbestos control programme, following a visit from a Health and Safety Executive field inspector, during the last year for which figures are available. [1440]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information is not available in the form requested.

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the public consultation on a discussion document which outlined possible adjustments to the asbestos licensing regime will be published; and if he will place submissions to the consultation in the Library. [1442]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Health and Safety Commission's discussion document on the future of the lead and asbestos regulations was published in May, and a copy placed in the Library. In accordance with its usual practice and as explained on the front cover of the discussion document, the Commission will be making responses to the document, except where consultees asked that their response should not be so disclosed, available for public scrutiny at the Health and Safety Executive's information centres in London, Bootle and Sheffield. A list of responses received has been placed in the Library of the House: copies of individual responses may be obtained through the Library.

Hampshire County Council (Court Costs)

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the reasons for refusing Hampshire county council a supplementary credit approval to cover the costs incurred in the case of Digital *v.* Hampshire Fire and Rescue Services. [1938]

Sir Paul Beresford: Because of the public expenditure implications, it is our firm policy not to issue supplementary credit approvals except for purposes falling within certain specified, limited categories. Outside those categories, a SCA would be issued only in the most exceptional circumstances. After very carefully considering all the information provided by Hampshire county council, we concluded there was insufficient justification for the issue of a SCA in this case.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1262]

Sir Paul Beresford: The figures for *(a)* central advertising expenditure, and *(c)* official hospitality by my Department in each of the financial years requested are detailed.

	Advertising £	*Official hospitality* £
1991–92	680,000	56,000
1992–93	6,869,000	92,000
1993–94	5,149,000	68,000
1994–95	4,470,000	76,000
1995–96	2,800,000	73,000

The figures *exclude* recruitment advertising but *include* VAT, advertising agency commission and all levies as paid.
On *(b)*, my Department does not employ public relations consultants.

All publicity and information activities are carried out by members of the Government Information Service whose salaries are paid as part of departmental annual running costs.

Supplementary Credit Approval

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the revised bids for supplementary credit approval cover in 1996–97 recently submitted by those authorities that have been or are to be reorganised on 1 April 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998; and if he will state the proportion of those bids that have been granted supplementary credit approval cover. [1545]

Sir Paul Beresford: The amounts are as follows:

	Bid	*Allocation*	*Allocation as percentage of bid*
1995 reorganisation			
Isle of Wight Council	792	500	63
1996 reorganisations			
Hartlepool Borough Council	3,661	2,150	59
Redcar and Cleveland Council	4,344	3,400	78
Middlesbrough Borough Council	3,560	2,750	77
Stockton on Tees Borough Council	8,471	3,250	38
Bristol City Council	7,834	3,500	45
North Somerset Council	4,929	3,000	61
Bath and North East Somerset Council	4,725	4,000	85
South Gloucestershire	4,856	3,500	72
Kingston upon Hull Council	4,473	3,000	67
East Riding Yorkshire Council	11,720	7,000	60
North Lincolnshire Council	3,746	3,500	93
North East Lincolnshire Council	5,355	4,000	75
North Yorkshire County Council	409	400	98
Selby District Council	93	90	97
York District Council	3,202	3,200	100
1997 reorganisations			
Bedfordshire County Council	7,987	1,800	23
Luton Borough Council	8,864	3,500	39
Milton Keynes Borough Council	4,089	2,800	68
Derbyshire County Council	3,241	1,900	59
Derby City Council	4,884	2,700	55
Dorset County Council	2,215	450	20
Bournemouth Borough Council	3,897	2,850	73
Poole Borough Council	3,340	2,800	84
Durham County Council	965	500	52
Darlington Borough Council	5,374	3,850	72
East Sussex County Council	2,635	1,750	66
Brighton Borough Council	1,009	680	67
Hove Borough Council	1,440	950	66
Brighton and Hove Council	5,741	2,250	39
Hampshire County Council	4,967	2,100	42
Portsmouth City Council	6,067	2,850	47
Southampton City Council	8,208	2,950	36
Leicestershire County Council	2,118	1,500	71
Leicester City Council	4,444	3,100	70
Rutland District Council	751	750	100
Staffordshire County Council	4,014	1,800	45
Stoke on Trent City Council	6,050	2,800	46
Wiltshire County Council	1,905	1,300	68
Thamesdown Borough Council	5,526	2,800	51
1998 reorganisations			
Berkshire County Council	0	0	
Bracknell Forest Borough Council	50	0	
Newbury District Council	0	0	
Reading Borough Council	240	0	
Slough Borough Council	910	0	
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	0	0	
Wokingham District Council	175	0	
Hereford and Worcester County Council	940	0	
Hereford City Council	25	0	
Malvern Hills District Council	130	0	
South Herefordshire District Council	0	0	
Devon County Council	150	0	
Plymouth City Council	373	0	
Torbay Borough Council	820	0	
Southend on Sea Borough Council	487	0	
Thurrock Borough Council	576	0	
Nottinghamshire County Council	616	0	
Nottingham City Council	845	0	
Cheshire County Council	572	0	
Halton Borough Council	220	0	
Warrington Borough Council	541	0	
Shropshire County Council	358	0	
The Wrekin District Council	893	0	
Kent County Council	649	0	
Gillingham Borough Council	132	0	
Rochester City Council	0	0	
Cambridgeshire County Council	135	0	
Peterborough City Council	676	0	
Lancashire County Council	190	0	
Blackburn Borough Council	515	0	
Blackpool Borough Council	342	0	

Ryedale and Leominster District Councils, and Essex County Council did not submit bids.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1279]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department and its executive agencies do not keep records of the number of staff who are parents but child care assistance is available to staff in the form of workplace nursery and holiday play scheme places. In the last 12 months, 40 female staff and 20 male staff were assisted with a nursery place and 72 female staff and 39 male staff with a play scheme place.

In addition, staff are entitled to the reimbursement of any additional child care costs incurred when the normal working routine is broken, for example, to attend a training course. Comprehensive records of the number of claims are not held centrally.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1245]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department and its executive agencies, the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, the Planning Inspectorate and the Building Research Establishment currently employ 1,936 women. This represents 42 per cent. of the total employees.

SSSIs (Hampshire)

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the sites of special scientific interest which have been destroyed beyond repair in Hampshire in each of the last five years. [1970]

Mr. Clappison: None.

Public Houses

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many recent representations he has received from *(a)* right hon. and hon. Members and *(b)* others about changes in the names of public houses. [1883]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department received seven letters on this subject from hon. Members or their constituents.

Mr. Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make it his policy to bring forward legislation to include within planning law the names of public houses; and if he will make a statement. [1884]

Sir Paul Beresford: I believe that it would introduce unnecessary and excessive regulation to introduce planning controls over the naming or renaming of public houses. Owners of licensed premises should retain their right to trade under the name of their choice, just as their customers have a freedom to drink where they choose.

However, members of the public do make their views known and this can have a considerable influence on owners' decisions, generally against change.

Rents (Hampshire)

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the average rent paid by *(a)* council tenants and *(b)* housing association trust tenants in (i) Southampton and (ii) Hampshire in each of the last five years. [1967]

Mr. Clappison: Average weekly rents for council and housing association tenants in Southampton and Hampshire are set out as follows:

	Council tenants[1]		*Housing association tenants*[2]	
	Southampton £	*Hampshire* £	*Southampton* £	*Hampshire* £
1991	28.17	30.66	n/a	n/a
1992	31.50	33.89	34.49	31.95
1993	33.97	37.31	37.30	37.42
1994	37.08	40.62	43.61	43.26
1995	39.46	42.93	44.50	46.72

Notes:
[1] At 1 April.
[2] At 31 March.
The following local authorities transferred their stock to housing associations in the period: Havant (31 January 1994), Hart (9 March 1994), Basingstoke and Deane (20 March 1995).
Source:
Housing subsidy claim forms (council rents), Housing Corporation HAR 10/1 return (housing associations).

Local Government Reorganisation

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what resources he has made available to authorities that have been or are to be reorganised on 1 April 1995, 1996, 1997 or 1998 for reorganisation costs incurred by them in 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [2046]

Mr. Curry: On 19 July I invited authorities that have been or are to be reorganised on or before 1 April 1998 to submit estimates of the amount of expenditure they expect to incur on transitional costs of reorganisation in 1996–97. On the basis, inter alia, of the information provided by the authorities, I have decided the maximum amounts that it would be appropriate to allocate towards such costs in 1996–97. In the initial round I gave priority to authorities that were reorganised on or before 1 April 1996. I have carefully considered the bids from these authorities and have decided that none has established a sufficiently exceptional case to justify an increase in their allocation for 1996–97. In this round I have given priority to authorities that are to be reorganised in 1997, especially their costs in respect of non-discretionary redundancy and other compensation payments to staff.
The amounts are as follows:

Maximum amounts: £000 rounded

Authority	*1996–97*
Isle of Wight	
Isle of Wight Council	500
Cleveland	
Hartlepool Borough Council	2,150
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	3,400
Middlesbrough Borough Council	2,750
Stockton on Tees Borough Council	3,250
Avon	
Bristol City Council	3,500
North Somerset District Council	3,000

Maximum amounts: £000 rounded

Authority	*1996–97*
Bath and North–east Somerset Council	4,000
South Gloucestershire Council	3,500
Humberside	
Hull City Council	3,000
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	7,000
North Lincolnshire Council	3,500
North–east Lincolnshire Council	4,000
North Yorkshire	
North Yorkshire County Council	400
Selby District Council	90
York Unitary	3,200
Total	47,240
Bedfordshire	
Bedfordshire County Council	1,800
Luton Borough Council	3,500
Buckinghamshire	
Milton Keynes Borough Council	2,800
Derbyshire	
Derbyshire County Council	1,900
Derby City Council	2,700
Dorset	
Dorset County Council	450
Bournemouth Borough Council	2,850
Poole Borough Council	2,800
Durham	
Durham County Council	500
Darlington Borough Council	3,850
East Sussex	
East Sussex County Council	1,750
Brighton Borough Council	680
Hove Borough Council	950
Brighton and Hove Council	[1]1,250
Hampshire	
Hampshire County Council	2,100
Portsmouth City Council	2,850
Southampton City Council	2,950
Leicestershire	
Leicestershire County Council	1,500
Leicester City Council	3,100
Rutland District Council	750
Staffordshire	
Staffordshire County Council	1,800
Stoke on Trent City Council	2,800
Wiltshire	
Wiltshire County Council	1,300
Thamesdown Borough Council	2,800
Total	50,730
Combined total allocations	97,970

[1] (SCA) + 1,000 SCA previously issued.

I have also considered carefully the bids submitted by authorities that are to be reorganised in 1998, but, in my view, none of the bids established a sufficiently strong case to justify an allocation of SCA for 1996–97. I have, however, announced that I am prepared to issue capitalisation directions for the net eligible revenue expenditure incurred.

A reserve of £2.03 million has been retained to meet any unanticipated, exceptional costs incurred, with priority being given to the shadow authority of Brighton and Hove.

Nuclear Wastes

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on current progress in negotiations between the European Union and the World Trade Organisation over implementation of the Basel convention on transfrontier movements of nuclear wastes; and if he will list the areas where agreement has not yet been reached. [2330]

Mr. Clappison: The Basel convention on the control of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal does not apply to wastes which, as a result of being radioactive, are subject to other international control systems, including international instruments, applying specifically to radioactive materials.

Transfrontier movements of radioactive waste are covered by the International Atomic Energy Agency's code of practice on the international transboundary movement of radioactive waste. In addition, provisions on the transboundary movement of radioactive waste are likely to be included in the international convention on the safety of radioactive waste management, currently being negotiated under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Housing Corporation

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement about the finance management and policy review of the Housing Corporation. [2460]

Mr. Curry: The finance management and policy review of the Housing Corporation has been completed and I am placing a copy of the final report in the Library.

This final report is the completion of a process which started last year. The FMPR of a non-departmental public body comprises two stages. The report on the first stage, the prior options study, was completed in June 1995. The bulk of the fieldwork for the second stage, following up the POS, was completed by early this year. Given that neither the POS nor the fieldwork identified significant problems and that the Housing Bill had been introduced, completion of the report was deferred so that it could reflect the content of the Housing Act 1996.

The original POS confirmed that there should be no change in the basic approach of the Housing Corporation, and identified a number of points to be covered in the second stage of the FMPR and a series of issues which should be followed up outside the FMPR. A number of recommendations in the POS were reflected in the Housing Act 1996, including arrangements to put the housing association tenants ombudsman service on a statutory footing.

A good deal of the report is devoted to the strategic relationship between the corporation and the Department. The review, which included an investigation by outside consultants, found that this relationship was in good shape but made a series of detailed recommendations on how it could be improved further. The report summarises a series

of other reviews: of the corporation's financial systems; of the scope for out-sourcing service functions; of the corporation's senior management structure; of the specific regulatory issues identified in the POS; and of how to handle potential conflicts of interest for corporation board members. The report also summarises progress with actions arising from the POS outside the FMPR.

The POS, last year, underlined the importance of the corporation's work and the effective way it is carried out. This report makes a series of suggestions for minor improvement, but again confirms the basic soundness of the arrangements. This all reflects well on both the staff of the corporation and the chairman and members of the board.

Central and Local Government

Mr. Day: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he will respond to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on relations between central and local government, HL97 Session 1995–96; and if he will make a statement. [2638]

Mr. Gummer: In response to the House of Lords Select Committee report, I have today laid before Parliament a White Paper setting out a programme of action to strengthen local democracy, to promote local authorities' local leadership role and to improve further relations between central and local government. Under this programme of action we intend:

- to agree with the new Local Government Association and the Welsh Local Government Association, a statement of the role and status of local government in England and Wales, for inclusion in the guidelines on central/local relations; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will also consider with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities a similar statement in relation to Scotland;
- to develop further, with the Local Government Association and the Welsh Local Government Association, the guidelines for central/local relations; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will also consider with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities the development of suitable guidelines for Scotland;
- to review the scope for local authorities to fulfil their local community leadership role within section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972, and to assess whether a more general power of local competence is practicable and advisable (in the light of broader priorities);
- to legislate in the next Parliament to enable local authorities in England and Wales to undertake experiments with their internal management structure;
- to undertake with the Local Government Association and the Welsh Local Government Association research on public participation in local government; and
- to review the arrangements in Government for handling cross-departmental business affecting local government.

This programme of action is based on the Government's belief, which the Select Committee shares, that democratically elected local authorities have important roles, in particular that of community leader, in the world of local governance today. As the Committee itself recognised, local authorities are not, never have been, and never will be the sole monolithic providers of all services in a given geographical area; nor can they ever operate wholly apart from powers for central intervention. Our programme represents a significant further chapter in the continuing development of local government within our living constitution, a development which we aim to take forward in a spirit of partnership and collaboration.

Cash Limits

Mr. Day: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what proposals he has to change the 1996–97 cash limits and running costs limits for which he is responsible. [2640]

Mr. Gummer: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, the cash limit for class VI, vote 1 (Housing and Construction, England), covering sections A, D to G and J to L of that vote, will be increased by £900,000 from £330,568,000 to £331,468,000. Increases in the cash limit of £2,200,000 are balanced by decreases of £1,300,000. The increases are a switch of £2,000,000 from non-cash-limited asylum seekers' housing grant to cash-limited Housing Corporation revenue grants; and £200,000 to meet increased administration costs the corporation is expected to incur preparing the loan portfolio for possible sale, funded from any receipt of the sale. The decreases are a transfer of £500,000 from gipsy site grant to class VI, vote 2, to fund projects on the Barkantine estate which was damaged in the docklands bombing of February 1996; and a switch of £800,000 from homelessness grants to Housing Corporation capital grant in aid, included in the DOE/HC (Housing Corporation) non-voted cash limit.

The DOE/HC (Housing Corporation) cash limit will be increased by £1,369,000 from £1,034,499,000 to £1,035,868,000 because of the take-up of £569,000 entitlement to end year flexibility as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326-31*, to fund capital projects; and the transfer of £800,000 from the cash limit for class VI, vote 1 in order to switch current to capital expenditure within the rough sleepers initiative.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 2 (Regeneration and Countryside and Wildlife) will be increased by £5,336,000 from £1,459,443,000 to £1,464,779,000. The increase is partly due to the net effect of the payment of £4,702,000 on capital projects which either slipped from previous years or to meet statutory compensation claims or the claim slipped into the following year. This extra provision will be met by the take-up of end year flexibility entitlement, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*, and will cover claims for the following: Teeside development corporation, Derby and Leicester city challenge and challenge fund within the single regeneration budget, estate action and Bristol development corporation. The balance will be made up of a transfer of £134,000 from the Departments for Education and Employment and of Trade and Industry as their contribution towards the Manchester bomb fund, and £500,000 transfer from vote 1 (Housing and Construction) to estate action to cover bomb damage in London.

There will be associated increases in external financing limits for urban development corporations by £767,000 from £207,050,000 to £207,817,000 and the housing action trusts by £250,000 from £878,960,000 to £879,210,000.

The DOE/NT (New Towns) non-voted cash limit will be decreased by £8,000,000 from –£100,000,000 to –£108,000,000. This decrease is due to the Commission for the New Towns having accelerated disposals and generated additional receipts in 1996–97 of £15,000,000 in gross terms, of which the commission expects to use £7,000,000 to increase capital spending leaving a balance of £8,000,000. Of this public expenditure survey saving: £1,800,000 will be transferred to class VI, vote 3 to meet pneumoconiosis compensation payments; £434,000 will be transferred to class VI, vote 7 (Office of Water Services) to meet additional monitoring and accommodation costs, £230,000 will be used to offset the penalty imposed on the Office of Water Services for its breach of cash and running cost limits in 1995–96 and £3,394,000 will be transferred to class VI, vote 8 (Ordnance Survey) to meet additional accommodation, security and severance costs.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 3 (Environmental protection and water), covering sections A to H of that vote, will be increased by £4,301,000 from £347,309,000 to £351,610,000. This change reflects increases in provision of £1,850,000 for grant in aid to the British Waterways Board, £1,800,000 for pneumoconiosis compensation payments, £500,000 for water and sewerage grants, £244,000 for grant to Mersey Basin Business Foundation, £39,000 for grant in aid to the Environment Agency, and £10,000 for Going for Green, less a transfer of £142,000 to the Scottish Office for the air quality pilot project. The increase will be met by reductions in the DOE/new towns cash limit (£1,800,000), the cash limits for class VI, vote 5 (DOE administration) (£254,000), class XIII, vote 2 (Scottish Office) (£800,000), class IV, vote 1 (DTI) (£39,000) and the take-up of end year flexibility entitlement—£1,550,000—as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*.

The external financing limit for the British Waterways Board will be increased by £2,800,000 from £47,000,000 to £49,800,000. This change will enable the board to undertake essential works to the Caledonian canal and will be funded by take-up of end year flexibility of £1,050,000, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996 *Official Report*, columns *327–28*, a transfer of £800,000 from class XIII, vote 2 (Scottish Office) and virements within vote 3.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 4, (Local government and planning, England), covering sections A to F of that vote, will be reduced by £30,000 from £31,128,087,000 to £31,128,057,000. This reduction is the net result of reductions in the payments made to the Valuation Office agency in section A (Valuation services) and an increase to allow payments to the Local Government residuary body in section B (Reorganisation of local government). The savings in section A will be used within vote 4, to cover residual payments of community charge grant in section H (Other grants), which is outside the cash limit on the vote.

The DOE/LGR (Local government reorganisation) non-voted cash limit will be reduced by £205,000 from £108,050,000 to £107,845,000 to offset the increase on section B of vote 4.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 5 (Administration) covering sections A to G and I of that vote, will be increased by £11,032,000 from £452,776,000 to £463,808,000. This change reflects increases due to the drawdown of £11,744,000 of running costs end year flexibility entitlement and £2,000,000 of capital end year flexibility entitlement, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*, together with a £20,000 transfer from the Security Facilities Executive agency (class XVII, vote 1) and £587,000 to pay for the Department's costs in respect of the sale of the Housing Corporation loans portfolio with the extra provision being funded from the expected proceeds of the sale. The increases will be offset by transfers of; £1,522,000 to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (class II, vote 1) and of £43,000 to the Office of Public Service (class XVII, vote 1) in respect of Lancaster house; £1,500,000 to the Department of National Heritage (class X, vote 1) for preparatory works to Somerset house to house the Gilbert collection; and £244,000 to provide for grant to the Mersey Basin Business Foundation and £10,000 in respect of Going for Green, both to class VI, vote 3. Also as a consequence, the DOE gross running cost limit has increased by £10,985,000 from £218,078,000 to £229,063,000.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 7 (Office of Water Services) will be increased by £434,000 from £9,201,000 to £9,635,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £434,000 from £8,901,000 to £9,335,000. This increase is required to cover the costs of active annual monitoring of the performance of the water and sewerage undertakings, development of information systems to allow the analysis of performance against comparative benchmarks and to meet additional administrative and accommodations costs. This change takes into account the penalties imposed following Ofwat's breach of its cash and running cost limits in 1995–96. The increases will be offset by savings on the DOE/NT (New Towns) non-voted cash limit and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

The cash limit for class VI, vote 8 (Ordnance Survey) will be increased by £5,305,000 from £9,110,000 to £14,415,000. The increase is required to cover additional expenditure on building refurbishment, enhancement of building security, higher than anticipated contributions in lieu of rates and early retirement costs. The increase will be met by a transfer of £3,394,000 from the DOE/NT (New Towns) non-voted cash limit and by a transfer of £5,000 from the Security Facilities Executive agency (class XVII, vote 1) with the balance of £1,906,000 being charged to the reserve.

All the increases will be offset by either savings or transfers from other Government Departments or else represent take-up of end year flexibility entitled or will be otherwise charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Environmental Information (Article 169)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) in what circumstances the Government *(a)* will and *(b)* will not make available information relating to article 169 proceedings; [1189]

(2) if he will make a statement about the Government's policy in respect of access to information held by the European Commission and the United Kingdom Government in the case of potential article 169 proceedings. [1188]

Mr. David Davis: I have been asked to reply.

Communications between a member state and the Commission in the context of anticipated or actual proceedings under article 169 are treated by both parties as confidential. The Government support and uphold this principle. The absence of this protection would prejudice the achievement of a negotiated settlement of disputes and the ability of member states and the European Commission to obtain confidential assistance from third parties in the preparation and conduct of the proceedings.

WALES

Cardiff Airport (Road Links)

13. **Mr. Sweeney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what stage has been reached in planning the new road links with Cardiff international airport. [290]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Vale of Glamorgan council is undertaking preliminary design and other preparation work with the support of transport grant from the Welsh Office. The council has recently submitted a bid to continue this work in 1997–98. My right hon. Friend will make an announcement on the settlement next month.

Nursery Vouchers

14. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many submissions he has received in favour of nursery vouchers. [291]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Government's intention of increasing provision for four-year-olds has been welcomed.

24. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to discuss the introduction of nursery vouchers with local authorities in Wales. [301]

Mr. Evans: Welsh Office officials are having a series of meetings with representatives of local authorities about the detailed implementation of the nursery voucher scheme.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the number of nursery vouchers likely to be applied for when the scheme begins in 1997; and if he will make a statement. [913]

Mr. Evans: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 16 October, *Official Report*, column *984*. It is for parents of eligible four-year-olds to apply for nursery vouchers and they will be alerted to the need to do so by the scheme contractor and other publicity.

Tourism

15. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many tourists visited Wales in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* the latest available year; and what they spent in real terms. [292]

Mr. Hague: The number of overseas visitors to Wales has increased between 1979 and 1995 by 40 per cent. from 530,000 to 740,000, with an increase in annual spending by overseas tourists from £139 million to £197 million at 1995 prices.

Welsh Development Agency

16. **Mr. Wigley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the impact of the LG project on the finances of the Welsh Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [293]

Mr. Hague: I have received representations from the hon. Member.

I have allocated an additional £20 million to the WDA for 1996–97 specifically to enable it to meet its commitments to the LG project. Provision for future years will be taken into account in my decisions on public expenditure in Wales.

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to increase the Welsh Development Agency's budget for 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [2440]

Mr. Hague: I have decided to increase the Welsh Development Agency's base programme for 1996–97 from £120 million to £157.1 million. This includes an increase in central Government provision of £25.4 million, of which £20 million is specifically for the LG project. The agency is also generating additional receipts of £11.7 million. Further expenditure will be funded by receipts from the European Union, which are estimated to be £4 million in 1996–97.

Learning Disabilities

17. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the services provided for people with severe learning disabilities in Wales. [294]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Local authorities have prime responsibility for the planning and commissioning of services for people with learning disabilities, but the Department receives monitoring information on these services.

A465

18. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next expects to met representatives of the Heads of the Valleys Standing Conference to discuss the A465 Abergavenny to Hirwaun dualling scheme. [295]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: There are no plans for such a meeting.

Income Levels

20. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to improve income levels in Wales. [297]

Mr. Hague: We have delivered low inflation and interest rates, sound public finances and an enterprise culture. We are giving a high priority to raising levels of

education and training. These are the foundations on which a dynamic and prosperous economy, with well-paid jobs, is built.

Local Government Finance

21. **Mr. Dafis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with local authorities concerning standard spending assessments for 1997–98. [298]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend and I discussed standard spending assessments for 1997–98 with representatives of local government at a meeting of the Welsh Consultative Council on Local Government Finance on 23 September 1996.

Inward Investment

22. **Mr. Bernard Jenkin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the level of inward investment into Wales over the past 12 months. [299]

Mr. Hague: In the period 1 October 1995 to 30 September 1996, 149 projects have been recorded promising 14,474 new jobs, 3,737 safeguarded jobs and capital investment of £2.7 billion.

Public Sewer Workers (Deaths)

23. **Mr. Hain:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will institute an inquiry into the death of two Neath public sewer workers on 10 October. [300]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The main investigative roles lie with the Health and Safety Executive and the South Wales police. I understand that a joint investigation is currently under way.

Health Service Waiting Lists

25. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on health service waiting lists in Wales. [302]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: In Wales, in the 12 months to June 1996 the number reported by health authorities waiting for first out-patient appointments fell by 7 per cent. from 115,000 to 107,000. The number waiting over six months for a first out-patient appointment fell by nearly half to 8,454.

In the past 12 months to June 1996 the number waiting over 12 months of in-patient and day case treatment rose by 171 from 5,465 to 5,636. Recent data from NHS trusts show that the figure fell back to 5,173 in August.

Welsh Assembly

26. **Mr. Devlin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on electoral systems in respect of a Welsh Assembly. [303]

Mr. Hague: None.

Abattoirs

27. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he will take to ensure that the abattoirs authorised in Wales to partake in the 30-month cull scheme give priority to animals from producers in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [304]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: I have asked the Intervention Board executive agency to ensure that Welsh abattoirs participating in the scheme give priority to animals from Welsh producers until the backlog is cleared.

Environment and Environmental Industries

28. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the importance of (i) the environment and (ii) environmental industries to the competitiveness of Wales; and if he will make a statement. [305]

Mr. Hague: I refer the hon. Member to the environment chapter of the Government's third annual competitiveness White Paper, "Competitiveness—Creating the Enterprise Centre of Europe", (Cm3300) and to "Meeting the Challenge—The Competitiveness of Wales" published by my Department, copies of which are in the Library of the House.

Grant-maintained Schools

29. **Mr. Richards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to introduce to ensure that grant-maintained schools are not disadvantaged by the 1997 standard spending round. [306]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: My right hon. Friend will announce his decisions on public expenditure in Wales in early December. It would not be appropriate to comment in advance of this.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1290]

Mr. Hague: Information is not collected in this format. My Department has a workplace nursery, supports play schemes and also has provision to reimburse staff for additional child care expenses and expenses relating to care of dependants incurred in the course of their official duties.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1256]

Mr. Hague: As at October 1996, 1,150 women were employed on a permanent basis, which is 51 per cent. of the total permanent staff employed by my Department.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1273]

Mr. Hague: Welsh Office expenditure on advertising, public relations and hospitality for the last five years is as follows:

£000

Year	Advertising	Press and public relations	Hospitality
1991–92	349	2,089	36
1992–93	427	2,069	38
1993–94	275	1,704	27
1994–95	255	2,068	29
1995–96	508	2,062	22

1. Expenditure on advertising includes television, radio and press advertising costs.
2. Figures for press and public relations includes press and publicity staff costs, press cutting services and the cost of purchasing other forms of publicity material.
3. Spending is shown at outturn prices.

Deregulation

30. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what existing rules and regulations he proposes to repeal in each of the next six months. [307]

Mr. Hague: My Department does not at present propose to repeal any existing rules or regulations in the next six months.

Schools

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish for each local education authority the amount paid to schools as in-year payments from the service, strategy and regulation budget in 1995–96. [2016]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Service strategy and regulation is a central cost of local education authorities and is not allocated to schools.

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish for each local education authority its service, strategy and regulation budget for the fiscal year 1996–97. [2017]

Mr. Evans: The information requested is given in the following table. The figures also include education management and support services expenditure, other than service strategy and regulation, that have not been included elsewhere in the budget returns submitted by authorities.

Local education authority 1996–97 budgeted expenditure on service strategy and regulation

	£ thousand
Blaenau Gwent	820
Bridgend	163
Caerphilly	211
Cardiff	706
Carmarthenshire	545
Ceredigion	542
Conwy	284
Denbighshire	229
Flintshire	526
Gwynedd	400
Isle of Anglesey	279
Merthyr Tydfil	77
Monmouthshire	198
Neath Port Talbot	1,338
Newport	260
Pembrokeshire	1,581
Powys	754
Rhondda Cynon Taff	312
Swansea	1,576
Torfaen	193
The Vale of Glamorgan	263
Wrexham	160
Wales	11,417

Source:
Local authority budget returns.

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each local education authority those secondary schools which had 1,000 or more pupils in September, and those grant–maintained secondary schools which had 1,000 or more pupils in September. [2018]

Mr. Evans: The information requested is contained in the following table. It is based on data for January 1996 which are the latest available.

	School
LEA maintained	
Bridgend	Brynteg Comprehensive School
	Maesteg Comprehensive School
	Pencoed Comprehensive School
	Porthcawl Comprehensive School
Caerphilly	Lewis Girls' Comprehensive School
	St. Cenydd Comprehensive School
Cardiff	Cantonian High School
	Cardiff High School
	Fitzalan High School
	Llanishen High School
	Radyr Comprehensive School
	Rumney High School
	St. Teilo's C.I.W. High School
	The Bishop of Llandaff C.I.W. High School
	Whitchurch High School
	Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Glantaf
Carmarthenshire	Amman Valley Comprehensive School
	Bryngwyn Comprehensive School
Ceredigion	Penglais Comprehensive School
Denbighshire	Prestatyn High School
	Rhyl High School
Flintshire	Castell Alun High School
	Hawarden High School
	Holywell High School
	Mold Alun School
	St. Richard Gwyn Roman Catholic High School
Gwynedd	Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen
Isle of Anglesey	Ysgol David Hughes
	Ysgol Uwchradd Caergybi
Merthyr Tydfil	Afon Taf High School
	Cyfarthfa High School
	Pen Y Dre High School
Monmouthshire	Caldicot Comprehensive School
	Chepstow Comprehensive School
	King Henry VIII Comprehensive School
	Monmouth Comprehensive School
Neath Port Talbot	Dwr Y Felin Comprehensive School
	Llangatwg Comprehensive School
Newport	Bassaleg Comprehensive School
	Bettws High School
	Caerleon Comprehensive School
	Duffryn Comprehensive School
	Lliswerry Comprehensive School
	St. Joseph's Comprehensive R.C. School
	St. Julian's Comprehensive School

	School
Pembrokeshire	Greenhill Comprehensive School
	Milford Haven Comprehensive School
	Pembroke Comprehensive
	Sir Thomas Picton Comprehensive
	Tasker Milward Comprehensive School
Powys	Newtown High School
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	Bryncelynnog Comprehensive School
	The Coedylan School
	Mountain Ash Comprehensive School
	Porth Comprehensive School
	Tonypandy Comprehensive School
	Tonyrefail Comprehensive School
	Treorchy Comprehensive School
	Ysgol Gyfun Llanhari
	Ysgol Gyfun Rhydfelen
Swansea	Bishop Gore Comprehensive School
	Gowerton Comprehensive School
	Morriston Comprehensive School
	Olchfa Comprehensive School
	Ysgol Pentrehafod School
Torfaen	Croesyceiliog Comprehensive School
	Fairwater Comprehensive School
	Llantarnam Comprehensive School
The Vale of Glamorgan	Barry Boys' Comprehensive School
	Bryn Hafren Comprehensive School
	Cowbridge Comprehensive School
	Llantwit Major School
Wrexham	St. David's High School
Grant maintained	
Conwy	Eirias High School
	Ysgol Emrys Ap Iwan
The Vale of Glamorgan	St. Cyres Comprehensive School
	Stanwell Comprehensive

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each local education authority the local management of schools criteria which determine what is a large secondary school. [2019]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: I am not aware of any local authority's local management of schools scheme which incorporates a definition of a large secondary school. As far as Welsh Office guidance is concerned, the LMS framework as set out in Welsh Office circulars 36/88 and 38/91 provided a definition of a small school for salary protection purposes only but no such definition was included for large schools.

TREASURY

Mortgage Interest Relief

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of Exchequer what is his policy in respect of mortgage interest relief at source at the present rate of 15 per cent. *(a)* for the rest of the current financial year and *(b)* for the following five financial years. [520]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said in his last Budget speech that mortgage interest relief will remain unchanged for the lifetime of this Parliament. Beyond that, the level of mortgage interest relief is a matter to be considered each year in the Budget.

Tax Returns

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate, in respect of tax year 1996–97, of the number of taxpayers who will submit their tax returns to the Inland Revenue by 30 September 1997; how his estimate of this figure changed over the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [267]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The Inland Revenue's current working assumption is that between 40 per cent. and 50 per cent. of tax returns for 1996–97 will be received by 30 September 1997. This assumption has remained constant over the last 12 months.

Unemployed Claimant Count

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people, by region and gender, are designated as economically inactive but are not included in unemployed claimant count figures, within the age groups *(a)* 16 to 24, *(b)* 25 to 49 and *(c)* over 50. [1143]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Dennis Roberts to Mr. Ian McCartney, dated 4 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Director of the Office for National Statistics to reply to your recent question asking for a breakdown by region, gender and age group of those people who are economically inactive, who would like a job but are not included in the unemployment claimant count figures. The Director has asked me to reply in his absence.

According to the spring 1996 Labour Force Survey there were 7,770,000 people of working age in the United Kingdom who were classified as economically inactive. Of these 2,335,000 said they would like a job, but were not classified as ILO unemployed either because they had not sought work in the past four weeks and/or they were not available to start work in the next two weeks. The main reasons given for not seeking work were that the respondent was long term sick/disabled, looking after their family/home or was a student. 2,164,000 of the total of 2,335,000 said that they were not claiming unemployment related benefits though this may be overestimated by up to 10 per cent as the LFS generally under-records people claiming unemployment-related benefits. Further details are contained in the article on page 464 of the October 1993 Employment Gazette a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library. The UK total figure is disaggregated for the analysis in the attached table.

Economically inactive of working age not claiming unemployment-related benefits who would like to work by age, gender and region

Thousands, Spring 1996

	16–24 years old		*25–49 years old*		*50 years and over*		*All working age*		
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*	*Males (50–64)*	*Females (50–59)*	*Males*	*Females*	*All persons*
United Kingdom	236	306	283	845	292	203	810	1,354	2,164
Great Britain	232	296	279	824	288	198	798	1,318	2,117
England	199	247	228	686	232	163	659	1,095	1,754
South East	82	89	76	282	78	64	236	435	670
Greater London	38	40	53	141	38	30	128	211	340
Rest of South East	44	49	23	140	40	34	107	224	331
East Anglia	'—	'—	'—	27	'—	'—	21	39	60
South West	20	24	20	54	21	15	61	93	154
West Midlands	20	29	23	82	30	17	73	127	201
East Midlands	17	19	20	51	16	15	53	84	137
Yorks and Humber	24	30	28	60	29	18	80	108	188
North West	18	26	39	77	30	19	87	122	208
North	13	22	15	54	19	11	47	87	134
Wales	12	20	17	52	23	13	52	85	137
Scotland	21	29	34	87	33	22	88	138	226
Northern Ireland	'—	10	'—	21	'—	'—	12	36	48

Note:
'Sample size too small for reliable estimate.
Source:
Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

National Bus Company Pension Scheme

Mr. Hall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the implications of the pensions ombudsman's recent findings in respect of breaches of trust relating to payments made from the National Bus Company employers' superannuation scheme for similar payments to the Treasury from the pension schemes of Government assets prior to their privatisation. [1085]

Mr. Waldegrave: I am not aware of any implications for other privatisations.

Interest Rates

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the savings to the Exchequer which would result from lower debt interest costs if United Kingdom interest rates were *(a)* 0.5 per cent., *(b)* 1.00 per cent. and *(c)* 1.5 per cent. lower across the yield curve for (1) 1997–98, (2) 1998–99, (3) 1999–2000, (4) 2000–01 and (5) 2001–02. [814]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Estimated reductions in central Government net debt interest payments resulting from lower interest rates are presented in the table.

Savings made from stated reduction in interest rates (£ billion)

	0.5 per cent.	*1.0 per cent.*	*1.5 per cent.*
1997–98	0.3	0.6	0.9
1998–99	0.5	0.9	1.3
1999–00	0.5	1.1	1.6
2000–01	0.6	1.2	1.7

Such estimates are dependent on the assumed path of Government borrowing. These figures are calculated using the Budget 1995 forecast for borrowing and assume the fall in interest rates in sustained throughout the forecast period.

Revised short-term projections for Government borrowing were produced in the "Summer Economic Forecast 1996". Estimates based on this forecast are not significantly different from those shown.

No borrowing forecasts have been published for 2001–02.

GDP Growth Rate

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the fastest annual average United Kingdom GDP growth rate in any consecutive period of nine years since 1966. [802]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 4 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Director of the Office for National Statistics to reply to your recent question asking what has been the fastest annual average United Kingdom GDP growth rate in any consecutive nine year period since 1966. The director has asked me to respond in his absence.

The highest United Kingdom growth rate, for any nine year period since 1966, was 3.1 per cent. in the period up to and including 1990. United Kingdom GDP growth rates, for any nine year period since 1966, can be found in table 16.10 of the 1996 edition of *United Kingdom National Accounts*, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library. I attach a photocopy of the table.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the cash limit and running costs limit for the Office for National Statistics for 1996–97. [2549]

Mrs. Angela Knight: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class XVI, vote 12—Office for National Statistics—will be increased by £7,561,000 from £105,039,000 to £112,600,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £7,100,000 from £99,839,000 to £106,939,000. This reflects:

the take-up of £5,453,000 for running costs and £1,254,000 for capital costs under the end year flexibility arrangements announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*. The increase will be charged to the reserve and will not add to the planned total of public expenditure;

increased running costs provision of £1,216,000 and capital cost provision of £74,000 for the processing and production of statistics relating to the general practitioners' research database; most of the increase will be met by the Department of Health from within its existing resources; the remainder will come from various other customers. The payments will be taken in as increased appropriations in aid;

increased capital costs of £2,565,000 for the refurbishment of Drummond gate, Pimlico. £600,000 will be funded from the Treasury's own end year flexibility entitlement, and the remaining costs will be met by the Metropolitan police and taken in as increased appropriations in aid;

increased running costs provision of £177,000 and capital costs of £123,000 for the national health service tracing services project, and further capital costs of £650,000 for the Department of Health's existing number replacement project. The increases will be met by the Department of Health from within its existing resources and taken in as increased appropriations in aid;

increases in running costs provision of £5,000 from the Security Facilities Agency for security advice, £67,000 from the Department of Health for legal services, £90,000 from the Department for Education and Employment for the labour market statistics and £92,000 from the Department of Transport for balance of payments work. All these will be met from existing resources.

TRANSPORT

M1 Slip Road Viaduct

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he instructed work to begin on the slip road viaduct at junction 2 of the M1 motorway to allow it to carry 44-tonne vehicles; how much the project will cost; and when he expects it to be completed. [19]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question asking him when he instructed work to begin on the slip road viaduct at junction 2 of the M1 motorway to allow it to carry 44 tonne vehicles, how much the project will cost and when he expects it to be completed.

Consulting Engineers were instructed on 4 April this year to examine options for strengthening the slip road viaducts to carry vehicles of up to 44 tonnes complying with current Construction and Use Regulations for combined road/rail transport. Preparatory site work was started on 21 October. The main strengthening contract is out to tender and is due to start in December 1996 with completion during the Spring of 1997.

The overall cost of the project is estimated to be £4m.

Motorways and Trunk Roads

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport at how many places on the national, motorway and trunk road motorway *(a)* speed limits are imposed as a result of a maintenance problem awaiting attention, *(b)* areas of carriageway or hard shoulder have had access restricted because of a maintenance problem awaiting attention, *(c)* signs have been erected to warn of a slippery surface and *(d)* weight restrictions have been imposed as a result of structures unable to carry vehicles of up to 38 tonnes gvw. [243]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Robert Ainsworth, dated 4th November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question asking at how many places on the motorway and trunk road network (a) speed limits are imposed as a result of a maintenance problem awaiting attention, (b) areas of carriageway or hard shoulder have had access restricted because of a maintenance problem awaiting attention, (c) signs have been erected to warn of a slippery surface and (d) weight restrictions have been imposed as a result of structures unable to carry vehicles of up to 38 tonnes gvw.

At the present time, temporary speed restrictions apply at the following locations:

M1 Junction 1 Southbound

M1/M621 Junction in West Yorkshire

M11 at Duxford in Cambridgeshire Southbound

M180 North Ings Interchange in South Yorkshire

M606/M62 Junction in West Yorkshire

A1 at Winthorpe in Nottinghamshire

A1/A41 Fiveways Junction in London

A194(M) at Blackfell Bridge in Tyne & Wear

A40 at Golden Valley Bridge in Gloucestershire

A42 at Lount in Leicestershire

A500 near Nantwich in Cheshire

and at 13 separate locations on the A14 in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk.

At these places areas of the carriageway or hard shoulder have been coned off pending maintenance work:

M1 at Smithywood in South Yorkshire

M1 at Birdwell Quarry in South Yorkshire

M1 at Stainborough in South Yorkshire

M1 Junction 1 Southbound

M1 Junction 2 Slip Roads

M1 Junction 2 Northbound

M2 Medway Bridge

M2 Gillingham Link Bridges

M4 Junction 13

M5 Junctions 1–2 Northbound and Southbound

M5 Junction 9 Northbound Slip Road

M6 Junction 43–44 Southbound

M6 Junction 8 Northbound and Southbound

M62 J18–19 at Birch Services

M62 Eastbound west of A1

M66 J0–1 at Lower Park

M180 North Ings Interchange in South Yorkshire

M606/M62 Junction in West Yorkshire

A102(M) Northbound at Blackwall Tunnel

A194(M) at Blackfell Bridge in Tyne & Wear

A13 Old Roding Bridge in London

A13 Beam Bridge North in London

A2 at Littledale Viaduct

A40 at Golden Valley Bridge in Gloucestershire

A41 at Whitchurch in Shropshire

Signs have been erected to warn of a slippery surface as follows:

M62 Junction 29 Eastbound Slip Road

M62 Junction 33 Eastbound Slip Road

M62 Junctions 32-33 in West Yorkshire

M62 Junction 32 Westbound Slip Road

A1 Ferrybridge Southbound Slip Road in West Yorkshire

A1 Darrington Southbound Slip Road in West Yorkshire

A1 Womersley Slip Road in West Yorkshire

A1 Redhouse Northbound Slip Road in South Yorkshire

A5 Catthorpe Crossroads in Warwickshire

A5 Lilbourne Truck Stop in Warwickshire

At these locations the problem is generally deformation of the road surface. There will also be other places where a routine survey of skidding resistance indicates a possible problem and the need for closer investigation. Signs warning of a slippery surface are erected at these locations too while these further investigations are carried out.

Finally, structures supporting motorways or all-purpose trunk roads which are currently restricted to vehicles of less than 38 tonnes are:

A13 Movers Lane Flyover in East London

A40 Golden Valley Bridge in Gloucestershire

Road Contracts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the amount spent on *(a)* accountants, *(b)* lawyers, *(c)* consultants and *(d)* other professionals in relation to design, build, finance and operate road contracts since their inception. [20]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question asking if he will list the amount spent on (a) accountants, (b) lawyers, (c) consultants and (d) other professionals in relation to Design Build Finance and Operate road contracts since their inception.

The information you have requested cannot be disaggregated for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

However, we can disclose that the amount spent on accountants, lawyers and technical advisors since 1994 in support of the Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) programme totals £13.5m. This figure does not include consultants appointed to design schemes which subsequently became subsumed within a DBFO project.

Maritime Search and Rescue Operations

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what was the number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations requiring helicopter support in (i) the Dover strait, (ii) St. George's channel and (iii) the North sea over the last three years; [1054]

(2) what is the number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations occurring in (i) the Dover strait, (ii) St. George's channel and (iii) the North sea over the last three years; [1053]

(3) what was the number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations involving British military and civilian services around United Kingdom coastal waters over the last three years; [1055]

(4) if he will list *(a)* the number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations occurring around United Kingdom coastal waters requiring support from foreign search and rescue services over the last three years, *(b)* the date of those incidents, *(c)* the location of those incidents and *(d)* the nationality of those services involved; [1056]

(5) what consultation has been conducted with representatives of foreign search and rescue services over the recent changes to helicopter search and rescue cover within the United Kingdom. [1014]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of the Coastguard agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from C. J. Harris to Ms Glenda Jackson, dated 29 October 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about search and rescue operations, helicopter support in those operations and recent search and rescue helicopter consultation.

The number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations requiring helicopter support in the (i) Dover Strait, (ii) St George's Channel and (iii) The North sea over the last three years were:

	1993	*1994*	*1995*
(i) Dover Strait	82	59	33
(ii) St. George's Channel	2	Nil	1
(iii) the North Sea	887	1,166	991

These figures represent total helicopter call-outs and do not differentiate between incidents when a helicopter was the only rescue unit from those when it participated with other rescue units, nor should they be taken to imply that a helicopter carried out an actual rescue.

Dover Strait is defined as Dungeness Point to North Foreland out to the Anglo-French median line.

St. George's Channel is defined as the area to the east of the Anglo-Irish median line bounded by lines drawn in the north from Arklow (Republic of Ireland) to Bardsey Island and in the south from Carnsore (Republic of Ireland) to South Bishop lighthouse. It does not include Cardigan Bay.

The North Sea is defined as an area between North Foreland on the east coast to the Magnus Platform off the north–east coast of Shetland and out to the median line.

The recorded number of maritime search and rescue operations occurring in the last three years for (i) Dover Strait, (b) St. George's Channel and (iii) the North Sea were:

	1993	*1994*	*1995*
(i) Dover Strait	439	731	544
(ii) St. George's Channel	5	3	1
(iii) The North Sea	3,019	3,027	3,929

The number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations co-ordinated by HM Coastguard in the United Kingdom Search and Rescue Region over the last three years were:

1993: 9,590

1994: 10,470

1995: 12,220.

Some of these incidents will have involved the Ministry of Defence. The Agency has no records of SAR operations by the MoD other than those involving HM Coastguard.

The number of recorded maritime search and rescue operations occurring around the United Kingdom coastal waters where support was supplied by foreign search and rescues services was:

(a)

1993: Nil

1994: 3

1995: 6.

The dates and locations of the incidents and nationality of the services involved were:

1993

Nil

1994

(b) 28 April

(c) Ramsgate two persons overboard from a cross channel ferry

(d) French

(b) 30 October

(c) Between Isle of Man and Liverpool search for downed aircraft

(d) Irish

(b) 25 August

(c) Ramsgate Sally Star incident

(d) French

1995

(b) 28 January

(c) Between Llandudno and Anglesey two missing persons

(d) Irish

(b) 9 June

(c) Greencastle Auxiliary Coastguard team assisted in search at Lough Foyle

(d) Irish

(b) 18 June

(c) Dauphine Helicopter search Lough Foyle

(d) Irish

(b) 15 July

(c) Dungeness Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon hit

(d) French

(b) 10 September

(c) Main Head communications support

(d) Irish

(b) 16 November

(c) Helicopter and fixed wing aircraft search for a missing Irish Fishing Vessel Lough Foyle

(d) Irish

No consultation has been conducted with representatives of foreign search and rescue services over recent changes to helicopter cover in the United Kingdom since neither the UK nor foreign services take account of each other's coverage in determining the location of their rescue facilities. However, foreign search and rescue services are kept advised of any changes in coverage by the Coastguard Agency through regular liaison meetings.

Air Crashes

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* civilian light aircraft and *(b)* helicopter crashes have taken place in each of the last five years, giving the figures to the latest available date. [1152]

Mr. Bowis: The number of accidents involving civilian light aircraft, with a maximum total authorised weight below 2,300 kg, and helicopters in each of the last five years is as follows:

	Light aircraft	*Helicopter*
1992	8	3
1993	3	5
1994	11	3
1995	8	1
1996 (to date)	8	4

These figures include mid-air collisions and collisions with ground, water or wires, but not accidents occurring on the ground at aerodromes.

Air Traffic Control

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many aircraft were affected by the air traffic control delays occurring on 23 August. [1446]

Mr. Bowis: I understand from the Civil Aviation Authority that on August 23 there were 5,072 flights through UK airspace, of which 740 were delayed by more than 10 minutes as a result of air traffic control restrictions in both UK and European airspace.

Traffic Enforcement

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list those measures undertaken by his Department to improve the targeting of vehicle and traffic enforcement. [1505]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of the Vehicle Inspectorate agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ron Oliver to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning measures undertaken by the Department to improve the targeting of vehicle and traffic enforcement.

To improve our targeting capability, the Vehicle Inspectorate has done, or is doing, the following:

(a) Since November 1991, we have recorded all checks on mechanical condition of vehicles on a computerised database to enable identification of Operators with a poor history or whose vehicles have not been seen.

(b) We are currently linking annual test results to Operators, again to identify those with a poor history.

(c) We have trialled weigh-in-motion sensors which may have a role to improve the selection of vehicles brought in for weighing and the times of the day that weight checks should be run. The results are currently being evaluated.

(d) Over the next 12 months, we will be equipping all our Vehicle and Traffic Examiners with laptop computers so that they have access at the roadside to substantial parts of our operator and vehicle records. Through either mobile telephones or mobile data links, they will have access to all records.

(e) This year we are setting up 6 regional intelligence units to improve the collection and analysis of information.

(f) This year key targets for VI were agreed which give greater emphasis to the outcomes of our work, rather than the inputs, and which encourage Examiners to target their work. These targets will be developed further next year to encourage concentration on more serious cases.

HGV Spot Checks

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list the number of silent checks aimed at detecting drivers interfering with tachograph records for each of the last 12 months; [1514]

(2) what percentage of heavy goods vehicle spot-checks were undertaken *(a)* between the hours of 1900 and 0600 on weekdays and *(b)* at weekends for each of the last two years. [1515]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of the Vehicle Inspectorate executive agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ron Oliver to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your questions about the number of silent checks aimed at detecting drivers interfering with tachograph records for each of the last 12 months; and the percentage of HGV spot-checks undertaken (a) between the hours of 1900 and 0600 on weekdays and (b) at weekends for each of the last 2 years .

Details of the number of vehicles silent checked with the aim of detecting tachograph interference are as follows:

Month	HGV	PSV	Total
1995			
October	404	96	500
November	605	46	651
December	630	[1]3,799	4,429
1996			
January	246	535	781
February	262	140	402
March	310	172	482
April	477	78	555
May	447	149	596
June	632	698	1,330
July	576	866	1,442
August	756	354	1,110
September	305	122	427

[1] The use of this resource as a significant PSV enforcement tool was reviewed and as a result a special nationwide exercise was carried out in December.

Data on the percentage of HGV spot checks undertaken a) between 1900 and 0600 on weekdays and b) at weekends is not available separately. The total percentage of out-of-hours spot checks carried out between 1900 and 0600 and at weekends (against an agreed 5% minimum target) for each of the last 2 financial years is:

1994/95: 9.25%

1995/96: 7.49%.

Rail Driver Fatigue

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what procedures his Department has put in place to ensure that the research currently being undertaken by British Rail on the effects of driver fatigue will be disseminated to all rail operating companies. [1435]

Mr. Watts: This is a matter for British Rail and the Health and Safety Executive. BR will be disseminating the information to the train operating companies which are under BR's ownership at the time the study report is issued. BR has undertaken to convey any findings which have a significance for safety to other train operators.

HSE is aware of the project and will be discussing the results with BR and the researcher. HSE will ensure that any implications for safety are drawn to the attention of those operators which need to be made aware of the results.

Air Bags (Children)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what work his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned on the dangers posed by air bags to children in rear-facing child seats. [1469]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 25 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *11*.

Air Security

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each of the last three years the number of inspections undertaken by Transec staff on *(a)* airlines, *(b)* airports in the United Kingdom and *(c)* overseas airports. [1433]

Mr. Bowis: UK airlines and airports, as well as those foreign airlines operating in the UK, were subject to the following number of security inspections in each of the last three years. Figures are also shown for the number of visits to overseas airports to assess the security afforded to and conducted by British airlines.

	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96
Airlines	504	433	663
Airports	475	583	531
Overseas	101	72	33
Totals	1,080	1,088	1,227

Inspectors visited UK airports and airlines on many other occasions, mainly to audit and test their operations.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list by airport the number of security breaches recorded by Transec for the last 12 months. [1508]

Mr. Bowis: It would be inappropriate for security reasons to provide this information. Whenever breaches are identified, appropriate rectification action is taken.

Re-signing (London)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the decision was taken to postpone the re-signing project in London; and when he expects work to commence. [1470]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question about when the decision was taken to postpone the re-signing project in London and when he expects work to commence.

The decision was taken at the end of September. It remains a high priority project and will be back in the programme as and when funding allows.

Driving Tests

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on how many occasions in each of the last five years driving test candidates have been allowed to proceed with a driving test without a signed driving licence. [1438]

Mr. Bowis: Mandatory presentation of a signed driving licence by a candidate to an examiner at the start of a driving test was not introduced until 1 July 1996. We are unaware of any ordinary driving tests that have proceeded since that date where the candidate did not hold a valid licence or evidence that such a licence existed.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much has been invested in the infrastructure of the west coast mainline by *(a)* Railtrack plc and *(b)* the Department of Transport, (i) in each year since 1993 and (ii) since May 1996. [1374]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer Thursday 31 October]:* It is not for the Department to invest in the west coast main line. Railtrack was formed on 1 April 1994 and therefore

would not hold investment information before that date. However, the company has confirmed the following investment details for each financial year since 1994:

1994–95: £47.6 million

1995–96: £50.9 million

1996–97: £70.1 million.

Railtrack is planning to spend a total of £1.35 billion to renew the core infrastructure and is prepared to spend a further £150 million on a passenger upgrade.

Diesel Fuel (Spillages)

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into preventive measures to stop diesel fuel spillages from vehicles. [1932]

Mr. Bowis: None. Legislation is already in place aimed at preventing the spillage of diesel fuel from vehicles.

Taxis (Pedestrian Deaths)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many pedestrians have died after being hit by taxis in each of the past 10 years. [1942]

Mr. Bowis: The number of pedestrians reported to have been hit by taxis in each of the past 10 years is shown in the following table.

Fatal pedestrian casualties from single vehicle accidents involving a taxi and pedestrian, by severity: GB 1986–95

	Casualties
Years	*Fatalities*
1986	19
1987	17
1988	29
1989	17
1990	13
1991	17
1992	14
1993	6
1994	12
1995	8

Rolling Stock

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what is the average age of mark 1 rolling stock currently in operation on the rail network; and if he will make a statement; [1877]

(2) how many mark 1 rolling stock are currently in operation in the UK rail network. [1876]

Mr. Watts: The latest figures held centrally show the position as at 31 March 1995 and these are shown as follows. The rolling stock companies were privatised last year and the current position is a matter for them.

Summary of Mark 1 Rolling Stock on lease as 31 March 1995

Vehicle class	*Units on lease as at 31 March 1995*	*Build date*
101 (Heritage)	76 vehicles and 1 two car unit	1957–60
117 (Heritage)	14 two car units and spare vehicle, and 27 vehicles	1957–60
121 (Heritage)	4 vehicles	1960
205	1 two car unit and 10 three car units	1957–59, 1962
207	4 two car units	1962
302	28 four car units	1958–60
303	45 three car units	1959–61
304	6 three car units	1960–61
305	15 three car units and 5 four car units	1960
308	21 three car units	1961
309	8 four car units	1962–63
411	106 four car units	1958–63
412	7 four car units	1959–63
421	139 four car units	1964–72
422	23 four car units	1970–72
423	190 four car units	1966–74
Mk1 coaches	12 vehicles	1959–63
Mk1 catering	7 vehicles	1960–61
Motorail	4 side loaders and 47 General Use Vehicles	1960
Brake Guards Vans	27 vehicles	1960

National Bus Pension Fund

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what action he is taking to pass to the trustees of the National Bus pension fund the moneys paid to the Government in respect of the fund; and how much money is involved; [1924]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of his response to the report of the pension ombudsman into the National Bus Company pension inquiry. [1923]

Mr. Watts: The pensions ombudsman has issued his final determination on a complaint against the trustees of one of the pensions funds of the former National Bus Company—the bus employees superannuation trust. The complaint relates to the arrangements under which a surplus in the fund of £103 million, after tax, was paid to my Department in 1990. The trustees, to whom the determination is directed, are in touch with my Department about it. The Department is considering the determination and taking legal advice before replying to the trustees. It may be necessary and appropriate to ask the courts to make a ruling on the complex issues involved, including the sum involved should repayment of the surplus be required.

I will inform the House of my response to the trustees.

Rail Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on automatic train protection. [1878]

Mr. Watts: I refer the hon. Member to the answers to questions on this subject on 29 November 1995, *Hansard*, volume 267, columns *785–86*, and 23 July 1996, *Hansard*, volume 282, columns *137–38*.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport under what current circumstances HGVs over 38 tonnes can use United Kingdom roads. [1573]

Mr. Watts: The following categories of vehicles may exceed a gross weight of 38 tonnes:

(1) Certain 6-axle articulated vehicles and vehicle/trailer combinations carrying containers or swap-bodies to or from a railhead as part of a combined transport journey, up to a maximum weight of 44 tonnes.

(2) Vehicles carrying abnormal indivisible loads or designed for special purposes.

(3) Locomotives pulling trailers and when operating under a permit issued by a highway authority.

Eurostar

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received about the operation of Eurostar trains north of London. [1987]

Mr. Watts: The Department has received no recent representations about regional Eurostar services.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1277]

Mr. Bowis: The information is not available in the form requested.

The spend on advertising is:

1991–92: £4,667,000

1992–93: £5,759,000

1993–94: £4,256,000

1994–95: £4,518,000

1995–96: £6,493,000.

The spend on hospitality is:

1991–92: £102,000

1992–93: £127,000

1993–94: £220,000

1994–95: £123,000

1995–96: £106,000.

Public relations and entertainment expenditure is contained within the above figures.

The figures relate to the Central Transport Group only, and exclude information on agencies which could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received any assistance from the Department with child care. [1294]

Mr. Bowis: Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1260]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply given by the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mr. Norris) to the hon. Member for Cunningham, South (Mr. Donohoe) on 7 June 1996, volume 278, column *593*.

M20 Widening (Sandling)

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the latest estimate for the final cost of widening the Sandling stretch of the M20. [1882]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer Friday 1 November]:* The estimated total outturns given in the trunk roads in England 1994 review was £118.7 million, excluding VAT. It is not our practice to publish updated estimates while final accounts remain to be settled.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Nursery School Gardens

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research she has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned regarding the educational benefits of having nursery schools with on-site nature gardens; and if she will make a statement. [1589]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Government wish to encourage schools to make the best use of all their resources, both indoors and outside. The Department has a good record of research into the educational value and effective management of outdoor resources for all types of school, including nursery schools.

In the mid-1980s the Department, the Countryside Commission and several local education authorities jointly commissioned research whose main conclusions reached a wide audience through the 1990 Department of Education and Science publication "The Outdoor Classroom".

The Department intends shortly to publish further advice entitled "School Grounds: a guide to good practice". This will also draw on commissioned research and the experience of the Learning Through Landscapes trust.

South African Undergraduates

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many undergraduate students from South Africa were studying in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years and at five-year intervals between 1970 and 1990, broken down by ethnic origin and course of study where available. [1947]

Mr. Forth: The available information is as follows:

Full-time students from South Africa studying at undergraduate level in the UK[1]

	Thousands
1970–71	[2]0.1
1975–76	[2]0.1
1980–81	0.2
1985–86	0.1
1990–91	0.4
1991–92	0.4
1992–93	0.2
1993–94	0.2
1994–95	0.2
1995–96	0.2

[1] For the years prior to 1994–95 the figures cover undergraduate students in all HE and FE establishments; for 1994–95 and 1995–96 the figures cover HE establishments only.
[2] Includes postgraduates.

Readily available information on the ethnicity of students from individual overseas countries is available only for 1994–95 and 1995–96. However, levels of non-response and the magnitude of the numbers involved prevent meaningful information from being provided for students from South Africa. Similar considerations apply regarding course of study.

Employment Service (Computers)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what undertakings were given by the Employment Service to Mr. Thomas Docherty in respect of remedying the faults in the NUBS2—national unemployment benefit system—computer programmes; and which undertakings have been implemented to date; [1567]

(2) how many former students and others have paid excess taxation as a result of administrative errors by the Employment Service through faults in the NUBS2—national unemployment benefit system—computer programmes; and what sums of money were involved; [1569]

(3) for what reasons *(a)* students and *(b)* others have been given non-cumulative codes by the Employment Service on ceasing a period of unemployment benefit and taking up full-time employment; [1571]

(4) if the Employment Service has complied with pay-as-you-earn regulations in the issue of code numbers to former students taking up work and ceasing to be on unemployment benefit; [1598]

(5) what priority was given to the introduction of the jobseeker's allowance, in respect of work on his Department's computer system; and how many people were diverted from the NUBS2—national unemployment benefit system—programme to the JSA project; [1599]

(6) when she first evaluated reports that the NUBS2—national unemployment benefits system—Employment Service computer system was faulty; and what was the date of inception of the system; [1566]

(7) what reports she has received from the Inland Revenue about the taxation policy of the Employment Service regarding the accuracy of and procedures followed by the Employment Service in the initial taxation of *(a)* former students and *(b)* others; when she evaluated these comments; and what action she took; [1568]

(8) what factors underlie the decision to allow the Employment Service to administer the taxation of former students; and what plans she has to transfer this work to the Inland Revenue; [1570]

(9) if she will list the faults identified in the Employment Service computer programme; when they were identified; how many clients have been affected and in what ways; and what action has been taken to remedy the deficiencies; [1572]

(10) on what occasions the Employment Service submitted requests to the change control board to remedy errors in the Employment Service computer affecting the taxation of former students; and what responses it has received; [1597]

(11) what changes to improve the tax system were postponed to accommodate the jobseeker's allowance programme. [1601]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G Fogden to Mr. Tony Worthington, dated 4 November 1996:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply to your questions concerning tax issues. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

I will answer the questions in the order they will appear in Hansard.

Question 1567:

In his correspondence with the Agency Mr Docherty has not sought any undertakings, nor were any given.

Question 1569:

It is not possible to provide an exact figure of the number of clients affected. However, from mid June through to the end of July the number of claims registered reaches a peak. This peak can be attributed to full-time education leavers. Based on these figures, and taking into account the phased installation of the NUBS2 system (between February 1992 and September 1994), we estimate that up to 70,000 clients were affected in each of the four years in question. These figures assume that all ex-student clients found employment within the same tax year as they made their claim. As this will not have been the case it is fair to say that these figures are if anything over-estimates. It has proved impossible to obtain figures for the amounts of tax involved.

Questions 1571 and 1598:

(a) Due to a programming error with the NUBS2 computer system, students who have never worked and signed off in the same tax year were incorrectly allocated a non-cumulative tax code.

(b) Other claimants who are unable to supply a P45 from their previous employer are correctly allocated a non-cumulative code until IR can provide us with an up to date tax record. For some people, this may not have occurred before they find new employment. This is in accordance with the PAYE regulations.

Question 1599:

As it was new legislation, Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) had to be given the highest priority. It was therefore essential that the Employment Service could meet all its commitments up to and following the introduction of JSA. I cannot provide details of the

number of people who moved from NUBS2 to the JSA project as there was a constant exchange of staff between the projects, according to workload and priorities.

Question 1566:

The Agency was first notified of a potential problem regarding tax codes in a letter from the Inland Revenue (IR) dated 19 December 1994. Investigations in January 1995 confirmed that this was indeed a fault with our system. The NUBS2 system national roll-out program began in February 1992.

Questions 1568 and 1570:

Since (the Act) in 1982, the Agency and previously the Department of Employment have been required to operate a modified PAYE system, and has maintained communication with IR in doing so. In the course of these exchanges, IR raised this problem with us. As always, we take on board their comments and endeavour to work with them to find solutions to any problems identified. Following their intervention, a clerical solution was developed to identify and rectify these cases. As the responsibility for the processing and payment of JSA now resides with the Benefits Agency (BA), any questions regarding future plans should be addressed to them.

Question 1572:

At the time of handover (7 October) to BA there were 512 identified problems with the NUBS2 system. All these problems had interim solutions. Instructions were issued to all offices in the form of a problem guide. System manuals were amended to reflect how the system was operating. In addition, assistance was available to offices at both a regional and at national level. A total of 1673 faults have been identified with NUBS2 over the period that it has been operational. It is not possible to state the number of clients affected, as system problems frequently had no impact on the client. Any system fault that adversely affected the client was always given the highest priority for rectification.

Question 1597:

The change request was originally submitted to the Change Control Board in March 1995. At that time it was accepted as a high priority and scheduled for introduction in October 1995. In September/October 1995 the change was reviewed in the light of the emerging priorities arising from the legislation to introduce JSA. It was then decided that since the problem would be corrected in the Jobseeker's Allowance Payments System, it should be controlled by clerical procedures. The Change Control Board reviewed the position again in January and May 1996, but on each occasion was unable to reverse their decision.

Question 1601:

The only other tax change involved was one regarding notifications of direct payments of Income Support from the Benefits Agency to the client. In this case additional procedures were combined with the action to take upon receipt of a direct payment notification which ensured that this problem had no affect on our clients.

I hope this helps to clarify the position.

Workstart

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many people are involved in the workstart programme; [2239]

(2) if the contract for the survey being conducted by Martin Hamblin Research was awarded by competitive tender; what is its value; and when the research will be published; [2241]

(3) how many people in the workstart programme are being questioned for the survey currently being undertaken by Martin Hamblin Research; and how many of these have agreed that their records can be handed over to a third party. [2240]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mr. Ian McCartney, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the number of people currently on Workstart, and the research and contractual issues surrounding this programme. This falls within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

Since 1993, the Employment Service has been assessing the viability of paying a subsidy to employers to recruit very long term unemployed jobseekers. Three pilot studies have been undertaken to test various delivery models, with a fourth currently underway and linked to the Project Work initiative.

Results for the period ending September 1996 show that a total of 2,946 people have taken part in the programme.

The contract for the research on the Workstart programme was put out to competitive tender, the successful contractors being Martin Hamblin Research. The value of the most recent survey was £8,175 (excluding VAT), the results of which are due to be published in Autumn 1997.

In the Workstart survey recently concluded, one hundred and fifty people were interviewed. Acting as principal for the Employment Service, Martin Hamblin Research processed all monitoring information relating to the programme. This relationship is recognised under the Data Protection Act and individual data is treated anonymously at all stages of the analysis.

Following up individuals in this manner is standard procedure. It is important to evaluate our initiatives to assess how they achieve their wider objectives, the help they give to individuals, and their value for money.

I hope that this is helpful.

National Vocational Qualifications

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the number of NVQs at each level awarded through youth training and training for work in each London training and enterprise council in the last two reporting years. [2302]

Mr. Paice: As the reply will consist of a large amount of data, I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what sources of funds she proposes grant-maintained schools will use for expansion as envisaged in clauses 3 and 5 of the Education Bill. [2323]

Mr. Forth: Clauses 3 and 5 of the Education Bill enable grant-maintained schools to expand their capacity by up to 50 per cent. and to add or remove nursery, sixth form or boarding provision without central approval. Where capital funding is required, schools will need to consider the full range of options, including their annual formula-based capital allocations, commercial borrowing and the private finance initiative. As to recurrent funding, the existing mechanism will continue to apply, with the overall resources available being determined through the annual public expenditure settlement.

Nursery Vouchers

Ms Hodge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the autumn term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the city of Westminster; [1389]

(2) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the autumn in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the London borough of Wandsworth; [1384]

(3) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the autumn term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea; [1386]

(4) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the autumn term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector by Norfolk county council. [1388]

Mr. Robin Squire: The number of nursery education vouchers used in each type of provider in the phase 1 local authority areas to date in the autumn term 1996 is set out in the following table. Information on voucher use broken down between maintained reception classes, nursery classes and nursery schools or between private and voluntary sector providers is not available.

Number of children attending providers in each sector	*Norfolk*	*Kensington and Chelsea*	*Wandsworth*	*Westminster*
Private and voluntary	613	117	122	106
LEA-maintained	7,283	511	1,615	669
Grant-maintained	325	41	174	0
Special schools	16	0	4	0
Independent	204	255	294	112
Local authority day nurseries	0	21	4	22
Children attending more than one provider	108	0	0	0

Ms Hodge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the summer term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the city of Westminster; [1391]

(2) how many nursery vouchers have been spent in the summer term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery school and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea; [1385]

(3) how many vouchers have been spent in the summer term in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector in the London borough of Wandsworth; [1390]

(4) how many vouchers have been spent in the summer term 1996 in *(a)* reception classes in primary schools, *(b)* nursery classes in primary schools, *(c)* nursery schools and *(d)* the voluntary sector by Norfolk county council. [1387]

Mr. Squire: The number of nursery education vouchers used in each type of provider in the phase 1 local authority areas in the summer term 1996 is set out in the following table. Information on voucher use broken down between maintained sector reception classes, nursery classes and nursery schools or between private and voluntary sector providers is not available.

Number of children attending providers in each sector	*Norfolk*	*Kensington and Chelsea*	*Wandsworth*	*Westminster*
Private and voluntary	3,078	255	444	163
LEA-maintained	4,188	597	2,043	831
Grant-maintained	156	40	71	0
Special Schools	21	0	4	0
Independent	208	154	182	99
Local authority day nurseries	0	40	34	47
Children attending more than one provider	680	3	3	2

Investors in People UK

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations she had with *(a)* small business organisations and *(b)* Department of Trade and Industry Ministers and officials before selecting new members and reappointing existing members to the board of Investors in People UK. [1226]

Mr. Paice: All new and re-appointed members of Investors in People UK were appointed under the guidelines laid down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The posts were advertised nationally and all organisations were free to make nominations. Final appointments were made by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment against the requirements of the posts.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if she will list those members of the Investors in People UK board whose main business activity involves the running of a small firm; [1227]

(2) if she will list the members of the Investors in People UK board together with the businesses with which they are associated and the number of employees in each of those businesses. [1228]

Mr. Paice: On the board of Investors in People UK there are a number of directors whose main business activity involves the running of a firm with less than 200 employees. These include:

Mrs. Susan Tood, Mr. Martin Henry, Mr. Nick Hutton, Mr. Carl Hadley, and Mr. Patrick Hall.

The following table lists all directors and their main business. The Department does not hold details of the number of employees in all the businesses with which the directors are associated.

Investors in People UK
Board Members

Member	*Business organisation*
Sir Brian Wolfson	Global Health Alternatives
Mr. Don Beattie	The BOC Group
Mr. Anthony Dubbins	Graphical, Media and Paper Union
Mr. Martin Henry	Lastolite Ltd.
Mr. Tom Farmer	Kwik-fit Holdings
Mr. Carl Hadley	British Aluminium Wire and Conductor Ltd.
Mr. Patrick Hall	E Roland Gurney and Partners Ltd. AHA Construction Services Ltd.
Mr. Howard Hastings	Hastings Hotel Group
Mr. John Hazelwood	Birds Eye Walls Ltd.
Mr. Nick Hutton	Greenup and Thompson Ltd.
Mr. Terry Morgan	British Aerospace Defence Ltd.
Mr. Nick Stuart	Secretary of State Representative
Mrs. Susan Todd	Polymedia Ltd.
Mr. Derek Wanless	National Westminster Bank
Ms Mary Chapman	Chief Executive of Investors in People UK

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much her Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1271]

Mr. Robin Squire: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *997*.

Public Selection

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list, in relation to the proposed selection of pupils for secondary schools by ability or aptitude, as provided in clause 4 and schedule 1 of the Education Bill *(a)* the purpose for which these two qualities are directed and *(b)* how these qualities differ from the purposes to which pupils not so selected are to be directed in (i) the same and (ii) other schools. [2331]

Mr. Robin Squire: Different schools have different strengths, and some choose to specialise in particular areas of the curriculum. The provisions set out in clause 4 and schedule 1 of the Education Bill will give admission authorities the flexibility to offer a proportion of places to pupils with particular aptitudes, or of high ability in one or more subjects or generally, without seeking central approval.

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what requests she has received for the imposition of a statutory duty on *(a)* maintained secondary schools and *(b)* secondary grant-maintained schools for an annual governors' review to introduce, or vary, selective admission procedures, naming the persons or bodies concerned in each case. [2333]

Mr. Squire: My right hon. Friend has received no such specific request. She is, however, aware that many parents, for whom it is not presently a possibility, wish to have the option of selective education. It is right that schools should consider on a regular basis whether the wishes of parents and the needs of children in their areas would be better served by the introduction extension or of selective admission arrangements.

Cash Limits

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what changes she plans to make to cash limits and running cost limits on votes within her responsibility for 1996–97. [2626]

Mr. Robin Squire: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IX, vote 1, Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services, will be amended as follows:

Class: IX

Vote: 1

Existing cash limit: £8,744,945,000

Change: £197,000

New cash limit: £8,745,142,000.

The cash limit for class IX, vote 1 will be increased by £197,000 from £8,744,945,000 to £8,745,142,000. The cash limit increase is the net effect of the following: take-up of entitlements announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 12 July 1996, *Official Report*, columns *326–31*, under the end-year flexibility schemes for capital expenditure (£2,189,000) and EU structural funds (£177,283,000—offset by receipts from the EU and increased appropriations in aid). We have also funded a £300,000 increase in specialist schools expenditure from our non-voted provision. Transfers to other Departments include £263,000 to the Department of Health for the drugs challenge fund; £2,000,000 to the Home Office for school security measures; £67,000 to the Department of the Environment as a contribution towards the Manchester bomb appeal; and £90,000 to the Office for National Statistics to provide funding for staff moved under machinery of Government changes. These transfers to other Departments have been partially offset by a transfer of £128,000 from the Home Office to fund the costs of probation service training.

The running costs provision for class IX, vote 1 will be increased by £558,000 from £366,705,000 to £367,263,000. This is the net effect of the transfer of £648,000 from the Department of Trade and Industry towards work done on an agency basis by the Department for Education and Employment, offset by the transfer to the Office for National Statistics of £90,000.

The increase will be offset by savings or charged to the reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Community Care

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many community care assessments have been carried out since 1 April 1992. [1102]

Mr. Moss: The new community care assessment arrangements came into operation on 1 April 1993. In the period since, up to 30 June 1996, a total of 24,983 assessments have been carried out.

Carers

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many carers assessments have been carried out since 1 April following guidance relating to the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 in Northern Ireland. [1103]

Mr. Moss: Statistics relating to cases where individual carers have requested a separate assessment of their needs are not collected centrally.

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to monitor the implementation of the guidance issued relating to the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 in Northern Ireland. [1107]

Mr. Moss: Health and social services boards were directed by the Department to offer carers a separate assessment of their own needs if so requested, as elsewhere in the UK, from 1 April 1996. This requirement was reinforced by its inclusion in "Regional Strategy for Health and Wellbeing 1997–2002". The Department will monitor the implementation of the guidance as part of the overall strategy monitoring arrangements.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1264]

Sir John Wheeler: The information requested for the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments is listed.

£000

	Advertising	*Public relations*	*Entertainment*[1]
1991–92	10,587	1,660	807
1992–93	9,562	1,724	872
1993–94	8,105	1,898	921
1994–95	8,320	1,969	832
1995–96	10,945	2,087	587

[1] Entertainment has been defined as Official Hospitality.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1247]

Sir John Wheeler: The information requested is contained in the table:

	Total number of staff	*Total number of female staff*	*Female staff as percentage of all staff*
Non-industrial staff	23,683	12,371	52.2
Industrial staff	3,581	77	2.2
All staff	27,264	12,448	45.7

The table shows the position as at 29 October 1996.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Lenient Sentences (Appeals)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Attorney-General how many requests to appeal against the leniency of sentences he has received this year; how many he has supported; and how many sentences have been increased as a result. [269]

The Attorney-General: During 1996 the Law Officers have considered the sentences imposed upon 115 defendants. Forty-nine of these cases have been referred to the Court of Appeal. In relation to the 42 cases which have been heard to date, the sentence has been increased in 32, or 76 per cent.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was his Department's estimate at the time of its introduction for the reduction in claims for incapacity benefit which would result from the introduction of the all work test; and what was the reduction of claims finally realised for each year since 1995. [756]

Mr. Burt: No estimate was made of the effect of the all work test on new claims for incapacity benefit. In 1995–96 there was a reduction in new incapacity benefit claims of around 100,000 over the previous year.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are his plans for the future of Great Ancoats street Benefits Agency office. [1958]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Tony Lloyd, dated 1 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what are his plans for the future of Great Ancoats Street Benefit Agency (BA) Office.

To enable BA to achieve improvements in customer service and further efficiency improvements as part of the Change Programme, Area Directors are looking critically at their estate in an effort to reduce running costs, whilst maintaining the service delivery to their customers.

The need for a customer outlet at Bishopgate House, Great Ancoats Street, Manchester is currently under review. The number of callers to this office has decreased over recent months leading to a close examination of the cost effectiveness of providing a service from this office. A further reduction in callers is expected with the introduction of Job Seekers Allowance.

No firm decisions have yet been made and a full consultation exercise with customer liaison groups and representatives has yet to be undertaken. I will ensure that you will be afforded the opportunity to comment on any more detailed proposals at that stage.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Payments Backdating

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend the regulations governing backdating of social security payments; and if he will make a statement. [180]

Mr. Roger Evans: We are reviewing the provisions on the backdating of benefits and will announce any change in due course.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the weather stations used for the purposes of cold weather payments. [181]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is as follows:

Abbotsinch (Glasgow Airport)
Aberporth
Aultbea
Aviemore
Bedford
Bingley (Wilsden)
Boltshope Park
Boscombe Down
Boulmer
Bracknell
Braemar
Brize Norton
Caple Curig
Cardinham (Bodmin)
Carlisle
Chivenor
Coltishall
Crosby
Culdrose
Dumfries
Dunkeswell
Dyce (Aberdeen Airport)
Elmdon (Birmingham Airport)
Eskdalemuir
Eskmeals
Fylingdales
Gatwick
Great Malvern
Heathrow
Herstmonceux
Hurn (Bournemouth Airport)
Kinloss
Kirkwall
Leeds
Lerwick
Leuchars
Linton on Ouse
Liscombe
Loch Glascarnoch
Lyneham
Machrihanish
Manston
Marham
Mumbles Head
Newcastle
Nottingham
Plymouth
Portland
Rhoose (Cardiff Airport)
Rhyl
Ringway (Manchester Airport)
Scilly, St. Mary's
Sennybridge
Shawbury
Southampton
St. Mawgan
St. Catherine's Point
Stansted
Stornoway Airport
Thorney Island
Tiree
Tulloch Bridge
Turnhouse (Edinburgh Airport)
Valley
Waddington
Wattisham
West Freugh
Wick Airport
Wittering
Yeovilton

War Widow's Pension

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of his total liability for war widows' pension from the changes brought in by the Pensions Act 1995 since 19 July 1995; and what has been the actual expenditure over that period. [183]

Mr. Heald: The estimated cost of restoration of war widows' pensions under the Pensions Act 1995 to the end of September 1996 is £30 million.

Information on actual expenditure to date on such pensions is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many persons have successfully claimed a war widow's pension on the basis of the provisions of the Pensions Act 1995. [184]

Mr. Heald: As at 30 September 1996, 14,474 successful claims for restoration of a war widow's pension have been made under the provisions of the Pensions Act 1995.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total budget for war widows' pensions in the last year for which figures are available; and how many claimants were involved. [185]

Mr. Heald: Expenditure on war widows' pensions in 1994–95 was £293 million. As at 31 March 1995, 48,405 war widows' pensions were in payment.

Fraud Hotline

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the projected annual cost to operate the freephone hotline number of social security fraud. [186]

Mr. Heald: The cost of running the national benefit fraud hotline is expected to be in the region of £1.5 million per annum.

The savings from early calls to the service is almost £1 million. It is estimated that total savings so far will be in the region of £5 million.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1246]

Mr. Burt: Excluding casual staff, 66,163 women—68 per cent. of the total—were employed by the Department at 1 October 1996.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1280]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The information is not available.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1263]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the lists:

Advertising

1991–92: £4,834,813

1992–93: £4,452,277

1993–94: £5,964,988

1994–95: £3,597,308

1995–96: £6,383,467.

Entertainment (Official hospitality)

1991–92: £91,934

1992–93: £175,901

1993–94: £165,565

1994–95: £127,139

1995–96: £99,929.

The Department does not incur expenditure on public relations.

Appeal Tribunals

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals concerning the all work test were heard by social security appeal tribunals in the March 1996 quarter; and how many and what percentage were decided in the appellant's favour, where the appellant *(a)* attended the hearing but was not represented, *(b)* was represented but did not attend, *(c)* attended and was represented and *(d)* did not attend and was not represented. [2023]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the table.

Quarter ending 31 March 1996	*Total*	*Decided in appellants favour*	*Percentage*
Appeals Heard	7,378	3,407	46.2
Appellant only attended	3,028	1,403	46.3
Representative only attended	96	44	45.8
Appellant and representative attended	2,741	1,846	67.3
Not attended	1,513	114	7.5

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals were heard by disability appeal tribunals in the last quarter for which information is available; and how many and what percentage were decided in the appellant's favour, where the appellant *(a)* attended the hearing but was not represented, *(b)* was represented but did not attend, *(c)* attended and was represented and *(d)* did not attend and was not represented. [2024]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is in the table.

Quarter ending 31 March 1996	*Total*	*Decided in appellants favour*	*Percentage*
Appeals heard and decided[1]	5,175	3,197	61.7
Appellant only attended	1,357	757	55.7
Representative only attended	507	360	71.0
Appellant and representative attended	2,641	1,945	73.6
Not attended by appellant or representative	670	135	20.1

[1] There were 7,385 appeals heard in the quarter ending 31 March 1996. A total of 5,175 were decided and 2,210 were adjourned.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which venues have ceased to be used by social security appeal tribunals since January 1996; and which venues it is proposed to cease using. [2025]

Mr. Evans: The following nine venues have ceased to be used by social security appeal tribunals since January 1996: Mansfield, Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd, Gloucester, Yeovil, Huddersfield, Scunthorpe and Paisley.

The independent tribunal service has no plans to close any other venues.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library copies of the standard letters sent to appellants by clerks of social security appeal tribunals, disability appeal tribunals and child support appeal tribunals directing them to notify the clerk if they wish an oral hearing to be held. [2027]

Mr. Evans: These standard letters are the responsibility of the president of the independent tribunal service, His Honour Judge Bassingthwaighte, who will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Appeal Forms

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library copies of the appeal forms approved by him for the purposes of

regulation 3(1) of the Social Security (Adjudication) Regulations 1995 as amended, with effect from 21 October. [2026]

Mr. Roger Evans: A copy of the current appeal form has been placed in the Library.

SCOTLAND

Dounreay Nuclear Plant

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what notification he has received of prosecutions to be undertaken under *(a)* the Nuclear Installations Act 1965 and *(b)* the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 by the procurator fiscal for the nuclear installations inspectorate and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency in regard to radiological incidents at the Dounreay nuclear plant. [1089]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am advised by my noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate that the procurator fiscal at Wick has received a report from the nuclear installations inspectorate concerning the installation at Dounreay. The procurator fiscal is investigating the matter and will report the outcome of his inquiries to Crown counsel for instructions.

Clydebank and Anniesland Colleges

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the current salary of the principal of Clydebank college. [1602]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The annual accounts for 1995–96 for Clydebank college disclose that the principal's remuneration, excluding employers' pension contributions, was £64,000 for the financial year.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the role of the college boards in respect of the merger of Clydebank and Anniesland colleges. [1606]

Mr. Robertson: In the event that both boards of management decide to pursue the possibility of a merger, they would be required to undertake a full option appraisal. This would have to be undertaken in line with the Scottish's Office's merger principles and criteria, which were sent to the Association of Scottish Colleges in June of this year. These criteria require full consultation with students, staff and relevant local and national interests.

Mr. Worthington: To ask The Secretary of State for Scotland what salary has been offered to the incoming principal of Clydebank college; and what contribution to it will be made by the Scottish Office. [1604]

Mr. Robertson: The salary of a college principal is a matter for the college board of management. The Scottish Office will not be contributing to the salary of the incoming principal of Clydebank college, but will be providing financial assistance to the college to enable the incoming principal to take up post before the retiring principal leaves, thus permitting a period of overlap. The scale of this assistance has still to be determined.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the current salary of the principal of Anniesland college. [1603]

Mr. Robertson: The annual accounts for 1995–96 for Anniesland college disclose that the principal's remuneration, excluding employers' pension contribution, was £48,000 for the financial year.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on what date the principal of Anniesland college accepted the post of principal of Clydebank college; on what date his representative met the principals and chairs of both colleges; and on whose initiative the meeting was arranged. [1607]

Mr. Robertson: The principal of Anniesland college accepted in principle the post of principal of Clydebank college on 9 September. The principals and chairmen of both colleges met, at his invitation, an official of the Scottish Office on 12 September, for exploratory discussions on the issues that the boards would have to consider if they decided to examine merger.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what have been the financial terms on which the principal of Clydebank college has accepted early retirement; and what contribution the Scottish Office has made to this settlement. [1605]

Mr. Robertson: The terms of any severance package are matters for the college's board of management to determine with the principal.

From the current phase of the colleges restructuring fund the Scottish Office has provisionally allocated Clydebank college £10,677 towards the principal's lump sum enhancement.

M80

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he intends to announce the route for the new M80; and if he will make a statement. [1754]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The results of the consultation exercise recently carried out on the two route options are still being analysed. My right hon. Friend will consider the merits of each route once this and other relevant information is available to him.

Mr. Norman Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many representations he received on the two options proposed for the M80 extension between Stepps and Haggs; how these were distributed between the two options; and if he will make a statement. [1221]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Forty-three representative bodies gave evidence at the consultation forum held to determine views on the two route options. In addition, over 800 letters have been received. A number of concerns were raised in relation to each of the route options, and analysis of the responses is still in progress.

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to announce his decision on the line of route for the proposed M80 motorway between Stepps and Haggs; and if he will make a statement. [1224]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The results of the consultation exercise recently carried out on the two route options are still being analysed. My right hon. Friend will consider the merits of each route once this and other relevant information is available to him.

Castle Urquhart

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to reach a conclusion on Historic Scotland's proposals for car parking and related commercial developments at Castle Urquhart, Inverness-shire; and if he will make a statement. [1591]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: This is not a matter for my right hon. Friend, as the application is currently before the planning authority, Highland council. I understand that the council is in the process of setting up a working party to meet with Historic Scotland to consider the way forward.

"Wildlife and Agriculture in Scotland"

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what response he has sent to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds about the recommendations in "Wildlife and Agriculture in Scotland: A Secure Future". [1003]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: My noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for agriculture and the environment has been sent a copy of this report, which he hopes to discuss with representatives of the RSPB in due course.

Government Expenditure and Revenue Document

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will provide the same information for the 1994–95 "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" report as that provided for the 1993–94 report, referred to in his answer of 17 October, *Official Report*, columns *1141–42*; and if he will make a statement; [1463]

(2) how many of the 2,250 copies of the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" report were distributed in response to people who had written in requesting one and how many were sent out unsolicited; how many staff, and at what grades were involved in the research and writing of the document; what are the average annual costs of employing members of staff at these grades, including the share of running costs and support costs; what percentage of these staff's annual time was concerned with the report and related work; and if he will make a statement. [1464]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The Scottish Office produced 2,500 copies of the report "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland, 1994–95". The publication date was Monday 21 October 1996 and, to Tuesday 29 October 1996, approximately 600 copies have been distributed. The cost of design, printing and publishing the document was £5,384 and the cost of the launch and publicity was £25. The cost of research staff time involved in its production cannot be identified separately.

Accurate information on the distribution of the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland, 1993–94" report is not available by the type of detail requested.

The work undertaken by staff on the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" reports was carried out as an integral part of their normal work of providing economic advice and statistics and cannot separately be identified.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1258]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: At 1 April 1996, there were 2,200 female staff in the Scottish Office core and its executive agencies other than the Scottish Prison Service: female staff accounted for 42 per cent. of the total. At that date, there were 615 female staff in the Scottish Prison Service, accounting for 14 per cent. of the total.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1292]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The Scottish Office operates a number of family-friendly working practices that indirectly assist staff with child care. These include the provision of two contracted workplace nurseries, flexible working hours, alternative working patterns, maternity–paternity leave and paid–unpaid special leave. We do not hold statistics on the total number of mothers or fathers who have benefited from these arrangements.

Green-field Sites

Mr. Norman Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the total area of green-field sites he expects to be developed in the next five years. [1222]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend has made no estimates of this nature.

Home Affairs Budget

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much and what percentage of the Scottish Office budget has been allocated to home affairs in each year since 1990 at 1996–97 prices; and if he will list the categories of expenditure. [1476]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The table sets out expenditure by the Scottish Office Home Department, other than on social work services, and Scottish Courts Administration, together with total expenditure within the Secretary of State's responsibility. The table includes expenditure by central Government only: it does not include expenditure by local authorities. Comparisons over years are affected by the Secretary of State taking on responsibility for additional functions. The principal instances are set out in full in chapter 1 of the publication "Serving Scotland's Needs—The Government's Expenditure Plans 1996–97 to 1998–99", Cm 3214, a copy of which is in the Library.

£ million, 1996–97 prices

	1990–91 Outturn	1991–92 Outturn	1992–93 Outturn	1993–94 Outturn	1994–95 Outturn	1995–96 Outturn	1996–97 Plans
TOTAL EXPENDITURE WITHIN THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S RESPONSIBILITY	11,758	13,301	13,849	14,376	14,677	14,734	14,494
HOME AFFAIRS							
Central Government expenditure							
Legal Aid Fund	78	87	115	126	131	129	133
Legal Aid Administration	7	8	8	9	7	7	7
CICB Compensation	21	23	23	21	19	23	36
CICB Administration	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
Other services related to crime	2	2	2	2	3	3	5
Scottish Prison Service	150	157	148	164	172	165	174
Police	20	22	20	25	25	27	27
Fire Service	2	2	3	3	3	4	4
Civil Defence	4	3	2	2	2	1	1
Miscellaneous Services	1	1	1	2	1	2	1
Police Superannuation	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Fire Superannuation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scottish Courts	72	83	86	85	62	60	59
Central Government grants to local authorities current grants							
Police	260	267	276	288	286	294	316
Civil Defence	4	3	4	3	3	3	3
Capital grants							
Civil Defence	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Police	1	0	2	1	1	1	0
Total home affairs expenditure	690	660	694	733	718	740	769
HOME AFFAIRS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL EXPENDITURE WITHIN THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S RESPONSIBILITY	5.9 per cent.	5.0 per cent.	5.0 per cent.	5.1 per cent.	4.9 per cent.	5.0 per cent.	5.3 per cent.

Figures adjusted to 1996–97 prices using the GDP deflator.

Brown-field Sites

Mr. Norman Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the total area of brown-field sites which is available for redevelopment; and what estimate he has made of that area to be redeveloped in each of the next five years. [1223]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend has made no estimates of this nature. However, the hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that information on the amount of vacant and derelict land in Scotland is reproduced in the Scottish Office statistical bulletin environment series "Scottish Vacant Derelict Land Survey 1995", published in October this year. A copy is available in the House Library.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each district and islands council area the final outturn expenditure for 1995–96 in *(a)* the housing revenue account and *(b)* the non-housing revenue account. [1616]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The latest information provided by local authorities on outturn expenditure is set out in the table.

Final outturn expenditure 1995–96

Authority	HRA	Non-HRA
Borders		
Berwickshire	0.349	0.500
Ettrick and Lauderdale	1.730	0.703
Roxburgh	3.019	0.837
Tweeddale	1.066	0.693
Central		
Clackmannan	3.465	0.718
Falkirk	11.911	1.566
Stirling	7.908	1.904
Dumfries and Galloway		
Annandale and Eskdale	2.542	0.467
Nithsdale	5.362	1.045
Stewartry	1.278	0.270
Wigtown	3.210	0.713
Fife		
Dunfermline	7.720	0.912
Kirkcaldy	8.713	1.005
North East Fife	2.612	1.208
Grampian		
Aberdeen	19.016	4.423
Banff and Buchan	4.948	1.454
Gordon	5.006	1.871
Kincardine and Deeside	5.069	0.687
Moray	4.847	1.170
Highland		
Badenoch and Strathspey	1.113	0.503
Caithness	2.432	0.714
Inverness	4.955	0.876
Lochaber	3.692	0.703
Nairn	0.825	0.145
Ross and Cromarty	2.701	3.064
Skye and Lochalsh	1.036	1.057
Sutherland	1.355	0.749
Lothian		
East Lothian	6.606	1.385
Edinburgh	30.650	21.401
Midlothian	5.544	0.711
West Lothian	6.860	0.914

Final outturn expenditure 1995–96

Authority	*HRA*	*Non–HRA*
Strathclyde		
Argyll and Bute	4.704	5.683
Bearsden and Milngavie	1.616	0.184
Clydebank	5.576	0.340
Clydesdale	3.690	0.810
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	1.683	0.687
Cumnock and Doon Valley	3.178	0.285
Cunninghame	8.340	3.718
Dumbarton	6.621	1.146
East Kilbride	1.702	0.410
Eastwood	1.495	0.201
Glasgow	90.404	24.009
Hamilton	10.089	2.177
Inverclyde	10.683	4.300
Killmarnock and Loudoun	6.024	0.596
Kyle and Carrick	7.820	0.935
Monklands	14.358	1.172
Motherwell	15.547	0.966
Renfrew	23.986	4.361
Strathkelvin	5.000	0.770
Tayside		
Angus	4.900	0.858
Dundee	15.610	9.559
Perth and Kinross	6.046	2.077
Islands Areas		
Orkney	0.770	1.182
Shetland	4.534	0.261
Western Isles	3.165	4.674
Scotland	425.081	125.729

Nursery Vouchers

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many four-year-olds were in *(a)* private, *(b)* voluntary and *(c)* local authority pre-school provision in each of the pilot areas of the nursery voucher scheme, for the latest date for which figures are available prior to the issuing of vouchers. [1823]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The information is set out in the table, except for Argyll and Bute where information is not separately identifiable for the pilot area. It is important to note that children may attend more than one type of pre-school provision.

Number of children in the Nursery Voucher Scheme Pilot Areas aged 4 years old[1] in receipt of pre-school provision

Local authority area	*Local authority schools*[2,3]	*Other local authority provision*[4,5]	*Independent schools*[2]	*Registered social work facilities* *Private provision*[4]	*Voluntary provision*[4]
East Renfrewshire	366	75	16	121	288
Highland	90	2	0	7	128
North Ayrshire	325	28	0	408	823

[1] Age as at 31 December.
[2] Numbers at September 1995.
[3] Includes nursery schools/classes and special schools.
[4] Numbers at November 1994.
[5] LA figures include jointly administered facilities and day nurseries.

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what notification he has received in respect of pre-school providers that have gone out of business as a result of competition from other providers in the pilot areas of the nursery voucher scheme. [1825]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* None.

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of the vouchers that have been redeemed to date, have been redeemed in *(a)* the public, *(b)* the private and *(c)* the voluntary sector. [1829]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Of the vouchers for which claims had been paid by 25 October, 61 per cent. had been used in the public sector, 13 per cent. in the private sector and 26 per cent. in the voluntary sector. A number of claims had not yet been made, and these proportions will change as outstanding vouchers are submitted.

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* parents and *(b)* eligible children in each of the pilot areas of the nursery voucher scheme have not taken up the entitlement to apply for a voucher. [1824]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Precise information on the numbers of eligible parents is not available. The four pilot authorities have estimated that there are 3,763 eligible children in the pilot areas. As at 25 October, 3,716 books of vouchers had been issued.

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from pre-school providers outside the pilot areas whose rolls have decreased as a result of the piloting phase of the nursery voucher scheme; and if he will list the providers. [1826]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend has received one such representation.

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many providers have received initial validation to accept voucher-bearing children in *(a)* public, *(b)* private and *(c)* voluntary sectors. [1828]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Centres in the pilot areas are registered for the use of vouchers only if they are already subject to inspection by HM inspectorate, or if the HMI, having examined its profile of education provision, is satisfied of their capacity to deliver quality education. There are currently 152 centres registered as eligible to redeem vouchers—64 public sector, 18 private sector and 70 voluntary sector.

Pre-school Education

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many three-year-olds were in receipt of pre-school education in the period 1994–95; and how many have registered since August 1996, broken down by *(a)* type of provision and *(b)* unitary authority. [1827]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Information on three-year-olds attending education authority and independent schools, as at September 1994 and September 1995, is set out in the table by unitary authority. While information is collected centrally on the numbers of three-year-olds attending other voluntary and private sector centres, it is not currently possible to identify whether a three-year-old in such a voluntary or private sector centre is receiving education as distinct from care. Information on the number of three-year-olds who have enrolled for pre-school education since August 1996 is not yet available.

Number of pupils in Scotland aged 3 years old[1] in receipt of pre-school education

	Education authority[2]					
	Nursery schools		*Special schools*		*Independent schools*	
Education authority	*September 1994*	*September 1995*	*September 1994*	*September 1995*	*September 1994*	*September 1995*
Scotland	12,927	12,634	179	152	558	559
Aberdeen City	473	488	21	12	66	92
Aberdeenshire	155	141	10	15	0	17
Angus	86	92	0	0	0	0
Argyll and Bute	40	53	9	2	21	38
Clackmannanshire	209	171	0	0	0	0
Dumfries and Galloway	187	178	0	0	0	0
Dundee City	795	721	6	0	0	0
East Ayrshire	500	466	6	2	0	0
East Dunbartonshire	54	40	0	6	79	75
East Lothian	292	340	0	0	1	0
East Renfrewshire	154	155	0	0	5	6
Edinburgh, City of	1,491	1,574	7	6	220	153
Falkirk	342	344	0	0	0	0
Fife	744	775	4	2	22	18
Glasgow City	3,557	3,198	25	27	63	89
Highland	125	130	2	4	0	0
Inverclyde	203	183	0	0	3	0
Midlothian	311	321	0	0	0	0
Moray	69	42	1	0	22	14
North Ayrshire	134	150	0	1	0	0
North Lanarkshire	567	590	35	41	0	0
Orkney Islands	45	41	1	0	0	0
Perth and Kinross	261	268	2	5	17	11
Renfrewshire	422	392	10	5	0	0
Scottish Borders	31	37	2	0	0	2
Shetland Islands	67	91	0	0	0	0
South Ayrshire	90	128	2	5	22	24
South Lanarkshire	437	348	31	16	5	7
Stirling	145	199	0	0	12	13
West Dunbartonshire	414	428	1	0	0	0
West Lothian	527	550	4	3	0	0
Western Isles	0	0	0	0	0	0

[1] Age as at 31 December.
[2] Includes a small number of Grant-Aided and Self-Governing Schools.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sitting Times

Mr. Dixon: To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will publish in the *Official Report* the letter sent to the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) giving details of the number of days and hours the House has sat in each of the last 10 years. [1656]

Mr. Newton: The information requested by the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey in his oral question to me of 28 October is as follows. A copy of my letter to him of 28 October has been placed in the Library of the House.

Session	*Days*	*Hours*
1986–87	109	930
1987–88	218	1,978
1988–89	176	1,581
1989–90	167	1,468
1990–91	160	1,374
1991–92	83	696
1992–93	240	1,985
1993–94	154	1,258
1994–95	159	1,313
1995–96	146	1,278

For purposes of comparison with other Sessions, 1986–87 and 1987–88, and 1991–92 and 1992–93 should be aggregated. In each case, these comprised one short and one long Session.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Allen: To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will review the procedure which prohibits the tabling of questions during prorogation. [1193]

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman may wish to draw this point to the attention of the Procedure Committee.

HEALTH

Mental Health

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Royal College of Psychiatrists has finalised its arrangements for the training of its members in mental health law. [1035]

Mr. Burns: No.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if research into the decision making and outcomes of mental health review tribunals has started; who is conducting it; and when it will be completed. [1031]

Mr. Burns: The research which is being undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute began in January 1996 and will be completed by 31 March 1998.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the numbers of psychiatric patients detained *(a)* under the Mental Health Act 1983 and *(b)* under other legislation, as a percentage of all admissions to NHS hospitals for psychiatric treatment, in the financial year 1989–90. [1036]

Mr. Burns: The information requested is shown in the table:

Formal admissions to NHS facilities for the financial year 1989–90[1]

England

	Number of admissions	*Admission as a percentage of all admissions*[3]
Formal admissions under the Mental Health Act 1983	16,974	7
Other Act admissions[2]	59	0

[1] Excludes admissions into Special hospitals.
[2] Other Acts includes Criminal Procedure (Insanity and Unfitness to Plead) Act 1991, Section 47 of the National Assistance Act 1948, Section 1, 2 and 12 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969, Children Act 1989 and Section 3 of the Powers of Criminal Courts Act 1973.
[3] All admissions is taken as number of admissions to mental illness and learning disability specialties.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many psychiatric patients aged between 16 and 64 years were *(a)* discharged from hospital in the 90-day period April to June for which returns are being collected by the NHS executive and *(b)* readmitted to hospital within 90 days of discharge. [1034]

Mr. Burns: Information on emergency psychiatric readmissions to hospital within 90 days of discharge was collected for the first time during the first quarter of 1996–97.

Between April and June, in the region of 27,000 patients aged 16–64 had been discharged from the care of a psychiatric specialist. During the same period in the region of 5,000 patients aged 16 to 64 were readmitted as emergencies to the care of a psychiatric specialist within 90 days of previous discharge.

Heart and Circulatory Disease

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what has been the cost to United Kingdom industry, in each of the last five years for which figures are available, of sickness absence caused by heart and circulatory disease; [1131]

(2) how many working days are estimated to have been lost, in each of the last five years for which figures are available, due to heart and circulatory diseases. [1130]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected centrally.

Health Checks (Children)

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have received health checks in each of the past five years. [1099]

Mr. Burns: This information is not collected centrally.

Wheelchair Vouchers

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the basis for determining the value of the proposed wheelchair voucher. [1135]

Mr. Burns: It will be the cost to the national health service of providing a new wheelchair that, in the opinion of the NHS therapist or other qualified professional, would meet the clinical needs of the user.

Speech Therapists

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many speech therapists per 1,000 population there are in (a) inner London, *(b)* outer London, *(c)* Liverpool, *(d)* Manchester, *(e)* Newcastle, *(f)* Leeds and *(g)* Birmingham. [1126]

Mr. Horam: The precise information requested is not available centrally.

The number of speech therapists employed by the NHS hospital and community health services by health authority areas is available from the Department of Health's statistical tables "NHS Hospital and Community Health Services staff by health authority areas, England 1995"—the latest year available—copies of which are available in the Library. Information on the estimated 1995 population in health authorities is also available from the Library in "Office for National Statistics Monitor for Population and Health: Mid-1995 population estimates for re-organised local and health authority areas in England and Wales".

The number of speech therapists per head of population within health authorities should be interpreted with caution because in some cases the population served by the organisations in each authority may be greater than the population of the health authority itself.

Strokes

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are his Department's latest estimates of the number of people who have had strokes in each of the latest three years for which figures are available. [1450]

Mr. Horam: Information on the total number of finished consultant episodes with primary diagnosis cerebrovascular disease in national health service hospitals in England is shown in the list:

1992–93: 137,396

1993–94: 145,761

1994–95: 140,413.

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics, Department of Health.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met the Stroke Association; and what matters were discussed. [1451]

Mr. Horam: The Secretary of State has not met the Stroke Association in the last year.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the research commissioned by his Department on *(a)* strokes and *(b)* related illnesses in each of the last three years. [1448]

Mr. Horam: The information requested is in the following list.

1996

The influence of developmental indices and blood pressure in young adults on risk of stroke and ischaemic heart disease in later life.

Multi-centre trial of out-patient occupational therapy for stroke.

A prospective study of cardiovascular risk-conducted within the framework of the British Regional Heart Study (on—going since 1985).

1995

A study of discharge from hospital using stroke as a tracer condition (on-going since 1991).

Snoring, obstructive sleep and sleep apnoea—stroke.

Incidence of aetiology and management of stroke.

A detailed investigation of implementation of research-based knowledge by practice nurses in relation to risk factors for CVD and stroke.

Does psychological treatment improve the outcome after stroke?

Development of a measure of social outcome following a stroke.

Stroke Collaborative Review Group: rehabilitation.

Treatment of visual neglect after stroke.

Validation of the stroke drivers screening assessment for patients with acquired neurological disability.

Screening for stroke.

A controlled comparison of alternative strategies and stroke rehabilitation.

Can the effectiveness of inter-disciplinary team care for stroke be improved?

A policy for the drug treatment of high blood pressure.

Early prediction of rehabilitation needs following acute stroke.

Social, environmental, psychological and physical approaches to stroke rehabilitation.

1994

The Tees Stroke register.

The incidence, natural history resource use and outcome of stroke.

The treatment of urinary incontinence in stroke patients.

Formulation of guidelines for dental rehabilitation of stroke patients.

Development of an early warning discharge policy following acute stroke.

Co-ordinated stroke audit and research (COSTAR).

Rehabilitation of arm function.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what standards apply to the treatment of strokes; and what steps he is taking to ensure consistency of treatment throughout the United Kingdom. [1452]

Mr. Horam: Clinical standards in the treatment of all diseases are primarily a matter for the relevant professional bodies. Decisions about the best type of treatment to be given in individual cases is for the clinician concerned in consultation with his patient, where this is practicable. The Department's clinical effectiveness programme will help to ensure that all patients have access to services of proven effectiveness, enabling the best use to be made of available resources.

Standards of treatment in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assistance his Department gives to the Stroke Association. [1449]

Mr. Horam: The Stroke Association has received regular funding from the Department for projects to enhance the provision of stroke and coronary heart disease services in primary care. The most recent grant came to an end in 1995–96.

Health Authority Funding

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proposals he has in respect of the future funding of Nottingham district health authority; and if he will make a statement; [1425]

(2) if he will list those district health authorities which currently receive more than 100 per cent. funding on the current formula, giving the percentage funding in each case; [1423]

(3) which district health authorities with teaching hospitals in England are receiving less than 100 per cent. funding using the current formula, giving the percentage funding in each case; [1422]

(4) what additional money would be available to Nottingham district health authority if it were funded to 100 per cent. on the current formula *(a)* in the current year and *(b)* in 1997. [1424]

Mr. Horam: If Nottingham health authority were at its weighted capitation target in 1996–97, it would have received an extra £7,029,000.

No decisions have been made regarding 1997–98 allocations or for future years. These decisions are taken annually in the light of the overall level of resources available to the NHS. We are committed to the principle of achieving equity in resource allocation based on weighted capitation as soon as practicable.

Tables showing (i) those health authorities above their weighted capitation target and (ii) those health authorities with a teaching hospital situated within their boundary, which are below their weighted capitation target, will be placed in the Library. However, weighted capitation targets do not reflect any element for the cost of medical education and research. These are funded separately.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to use the test for the molecular marker specific for new variant CJD to screen *(a)* all cases of spongiform-like disease in humans and *(b)* all available preserved specimens of brains from cases of degenerative brain disease; and if he will make a statement. [1658]

Mr. Horam: This technique has yet to be fully evaluated and more work needs to be done, including the replication of the technique in other laboratories, before its usefulness as a practical screening tool for new variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease can be established. This work will be a priority in our centrally directed programme.

Maternal Deaths

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* direct maternal deaths and *(b)* indirect maternal deaths registered in England and Wales in 1991 and each subsequent year were of women born in (i) the United Kingdom, (ii) the Republic of Ireland, (iii) the new Commonwealth and Pakistan, (iv) other countries and (v) unstated countries. [1838]

Mr. Horam: The number of direct and indirect maternal deaths in England and Wales for the period 1991 to 1993, the time scale covered by the latest report of the confidential inquiry into maternal deaths was 113 and 85 respectively. Information on country of birth was not available.

Maternal deaths occurring from 1994 onwards are the subject of a continuing inquiry and details will be published in the next report, due in 1998.

Head Lice Treatment

Mrs. Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the reason for the withdrawal of the head lice treatment, derbac, from the NHS prescription list. [1943]

Mr. Malone: Derbac is available on the national health service for the treatment of head lice.

Obstetric Interventions

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to NHS trusts in connection with obstetric interventions *(a)* without the consent of and *(b)* against the expressed wish of the patient. [1843]

Mr. Horam: None. Advice on clinical issues is a matter for the royal colleges and professions involved. It is for clinicians to determine the most appropriate form of treatment, including medical interventions, for individual patients. As far as possible, this should be done with the knowledge and consent of the patient concerned. On the rare occasions when this is not possible, this is ultimately a matter for the courts.

Acute Care

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's current definition of acute care. [1002]

Mr. Horam: Clinical practice varies throughout the national health service. Different hospitals use the term "acute care" in different ways.

Keep Warm, Keep Well Campaign

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the projected budget for the keep warm, keep well publicity campaign. [182]

Mr. Horam: The projected spend for the keep warm, keep well publicity campaign in 1996–97 is £550,000.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has issued to local authorities regarding the duties of social services departments where the Benefits Agency out-of-hours service is inoperative. [1429]

Mr. Burns: The impact of the possible withdrawal of the Benefits Agency's out-of-hours service is being assessed.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1286]

Mr. Horam: Information of the parental status of staff is not available.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1269]

Mr. Horam: Information for the financial years 1991–92 to 1995–96 is shown in the table. Functions which are commonly associated with public relations for the Department of Health are carried out by the Department's press and publicity division. The division now includes the public inquiry office and provides direct marketing, print, storage and distribution services for the whole Department. The running costs figures are therefore

not comparable over the years. The Department does not have an entertainment budget but official hospitality expenditure has been included which contains both general hospitality and working lunches.

£ million

Financial year	Total advertising expenditure	Press and publicity manpower and running costs	Official hospitality expenditure
1991–92	8.70	1.50	0.17
1992–93	5.05	1.75	0.25
1993–94	6.10	1.90	0.22
1994–95	4.30	2.00	0.23
1995–96	2.35	3.00	0.32

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [1392]

Mr. Horam: The Department is currently consulting on the following proposals for use of the deregulation order-making power:

Children and Young Persons Act 1933:

To allow children under 16 to work longer hours on Sunday;

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 and the London Local Authorities Act 1991:

To reduce the licensing requirements for skin piercing businesses.

The timing of any reference to the Deregulation Committee will depend on a number of factors, including the outcome of consultation.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1253]

Mr. Horam: The Department of Health employed 2,697 women on 1 October 1996. This represented 56 per cent. of the total staff employed.

Cystic Fibrosis Trust

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what amount has been given in section 64 grant to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust by his Department in 1996–97 and in each of the last five years; and for what purposes. [2047]

Mr. Horam: In the period in question, the Department gave the Cystic Fibrosis Trust the following three-year section 64 project grants:

Family Support Project:

1990–91: £22,000

1991–92: £20,000

1992–93: £18,000.

Family and Adult Support Volunteer Network:

1993–94: £16,000

1994–95: £14,000

1995–96: £12,000.

Cystic Fibrosis Advocacy Project:

1996–97: £25,000

(this grant will continue in 1997–98 and 1998–99).

Multiple Pregnancies

Mr. Alton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy with regard to selective termination of pregnancy when such an operation is solely to terminate one or more of the foetuses that make up a multiple pregnancy; and if he will make a statement. [2139]

Mr. Horam: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 clarified the legal position on selective termination of a pregnancy. Whether or not selective termination should take place rests on the opinion of two doctors, formed in good faith, that it is justified within the terms of the Abortion Act 1967, as amended.

Beta-interferon

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS spent on beta-interferon in the first six months of *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1995–96. [2329]

Mr. Malone: Information on the net ingredient cost of all beta-interferon products dispensed in the community in England is shown in the list. Information on the cost of drugs dispensed in hospital pharmacies is not available centrally.

1995

January–June: £63,000.

1996

January–June: £163,000.

Notes:

Data are only available for the first three months of the 1996–97 financial year. In order to provide a six-month comparison period, data are therefore provided on the basis of the first six calendar months for each year.

Figures are rounded to the nearest £1,000, and include the cost of any prescriptions written by hospital consultants but dispensed in the community.

The data are from the prescribing analysis cost system generated by the Prescription Pricing Authority and cover only those prescriptions which were dispensed in the community.

Childhood Leukaemia

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has supported on childhood leukaemia by ensuring that the national database of childhood leukaemia held by the childhood cancer research group remains open; and what plans he has for future funding. [2332]

Mr. Horam: The Department of Health supports the childhood cancer research group. A new contract has been placed to run from 1 January 1996 to 31 December 2000 to a value of £350,000 per year. One of the main objectives of the core-funded programme is the development and management of the national registry of childhood tumours, which includes virtually all cases of cancer and leukaemia in children aged 0 to 14 in Great Britain.

Finance

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in cash terms the baseline allocation figures for each English health authority which have been circulated to finance directors for comment. [2328]

Mr. Horam: A table showing the health authority recurrent baselines will be placed in the Library. These have been circulated to health authorities for validation and may therefore be subject to amendment.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 5 November 1996

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Greyhound Racing

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) what assessment she has made of the impact on greyhound racing of the decision to allow a second weekly national lottery draw, in respect of *(a)* attendances *(b)* the number of greyhound tracks *(c)* employment in the industry *(d)* total revenue accruing to greyhound racing *(e)* greyhound racing profitability and *(f)* taxation revenue; [2318]

(2) what assessment she has made as to the impact on the off-course greyhound betting industry of the introduction of a second weekly national lottery draw. [2275]

Mr. Sproat: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made no such assessment. Under section 4 of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, the Director General of the National Lottery has a duty to exercise his functions in the manner he considers most likely to secure that the national lottery is run with all due propriety, that the interests of participants in the lottery are protected, and subject to these to maximise the revenue to the good causes. The director general judged that the introduction of a midweek draw would be consistent with these duties.

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans she has to meet representatives of the greyhound racing industry to discuss the impact of a second weekly national lottery draw on off-course and on-course betting. [2237]

Mr. Sproat: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to meet the greyhound racing industry. Responsibility for greyhound racing and the gaming industry in general is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

BBC

Dr. Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will make a statement on the publication of the BBC's statement of promises to viewers and listeners. [2768]

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: I welcome the publication today of the BBC's first statement of promises to viewers and listeners. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House. The BBC is a unique broadcaster and has a unique relationship with its audience. The new charter and agreement came into effect on 1 May this year. They reaffirm the BBC's independence. That independence requires direct accountability to licence fee payers. The statement of promises forms a new link between the BBC and its audience. It sets out the standards of service that all viewers and listeners can expect from the BBC and the standards against which the BBC board of governors will carry out its annual assessment and report on the corporation's performance. The statement of promises brings to the BBC the principles of the Prime Minister's citizens charter initiative. A summary version will be available to licence fee payers.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many women are currently employed by her Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1248]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* My Department, excluding its executive agencies, currently employs 178 women. This is 49 per cent. of the total staff employed by the Department.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by her Department have received any assistance from the Department with child care. [1289]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such data. However my Department, as part of its equal opportunities policy, offers a range of child care facilities including a subsidised nursery place, a subsidised holiday play scheme and standard civil service maternity and paternity provisions; staff also have the opportunity to take extended leave due to family commitments.

Public Houses

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps she is taking to protect the historical heritage of public house names; and if she will make a statement. [1886]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The names of public houses are entirely matters for their owners to decide. Where a change of name of a public house which is listed as a building of special architectural or historic interest involves an alternation to its fabric which would affect its character as such a building, listed building consent would be required from the local planning authority.

DEFENCE

Land Mines

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the *(a)* maximum timed life and *(b)* self-destruct reliability of (i) area denial and (ii) land mine systems presently in active service with British forces. [391]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The systems concerned are the HB876 sub-munition of the JP233 area denial weapon and the MLRS AT2 scatterable mine. Self-destruction will normally take place in a matter of hours for the HB876; its self-destruct reliability is currently being assessed. The AT2 mine self-destructs within days and has a reliability which has been evaluated as over 99 per cent. Additionally, in each case mine detonation relies on a short-life battery, and any mine that fails to self-destruct will deactivate within a further short period. Precise self-destruction timings for both mines are classified.

There is no other area denial weapon in service with the British armed forces, and no other land mine system in service which has a maximum timed life or a self-destruct capability.

Unidentified Flying Craft

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the reports of encounters by Royal Air Force pilots with unidentified flying craft since 1966 which have not been released to the public; on what grounds they have been retained; and if he will make a statement. [2201]

Mr. Soames: The information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the Royal Air Force's practice as regards investigating sightings of unidentified flying craft which correlate with radar information; if there is a requirement to investigate such phenomena by scrambling aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [2200]

Mr. Soames: Unidentified contacts penetrating UK airspace or the UK air defence region are identified by all available means, including interception.

Gulf War Veterans

Mr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the people who are currently employed on his Department's Gulf veterans medical assessment programme. [1687]

Mr. Soames: The personnel currently employed by my Department's Gulf veterans medical assessment programme are:

Military:

2 consultant physicians (1 group captain RAF and 1 lieutenant colonel Royal Army Medical Corps)

1 state registered nurse (squadron leader RAF)

1 medical administrator (flight sergeant RAF)

Civilian:

1 personal secretary

1 administrative officer

2 administrative assistants

1 typist

In addition, the Middlesex hospital undertakes diagnostic testing at the request of the MAP consultants.

Married Quarters Estate

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the sale of the married quarters estate to Annington Homes. [2750]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Contracts for the sale were exchanged on 24 September. The transaction was completed today.

Menwith Hill RAF Station

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what right of access the Health and Safety Executive has to Menwith Hill station; if it makes regular health and safety checks; and how many times it has made official visits to the Menwith Hill station. [2153]

Mr. Soames: The Health and Safety Executive has the same right of access to RAF Menwith Hill as at any other MOD establishment. The Health and Safety Executive have visited the site once in June 1996.

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what systems are in place to monitor levels of non-ionising electro-magnetic radiation at Menwith Hill station; who is responsible for such monitoring; if their reports are made available to the public; and what precautions are being taken to protect the health and safety of *(a)* the base population, *(b)* the local community and *(c)* the local environment from the effects of non-ionising electro-magnetic radiation emitted by operations at Menwith Hill station. [2157]

Mr. Soames: There is no specific legal requirement to monitor non-ionising electro-magnetic radiation. However RAF Menwith Hill observes and operates in accordance with the National Radiological Protection Board guidelines and the Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992.

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will commission a report on the state of the environment at Menwith Hill station, similar to the internal US environmental compliance status survey of 1992; on what occasions his Department has commissioned similar reports in the past; and if he will commission and publish such reports on a regular basis. [2158]

Mr. Soames: No. The commissioning of compliance status surveys is the sole responsibility of the US authorities. These surveys are carried out to US criteria and I am satisfied that the standards applied fully meet those applicable in the UK. Therefore my Department has not commissioned any similar reports and does not intend to do so.

United States Visiting Forces

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which British bases are occupied by United States visiting forces; how many United States personnel are stationed at each; for what reasons sites used by United States visiting forces are designated as RAF stations; when and by whom this decision was taken; what parliamentary scrutiny of this decision has taken place; and if he will make a statement. [2155]

Mr. Soames: United States visiting forces are present at the following bases. Numbers of personnel at each base are shown in brackets.

RAF Alconbury/RAF Molesworth/RAF Upwood: (1,365)
RAF Croughton/RAF Barford St. John: (530)
RAF Daws Hill/RAF High Wycombe/RAF West Ruislip: (600)
RAF Digby: (15)
RAF Edzell: (280)
RAF Fairford/RAF Welford: (180)
RAF Fylingdales: (1)
RAF Hythe: (5)
RAF Lakenheath/RAF Feltwell: (5,330)
RAF Menwith Hill: (1,200)
RAF Mildenhall: (4,450)
RAF Northwood: (10)
RAF Oakhanger: (1)
RAF Spadeadam: (5)
RAF St. Mawgan: (320)
RAF Uxbridge: (15)

The American presence is chiefly Air Force and as the sites are parented by the RAF they are designated as RAF stations. Parliament has the same opportunity to scrutinise this as with any other administrative decision.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2618]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The capability of MOD's existing computer systems to recognise the millennium date change remains under investigation and has been the subject of recent MOD-wide guidance requiring those responsible for current and planned information systems to assess fully the extent of the problem. Until these assessments have been made it will not be possible to assess the cost effects of the year 2000 date change.

Operation Seanuts

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the outcome of the waste disposal programme, Operation Seanuts. [2601]

Mr. Soames: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of the letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

TRANSPORT

Railway Inspectorate

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many complaints have been received by Her Majesty's railway inspectorate relating to unqualified contractors working on the rail network in the last 12 months. [1445]

Mr. Watts: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave her on 14 October 1996, *Official Report*, column 972.

Clapham Rail Crash (Recommendations)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the recommendations of the 1988 Clapham rail crash report which have not been put into operation. [1871]

Mr. Watts: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave her on 24 July 1996, *Official Report*, column *347*.

Watford Rail Crash

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if the passenger train involved in the Watford train crash of 8 August was equipped with automatic train protection; and if the protection was operating at the time of the crash. [1873]

Mr. Watts: I am advised by the Health and Safety Executive that neither train involved in the accident near Watford on 8 August was fitted with automatic train protection.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will publish the accident report into the Watford rail crash of 8 August. [1868]

Mr. Watts: The Health and Safety Executive's railway inspectorate is continuing its independent investigation into the cause of the collision. A report of the findings will be published by HSE when its inquiries are complete.

Railway Accident Reports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what measures he has taken to prevent the naming of individual railworkers in advance of the publication of a railway accident report. [1869]

Mr. Watts: I deplore the leaking of railway accident reports and the premature and unauthorised release of the names of individual rail workers in advance of the publication of any railway accident report, and especially in advance of decisions being taken on whether any legal proceedings are to be taken as a result of any official investigation.

Rolling Stock (Safety)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the safe operating life of mark 1 rolling stock. [1875]

Mr. Watts: Mark 1 rolling stock was built between 1951 and 1974, although the oldest stock currently in use all year round dates from 1956.

Mark 1 rolling stock was designed and constructed to have an expected life of between 30 and 40 years and is subjected to regular inspection and maintenance at planned intervals to ensure that it is suitable for service use.

There is no reduction in the level of operating safety of mark 1 rolling stock during its life provided that it is maintained appropriately.

Rail Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the cost of installing and operating automatic train protection on all trains on the network. [1872]

Mr. Watts: None. The British Railways Board estimated in 1994 that, assessing the project over a 20–year period, the net total cash cost of a network–wide ATP system would be about £759 million. The independent Health and Safety Commission advised that the introduction of ATP, as piloted, on a network–wide basis was not reasonably practicable, and that there were alternative safety investments which would be likely to yield greater effectiveness in terms of lives saved, and better value for money.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what *(a)* legislation and *(b)* other rules and regulations cover safety requirements for rail transport after privatisation; and if he will indicate in particular which legislation or regulations apply to the number of standing passengers permitted as a ratio of seated passengers; [1852]

(2) what *(a)* legislation and *(b)* other rules and regulations covered rail transport safety before rail privatisation; and if he will make a statement. [1835]

Mr. Watts: The statutory requirements concerning railway safety which pre–date rail privatisation are referred to in annex 11 of HM Chief Inspecting Officer of Railways' annual report for 1994–95, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. These provisions are still in force.

Since the start of rail privatisation in 1994, the following safety regulations have been made under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974: the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 1994; the Railways (Safety Critical Work) Regulations 1994; the Railways and Other Transport Systems (Approval of Works, Plant and Equipment) Regulations 1994; the Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Rail Regulations 1996; the Packaging, Labelling and Carriage of Radioactive Materials by Rail Regulations 1996. In addition, the Health and Safety Commission has recently submitted to the Secretary of State draft Level Crossings Regulations and draft Railway Safety (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations. The latter would repeal and replace most of the pre–1994 provisions.

There are no statutory provisions which cover the ratio of standing to seated passengers.

Heathrow Flight Path

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the annual figures for the number of aircraft flying over Lewisham, East to and from Heathrow for each of the past five years. [2129]

Mr. Bowis: The information is not held in the form requested. Radar track recordings are not normally retained by National Air Traffic Services Ltd. for longer than 30 days. Heathrow Airport Ltd. holds information on aircraft tracks beyond a radius of 12 miles from the airport for the first 10 months of 1996 only, but analysis of this would incur disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what changes there have been recently to the flight path of aircraft flying to and from Heathrow over Lewisham, East. [2202]

Mr. Bowis: The main departure route from Heathrow towards Dover used by Heathrow traffic during easterly operations was last adjusted by one degree on 19 August 1993 to compensate for the accumulated movement of magnetic north since the previous such adjustment made in 1986. There are no fixed routes for landing aircraft. Aircraft normally land and take off into the wind. Lewisham, East is overflown by Heathrow departing traffic during easterly operations, which occur about 25 per cent. of the time during an average year, and by Heathrow landing traffic during westerly operations, which occur about 75 per cent. of the time during an average year. Lewisham, East is situated between the holding stack, located since 1971 over the Biggin Hill and Orpington area, and the extended runway centre lines followed by landing traffic on final approach to Heathrow during westerly operations. It is also overflown during easterly operations by traffic landing at London City airport.

Franchising Director

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the contractual restrictions placed on the retiring director of the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising in respect of professional relations with companies which had applied for a franchise to operate passenger rail services. [2219]

Mr. Watts: Under the terms of his original appointment, the former Director of Rail Franchising cannot join any company with railway interests within two years of termination except with the consent of the Secretary of State.

Bus Transport

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what steps he is taking to prevent the creation of regional monopolies in bus transport. [2281]

Mr. Watts: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 10 July 1996 by my hon. Friend the then Minister for Local Transport and Road Safety, *Official Report*, column *204*.

Rail Services

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many of the responses to the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising passenger service requirement consultation draft for Great Eastern Rail services supported the proposals in the draft specification; and if he will place in the Library copies of all responses received. [2218]

Mr. Watts: Consultation responses from local authorities and rail users' consultative committees focus on changes sought to draft passenger service requirements rather than explicitly confirming support for those elements of the draft PSR which are considered to be satisfactory. OPRAF made a number of changes from the consultation draft of the Great Eastern PSR as a

consequence of representations made by consultees. The changes are described in a document which was circulated to consultees when OPRAF published the final PSR.

OPRAF has no explicit agreement with consultees that enables it to make public their submissions, by placing them in the Library or by other means. The hon. Member may wish to approach consultees direct on this matter. I will write to the hon. Member with details of consultees.

Railway Stations

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many railway stations have been *(a)* opened and *(b)* re-opened over the last 10 years. [2039]

Mr. Watts: My Department's records show that since 1986 there have been 144 railway stations opened and 26 stations re-opened.

M20 (Ashford)

Sir Keith Speed: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is his estimate of the latest vehicle flow on the M20 motorway at Ashford. [1999]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mr. Lawrie Haynes to Sir Keith Speed, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question about traffic flows on the M20 at Ashford.

The Highways Agency does not have traffic counters on the M20 between Junction 9 (Ashford East) and Junction 10 (Ashford West). However, the 1995 Annual Average Daily Traffic flow on the adjoining section between Hollingbourne and Ashford (Junctions 8–9) was 18,500 eastbound and 18,400 westbound.

Highway Clearance

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what powers highway authorities have to charge *(a)* vehicle owners and *(b)* property owners for clearing the highway following an accident or obstruction; and what limits are placed on the levels of such charges. [2576]

Mr. Watts: Section 149 of the Highways Act 1980 enables highway authorities to require the removal of any thing deposited on the highway so as to constitute a nuisance, or to do it themselves and recoup the costs from the person responsible, but this may not be sufficient to cover all situations in which debris needs to be removed.

My Department proposes shortly to lay regulations under section 150 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 that will, among other things, explicitly enable local highway authorities to recoup costs incurred in connection with the clearance of accident debris. The charge will be recoverable from the person responsible for the deposit of the debris.

A38

Sir Robert Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects *(a)* design and *(b)* other preparatory work to commence on the proposed A38 trunk road improvement between Carkeel and Stoketon Cross; and if he will make a statement. [1633]

Mr. Watts: The A38 Saltash to Stoketon Cross improvement scheme remains in the main trunk road programme. It will be brought forward when funds allow.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2613]

Mr. Bowis: Main operational systems have been assessed and either replacement projects are being or will be programmed or rectification costs are or will be the subject of commercial negotiation. Where systems are being replaced, the cost effect of the millennium date change is not separately identified. A number of assessment projects are addressing the remainder of the Department's systems and cost estimates will be available only when decision are taken on the treatment of each system.

Air Traffic Control

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the amount spent in the last three months on *(a)* lawyers, *(b)* accountants, *(c)* consultants and *(d)* other professionals in consultations relating to privatisation of the national air traffic control service. [12]

Mr. Bowis *[pursuant to his answer, 29 October 1996, Official Report, c. 100]:* The Department of Transport spent about £4,000 plus VAT on legal fees in connection with this issue, with no expenditure under the other sub-headings. In addition, the Civil Aviation Authority spent approximately £25,000 plus VAT on legal fees and approximately £125,000 plus VAT on other consultants.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Lord President of the Council what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2607]

Mr. Newton: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 13 June 1996, *Official Report*, column 290.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2612]

Mr. Streeter: The Department is continuing its assessment of the impact of the millennium date change on its computer systems. Until this work is complete, it will not be possible to estimate the likely costs.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Attorney-General what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department, with particular reference to those operated by the Crown Prosecution Service. [2619]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service has identified all current CPS software systems which need to be checked for the millennium problem. An analysis of the staff effort needed for testing suggests that about one man year of work is involved. Work is also under way to identify other costs, such as replacement of outdated hardware.

The Serious Fraud Office estimates that a few man months of work will be required to make the necessary changes to its systems, if it becomes apparent that those systems will still be required in the new millennium. A number of those systems may in fact be replaced before the year 2000.

In the case of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and Government Property Lawyers, no significant cost effects are expected.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

International Criminal Court

Sir David Steel: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Government preparations for attendance of a UN plenipotentiary diplomatic conference in late 1998 to discuss the establishment of an international criminal court. [1881]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We are active participants in the preparatory process to consider the establishment of an international criminal court. However, a date has not yet been set for a conference to consider a statute for such a court. We will make preparations for such a conference once a date has been set.

Torture

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Mexican Government over their use of torture. [1927]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We have made clear our concerns to the Mexican Government, who acknowledge the problem and are seeking to resolve it. We are supporting a police reform programme being implemented by the Ministry for Public Sector Reform, in order to help raise human rights awareness throughout the various police forces.

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Turkish Government regarding the implementation of the Council of Europe recommendations regarding torture. [1931]

Mr. David Davis: We have urged the Turkish authorities to implement the recommendations made following the visits of the European committee for the prevention of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment to Turkey, and to publish three reports. We welcomed the Turkish Government's decision to invite the committee to make a further visit to Turkey in August to look at prison conditions.

Heads of Government Summit

Sir Anthony Durant: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy regarding the proposals contained in recommendation 1303 (1996) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe relating to a second summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe; and if he will make a statement. [2205]

Mr. David Davis: We accept that a second summit would serve a useful purpose. We expect a decision on whether or not to hold such a summit in the second half of 1997 in Strasbourg to be made at the 99th session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 7 November. We take full note of the items listed in recommendation 1303 (1996) as potential elements for a draft declaration following a second summit, but we believe that any draft text should evolve after further consideration by member states, in consultation with the Parliamentary Assembly.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each repeal. [1396]

Mr. Hanley: This Department issues very few rules and regulations. There are no plans to repeal any rules or regulations by the end of 1996.

Morwenstowe Interception Station, Bude

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what classification and status the Morwenstowe interception station at Bude in Cornwall has been given; at what cost it was built; who paid for it; who owns the radomes and equipment; what flags it flies; how many personnel work there and from what organisations; and if he will identify the name, nationality and employer of its commander. [2154]

Mr. Rifkind: The composite signals organisation station at Morwenstowe is directly subordinate to GCHQ. It is Government policy not to provide details about the operations or expenditure of the security and intelligence agencies, or about their staff.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the Foreign Minister of South Africa in respect of Lockerbie. [2416]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: None.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2615]

Mr. Hanley: In line with central guidance, this Department has completed an initial study which shows that up to 60 per cent. of its software applications may be affected. Further study is taking place to determine the risks and costs. The Overseas Development Administration is taking similar action. We estimate that all problems will be resolved and that systems will be fully 2000-resilient by 31 March 1999.

Argentina

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers authorised the reassessment of the military embargo against Argentina which led to the supply of naval engine parts; and which Ministers were informed of the outcome of this reassessment and when. [1065]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the statement in this House on 24 October by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary and to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. The advice given by the Department of Trade and Industry to Rolls-Royce on the licensability of the Tyne engine and components did not constitute either a variation or a relaxation of the embargo, nor did it reflect any reassessment of policy on the embargo.

TREASURY

National Debt

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what have been the principal factors underlying the changes in the levels of the national debt since November 1990. [899]

Mr. Waldegrave: Changes in national debt principally reflect the level of Government borrowing, which increased substantially in the recession in the early 1990s. The public sector borrowing requirement has since fallen; the latest forecast for 1996–97 is for a PSBR as a per cent. of gross domestic product of half its peak level in 1993–94.

Beer

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to restrict the amount of beer for personal consumption which can be imported from the rest of the EU into the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [1165]

Mr. Oppenheim: Under the provisions of the Excise Duty (Personal Reliefs) Order 1992, based on Council directive 92/12/EEC, travellers may bring into the UK alcohol, purchased for their own use, duty and tax paid in another EU country, without further liability to UK duty and tax. There is no restriction on the quantity of such goods that an individual can purchase. The directive, however, provides indicative levels, agreed by all member states, which can assist Customs officers in determining whether goods are in fact intended for commercial use—for beer the level is 110 litres. Although there is no fiscal frontier, a person holding such goods may be challenged by a Customs officer anywhere in the UK, and must be able to satisfy the officer that goods in excess of the indicative levels are not for a commercial purpose.

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to equalise the duty on beer with that applying in other European countries; and if he will make a statement. [1166]

Mr. Oppenheim: The Government would like to see some movement towards the equalisation of duty rates on beer within the EU through the mechanism of the European Commission's biennial review of the minimum rates of excise duty. The next review is due by the end of 1996. Meanwhile, in reaching his Budget decisions, the Chancellor of the Exchequer takes a range of factors into account, including the rates of duty applied by our near neighbours in the European Union.

Public Sector Debt

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the present size of the net public sector debt; and what was the equivalent figure in *(a)* November 1990 and *(b)* May 1979. [809]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Debt figures are not available on a monthly basis; published figures record the stock of debt at the end of each financial year. A provisional estimate of net public sector debt at end March 1996 of £323 billion was published in the "Summer Economic Forecast". Equivalent figures for end March 1991 and end March 1979 were £154 billion and £91 billion respectively. Such comparisons are not particularly meaningful since they take no account of the impact of inflation or the size of the economy. As a per cent. of money GDP, net public sector debt in 1996 was somewhat lower than in 1979.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the net public sector debt per income tax payer; and what was the figure in *(a)* November 1990 and *(b)* May 1979. [812]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Debt figures are not available on a monthly basis; published figures record the stock of debt at the end of each financial year. Based on the provisional estimate of net public sector debt at end March published in the "Summer Economic Forecast", NPSD per income tax payer at end-March 1996 was £12,700. Equivalent figures for end-March 1991 and end March 1979 were £5,900 and £4,300 respectively. Such comparisons are not particularly meaningful since they take no account of inflation. Real net public sector debt per income tax payer was marginally lower in 1996 than in 1979.

Transport Fuel Duty

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations he has received from road haulage organisations on the current level of transport fuel duty; and if he will make a statement. [1748]

Mr. Oppenheim: I and my ministerial colleagues have received numerous representations from individuals and companies involved in road haulage. I saw representatives of the Road Haulage Association as recently as 29 October.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals his Department is currently evaluating with regard to local exchange trading systems and the Inland Revenue; and if he will make a statement. [2306]

Mr. Jack: The Inland Revenue is not aware of any particular problems with local exchange trading systems and has no plans to evaluate these schemes.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is Her Majesty's Government's policy in respect of LETS and the Inland Revenue; and if he will make a statement. [2305]

Mr. Jack: Traders who operate within a local exchange trading system are taxable on their trading profits, just like traders who operate outside of such a scheme.

Ministerial Visit (Switzerland)

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the purpose of his visit to Switzerland between 2 and 4 December 1994. [2208]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: My visit to Switzerland was a private one made at my own expense.

Unremunerated Work

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the Government plan to take forward the commitment, given in the global platform for action resulting from the fourth UN world conference on women, to measure unremunerated work which is outside the usual national account conventions. [2923]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The Office for National Statistics is working to construct a satellite account on the household, in line with recommendations in the 1993 UN system of national accounts. Part of this project is theoretical and will be overseen by an interdepartmental working group on satellite accounts. The rest of the project would involve asking people how they use their time, to find out how much unpaid work is done. At present, ONS is designing a pilot survey which would take place in 1997. An article on time use data in the construction of household accounts appeared in the July edition of *Economic Trends*.

European Monetary Union

Mr. Hain: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of recent progress towards European monetary union. [703]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke *[holding answer 30 October 1996]:* The Florence European Council stated that economic and monetary union will start, in accordance with the EC treaty, on 1 January 1999, but it is too early to make realistic and certain assessment of progress and there are still considerable uncertainties. The decision on which countries are adjudged to meet the conditions to join EMU in 1999 will not be made by Heads of Government until early 1998, based on an assessment by the council of Economic and Finance Ministers, ECOFIN, at that time.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the latest date by which the United Kingdom will need to make a decision on whether to participate as a founder member of European monetary union if the existing timetable is adhered to; and if he will make a statement. [811]

Mr. Clarke: *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The existing timetable is still based on the assumption that EMU will start on 1 January 1999 although that is open to considerable uncertainty in practice. Protocol No.11 to the EC treaty provides that in the event of EMU starting on 1 January 1999, the United Kingdom may notify its intention to move to the third stage before 1 January 1998.

Government Financial Deficit

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the ability of the United Kingdom to reduce its general Government financial deficit to below the 3 per cent. level necessary to meet the Maastrict treaty convergence criteria. [810]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The summer economic forecast projected a general Government deficit in the UK of 3 per cent. in 1997–98. Updated forecasts will be published with the Budget, on 26 November 1996.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* UK receipts from CAP as a proportion of UK gross domestic product, and *(b)* Scottish receipts from CAP as a proportion of Scotland's gross domestic product. [1534]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* The following figures refer to 1994 gross domestic product, as that is the last year for which a figure for Scottish gross domestic product is currently available. UK receipts from CAP represented 0.4 per cent. of UK GDP, excluding the UK continental shelf. Scottish receipts from CAP represented 0.6 per cent. of Scottish GDP.

Venture Capital

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* the size of each company invested in by a venture capital trust, together with the sum invested and *(b)* the number and size of companies in which more than one venture capital trust has invested, together with the number of venture capital trusts which have invested in each. [1225]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* We expect the venture capital trusts to give information of the type requested in their annual reports.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the past five financial years. [1268]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Expenditure on advertising, public relations and official hospitality by HM Treasury in the last five financial years is included in the published running costs.

Car Parking

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue which would be raised by the treatment of car parking space provided to employees as a taxable benefit; and if he will make a statement. [1622]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Before 1988, the benefit of employer-provided workplace car parking was taxable under the general rules for valuing benefits in kind. This benefit was exempted in 1988, on practical grounds, at a cost then estimated at £5 million a year. The revenues that would now be raised by specific charging rules would depend on those rules—for example, the valuation mechanism and any exclusion for low-value parking or infrequent users.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

EU Maternal and Child Health Budget Line

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many and which projects have been funded by the EU maternal and child health budget line for *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996; and what is the total amount of funding allocated for these projects; [2008]

(2) what is the total amount of commitment appropriation for the EU maternal and child health budget line (B7–5047) for *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [2007]

(3) which agencies and non-governmental organisations are responsible for projects funded by the EU maternal and child health budget line for *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996; in which countries the projects are conducted; and what is their duration. [2009]

Dr. Liam Fox: The projects funded are as follows:

1994

1. Commonwealth Regional Health Community Secretariat: support for Commonwealth reproductive health programme in east, central and southern Africa, duration 40 months.
2. Marie Stopes International (UK): testing the effectiveness of a community based network in Bolivia, duration 26 months.
3. Marie Stopes International (UK): studies on a family life education programme and a family planning education programme in Kenya, duration 20 months.
4. International Planned Parenthood Federation Resources Development Department: expanding family planning services in the Caribbean—Belize, Guyana, St. Lucia—in the wider context of reproductive health, duration 28 months.

1995

This budget line had no appropriations for that fiscal year.

1996

1. University of Wales: review of three maternal and child health projects funded by the EC, duration five months.
2. Walter Kessler: study on the problems of integrating Maternal and Child Health into financial health programmes, duration 14 months.
3. Commonwealth Regional Health Community Secretariat: operation research to demonstrate the impact of a package of low cost and sustainable intervention to reduce perinatal, neonatal and maternal mortality and morbidity in selected districts in Zimbabwe, duration 28 months.

The total amount committed for the EU maternal and child health budget line was 2,306,250 ECU for years 1994 to 1996. No funds are committed for 1997.

Kenya

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what human rights considerations are applied in selecting candidates from the Kenyan military and police for training. [2295]

Dr. Liam Fox: Candidates for training are nominated by the Kenyan Government. We examine candidates' professional qualifications.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proportion of United Kingdom trainers currently training the Kenyan police have been training them since 1991. [2296]

Dr. Fox: None.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in which years the Kenyan police have received training in the United Kingdom since 1991. [2299]

Dr. Fox: Since 1991, 26 members of the Kenyan police have received training in the United Kingdom: five in 1991, one in 1992, four in 1995, and 16 in 1996.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what human rights elements have been included in the training of Kenyan police since 1991. [2284]

Dr. Fox: A number of trainees attended the international commanders course at the Bramshill police training college in the UK which includes a specific component on human rights. In addition, we are currently helping the Kenyan police force develop two in-country training courses: a senior management training course which concentrates on the responsibility and accountability of the police to the community; and a course on the care and treatment of the public and prisoners. Both courses are concerned with awareness of human rights issues.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what human rights components were included in the training of Kenyan military personnel during 1995 in the United Kingdom and Kenya. [2283]

Dr. Fox: The detail of our bilateral training programmes for military personnel is regarded as confidential between Governments. We have no reason to believe that our training programmes have anything other than a positive impact on human rights practices in other countries.

Mrs. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many and what grade of Kenyan military personnel trainees were trained during 1995 in the United Kingdom and Kenya. [2282]

Dr. Fox: The detail of our bilateral training programmes for military personnel is regarded as confidential between Governments.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Horticultural Training

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what Government training schemes available for *(a)* school leavers, *(b)* people unemployed, *(c)* people unemployed for over six months but under 12 months, *(d)* people unemployed for over 12 months but under two years and *(e)* people unemployed for over two years include a significant proportion of training in horticultural skills, stating for each the number of places available and what percentage that is of the total number of places offered on other available schemes; and if she will make a statement. [1680]

Mr. Paice: Training and enterprise councils operate three main programmes on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment. The training delivered through each of these is geared to local labour market needs. Youth training offers the opportunity for 16 and 17-year-olds to receive training leading to a recognised vocational qualification of at least NVQ level 2 or equivalent. Modern apprenticeships are a similar scheme with an upper age limit of 25 in which to complete the programme. Training for work is aimed at people between the ages of 18 and 63 who have been unemployed for six months or more, although other disadvantaged groups, for example, people with disabilities and people needing literacy or numeracy training, have immediate eligibility regardless of the length of unemployment. From these programmes, the following figures are given:

England and Wales — *April to June 1996*

	Starts in horticultural trades	*Percentage of all starts*
Youth training	260	1
Training for work	640	2
Modern apprenticeships	20	Less than 1

Source:
YT, TfW, MA Starts databases.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what research she has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned regarding the educational value of horticulture; and if she will make a statement; [1593]

(2) what research she has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned regarding training schemes for teaching organic methods of horticulture; and if she will make a statement. [1657]

Mr. Paice: We have not evaluated or commissioned research in this area.

Local Education Authorities (Capital Spending)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the capital spending by each local education authority in each of the last six years for which figures are available; and what have been the Government capital allocations to each local education authority in each of those years and in each subsequent year for which allocations have been made *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* in real terms. [2123]

Mrs. Gillan: As the information is contained in a number of tables, I will write to the hon. Member and place copies in the Library.

Pupils (Behavioural Problems)

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list, consequent to the duties laid on local education authorities in clause 26 of the Education Bill requiring them to publish the arrangements they make in relation to pupils with behavioural problems, *(a)* how such problems shall be defined and by whom, *(b)* who shall determine the extent and nature of the necessary physical and human arrangements and *(c)* how such is to be financed. [2326]

Mr. Forth: We intend that all of these matters will be determined by local education authorities. But each of them may need to feature in the guidance which my right hon. Friend will issue, and on which we plan to consult widely over coming months.

Teachers (In-service Training)

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will review the practice of conducting in-service training during school working days; and if she will make a statement. [2006]

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State expects governing bodies and head teachers to organise in-service training for their staff in a way which causes the least possible disruption to their pupils' education. Since 1 September 1995, governing bodies have been able to pay teachers for attending training at weekends and during school holidays using funds which would otherwise be spent on supply cover for courses during school hours.

Schools Access Initiative

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provisions have been made for the continued funding of the schools access initiative. [2206]

Mrs. Gillan: No decision has been taken yet on whether to repeat the schools access initiative in 1997–98. The decision will be taken in light of the overall resources available for education at the end of the public expenditure survey round.

Departmental Information

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list in date order the information sent by her Department to *(a)* primary, *(b)* special and *(d)* grant-maintained schools during the academic year 1995–96. [1624]

Mr. Robin Squire: The information is given in the following table. It is not possible to give separately the figures for special schools. Since this period, the Department has taken steps to reduce significantly the amount of written material that it sends to schools. Although schools will continue to receive automatically essential information, for example, on the law, it is now for them to decide what other information they want and to order it from a twice-termly list of recent publications.

Title	*Date*
Primary schools	
Removing the Requirement to Publish Statutory Proposals to Establish Nursery Classes in the Maintained Sector	September 1995
Pupil Achievement in Primary Schools 1995	March 1996
Secondary schools	
Approval of qualifications under section 5 of ERA	April 1995
Good Practice in Secondary Schools	May 1995
New National targets for Education and Training	May 1995
Value Added for GCSE A/AS Level	June 1995
Schools and Colleges Performance Tables Circular 7/95	July 1995
Sportsmark Letter	July 1995
The Parent's Charter: Publication of Information Secondary Schools Performance Circular 6/95	July 1995
Bovine Eyeball Dissection in Schools	July 1995
Top Flight leaflet	August 1996
Section 50 Circular	August 1996
Section 50 Guidance	September 1995
School and College Performance Tables	November 1995
Performance Tables Consultation	February 19096
Pupil Achievement in Secondary Schools 1995	March 1996
All schools	
Schools Update	April 1995
VJ pack	April 1995
School Teachers' Review Body document	April 1995
Charter mark guidance	April 1995
Governing Bodies and Effective Schools booklet	April 1995
Appeal Committee Guidelines	April 1995
Teachers' Pay and Conditions Order 1995	April 1995
Drugs Circular	May 1995
Section 5 Circular	May 1995
White Paper on Competitiveness; Forging Ahead	May 1995
Teachers' Pay and Condition Booklet and Circular	June 1995
Schools Update	June 1995
Sports Policy Statement	July 1995
Annual GM consideration	July 1995
Assisted Places Scheme: A Brief Guide for Parents	August 1995
VJ Day 'thank you' letter	September 1995
VASA Grant Guide	September 1995
Schools Action Plans: Planning for Improvement	September 1995
Ethnic Monitoring of School Pupils—Circular Letter	September 1995
Aide-Memoire for School Governors	October 1995
Child Protection circular 10/95	October 1995
Schools Update	October 1995
Teachers' Misconduct circular 11/95	October 1995
Protecting Children from Abuse: Role of the Education Service	October 1995
Our School Your School booklet	October 1995
Schools Census Form	November 1995
Consultation document on National Curriculum Assessment	January 1996
Physical Education and Sports in Schools	January 1996
NC Assessment for 7, 11 and 14 year olds	January 1996
Assessing and Testing	February 1996
Commonwealth Day Poster/Message	February 1996
School Teachers' Review Body Report 1996	February 1996
Bullying Packs	March 1996
Charter Mark	March 1996
BSE letter	March 1996
School girl Rubella Immunisation	March 1996
Pupil Achievement in Schools	March 1996
Grant-maintained schools	
GM Funding	April 1995
Single Regeneration Budget	April 1995
Common Funding Formula for GM Schools	June 1995
Annual Maintenance Grant for GM and GM Special Schools 1996–97	July 1995
School Premises Regulations—Consultation document and letter on asbestos in educational buildings	August 1995
GM Bulletin Edition No. 13	October 1995
Common Funding Formula 96–97 Consultation Paper	October 1995
Statutory Instrument 1743	October 1995
Going GM Conferences	November 1995
AGM Arrangements 1996–97	December 1995
GM Admissions Consultation	January 1996
GM Conferences	February 1996
Secondary School Total—CFF	February 1996
Nursery Provision	February 1996
GM Bulletin Edition No. 14	February 1996
GM Speakers List	March 1996

Schools (Money Reserves)

Mr. Porter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money local education authority schools in Suffolk and Norfolk had in reserve, deposit and holding accounts *(a)* as a total amount and *(b)* as a percentage of the total available to be spent on schools in each of the last three years. [2048]

Mr. Robin Squire: The following table shows in column 1 for Norfolk and column 3 for Suffolk, the total financial balances, net of any deficits, held at the end of each year by the schools covered by each local education authority's scheme for the local management of schools. The figures have been derived from the LMS outturn statements produced by the LEAs for the relevant years. Columns 2 and 4 show, for each LEA respectively, the balances expressed as a percentage of the general schools budget—less capital expenditure and capital finance costs—shown at the beginning of each year in the LMS budget statement.

	Norfolk		*Suffolk*	
Financial	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*
year	*£000*	*Per cent.*	*£000*	*Per cent.*
1993–94	9,199	4.7	13,500	7.1
1994–95[1]	9,262	4.4	11,487	5.7
1995–96[1]	7,929	3.9	10,916	5.2

[1] Includes special schools.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment she has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by her Department. [2617]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Department has made an initial assessment of 5,000 days effort for the 1997–98 financial year. A project has been set up to identify all the Department's computer systems which will be impacted by the millennium date change. This projet will provide detailed costings covering all the work needed up to the millennium and take forward those changes where they are cost justified.

Youth Unemployment (Cambridgeshire)

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of 18 to 24-year-olds in the constituency of South-East Cambridgeshire are unemployed; and if he will make a statement. [980]

Mr. Paice *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* The Office for National Statistics does not provide claimant unemployment rates by age below national level, and considers that sample sizes in an area as small as a parliamentary constituency would be too small for reliable estimates of unemployment to be made from the quarterly labour force survey. However, data from the 1991 census show an unemployment rate of 7.7 per cent. for 18 to 24-year-olds in the constituency of South-East Cambridgeshire.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for acknowledging his error in stating—*Official Report,* 22 May 1996, column *274*—that one in four 18 to 24-year-olds in South-East Cambridgeshire are unemployed. I am happy to accept that his misleading remark was made accidentally.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by her Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1288]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such data.

The Department is, however, able to give information on the number of staff who have received child care assistance.

Subsidised places are provided at four playschemes and two nurseries at the DFEE head office sites. Two hundred and twenty-one female and 101 male staff have used the play schemes or nurseries in the past 12 months.

Staff can claim additional child care expenses arising from attendance at a residential training course or from disruption to normal work routine. Thirty-five women and nine men have claimed additional child care expenses from the Department in the past 12 months.

The Department also offers a range of provisions which can help staff balance home and home and work responsibilities:

Career breaks enable staff to take up to five years off work to cope with domestic responsibilities.

Paid and unpaid special leave is available to allow carers to deal with emergency child care cover.

Staff can apply to have a flexible work pattern such as part time, job sharing and home working.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many women are currently employed by her Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1255]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The DFEE excluding executive agencies currently employs 2,662 women. This is 53 per cent. of the Department's total employees.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the overall cost to the Prison Service of introducing mandatory drug testing including capital investment involved in building appropriate facilities and *(b)* the cost to the Prison Service per drug test, indicating *(a)* Prison Service expenditure and *(b)* costs billed to non-Prison Service contractors, excluding capital investment involved in building appropriate facilities. [1500]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. George Howarth, dated 5 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the costs of introducing mandatory drug testing and of the tests themselves.

The total cost of introducing mandatory drug testing was £940,840. The cost of a mandatory drug test is £45.32. More detail is given in the attached tables.

Introducing mandatory drug testing

	£
Building work and equipment[1]	266,000
First phase staffing costs	36,000
Staff training	551,000
Headquarters project staffing and expenses	87,840
Total	940,840

[1]This represents centrally allocated funds. In a few cases where only minor alterations were necessary or the work was done as part of a larger building project, the costs were borne by individual establishments. These costs could only be calculated at disproportionate expense.

Cost of a mandatory drug test

	£
Equipment	1.02
Courier	0.99
Laboratory Analysis[1]	2.37
Staff costs	40.94
Total	45.32

[1]This is for the initial screen test which all samples undergo. 8.6 per cent. of samples undergo a further, confirmatory test at a cost of £28.82.

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond to the recommendations in the report of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs on "Drug Misusers and the Prison System—An Integrated Approach". [1755]

Miss Widdecombe: We expect to do so soon.

Training Periods

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the specific training period for *(a)* a probation officer, *(b)* a fireman and *(c)* a prison officer. [1953]

Mr. Sackville: Under the new arrangements for the recruitment and qualifying training of probation officers, there will not be a specific training period. A flexible training programme is being devised which will allow training to be geared to the needs of individual recruits, taking into account their skills and experience. This will make it easier for a broad range of applicants to apply for appointment as a probation officer as they will not have to undertake the two-year social work diploma course required under the previous arrangements.

Home Office guidance recommends a minimum of 14 weeks' training for recruit firefighters.

Newly recruited prison officers undertake 13 weeks' initial training, including a nine-week residential course.

Immigrants (South African)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many immigrants and returnees from South Africa entered the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1985 and *(d)* each year from 1990 to 1995, broken down by ethnic origin where available. [1948]

Mr. Kirkhope: Information on migrants, including temporary migrants, from South Africa is given in table A, and information on South African citizens who have been accepted for settlement in the United Kingdom is given in table B. Information on their ethnic origin is not available.

Table A: Migrants from South Africa[1] entering the United Kingdom

Thousands of persons

Year[2]	Total	Country of birth: United Kingdom	Country of birth: Rest of the world
1970	6.8	[3]4.5	[3]2.3
1980	3.9	2.5	1.4
1985	17.8	10.1	7.7
1990	6.4	4.4	2.0

Table A: Migrants from South Africa[1] entering the United Kingdom

Thousands of persons

Year[2]	Total	Country of birth: United Kingdom	Country of birth: Rest of the world
1991	8.0	6.0	2.0
1992	6.9	4.8	2.1
1993	9.4	5.7	3.7
1994	8.1	2.6	5.5

Source:
Office for National Statistics.
Notes:
[1] Persons who have resided for a year or longer in South Africa and who state on arrival the intention to stay in the United Kingdom for a year or longer.
[2] Data for 1995 onwards are not yet available.
[3] Data relate to nationality not country of birth.

Table B: Citizens of South Africa accepted for settlement in the United Kingdom

Year	Number
1970	[1]—
1980	920
1985	790
1990	850
1991	1,050
1992	890
1993	1,100
1994	1,260
1995	1,300

[1] Not available.

Firearms

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the value of the retail trade in handguns of more than .22 calibre. [1480]

Miss Widdecombe: We have made no estimate of this.

Sir Jerry Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he has received concerning the temporary dismantling of self–loading pistols and revolvers proposed in Lord Cullen's report at paragraph 9.106; and if he will place that advice in the Library. [2020]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Advice from firearms experts at the Forensic Science Service is reflected in paragraphs 109 to 115 of the Government's evidence submitted to Lord Cullen's inquiry. A copy is in the Library. A copy of further advice from the Forensic Science Service confirming the view that the design of some self–loading pistols will make the operation to remove the slide assembly substantially more difficult than in others and the difficulties involved in removing the cylinder of a revolver has been placed in the Library.

Sir Jerry Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those guns which are not capable of dismantling in the manner described in Lord Cullen's report, paragraph 9.106. [2021]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* I understand from the Forensic Science Service that varying degrees of difficulty and potential damage apply to all self–loading pistols and revolvers.

Sir Jerry Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many guns have been surrendered as a result of the prohibitions introduced by the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988; how many claims for compensation remain to be settled; and what was the total cost of compensation paid to date. [2022]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The Department received nearly 3,000 claims relating to around 3,600 firearms under the Government buy-in scheme for weapons which became prohibited by virtue of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988. A total of £620,000 was paid in relation to those claims. The Department has considered all claims made under the scheme and advised claimants of the outcome. Offers have been made to all claimants entitled to receive compensation.

Children's Certificates

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children's certificates have been issued to licensed premises in each county or metropolitan authority in England and Wales. [1482]

Mr. Kirkhope: The information requested is contained in table 2 of the Home Office statistical bulletin "Liquor Licensing Statistics Children's Certificates: England and Wales, January 1995–June 1996", a copy of which is in the Library.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Alton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many and what percentage of (i) burglaries, (ii) homicides, (iii) robberies, (iv) instances of violence against the person and (v) sexual offences involved the use of *(a)* a gun and *(b)* a knife or sharp instrument for (1) 1985, (2) 1995 and (3) the last year for which figures are available; [1655]

(2) how many offences involving the use of a knife there were in the last year for which figures are available. [1654]

Mr. Maclean: The following table shows the number of notifiable offences recorded by the police in England and Wales in which firearms were reported to have been used and as a percentage of all notifiable offences of that type:

Notifiable offences recorded by the police in which firearms were reported to have been used and as a percentage of all notifiable offences of that type

	Homicide		Other violence against the person		Sexual offences		Burglary		Robbery	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1995	45	7.3	3,005	2.5	18	[2]0.0	125	[2]0.0	2,531	9.2
1995[1]	70	9.4	2,614	1.2	12	[2]0.0	268	[2]0.0	3,963	5.8

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] Less than 0.05 per cent.

The available information on offences involving the use of knives relates to 1988 and 1989 and is from an ad hoc survey concerning offences of violence against the person, robbery, aggravated burglary and sexual offences recorded by the police in which knives were involved. The results were published in table 2.24 of "Criminal Statistics, England and Wales, 1989". A copy of this publication is in the Library.

In addition, it is known that in offences currently recorded as homicide, 97 involved the use of a sharp instrument in 1985—35 per cent. of currently recorded homicide offences. The provisional figures for 1995 are 192 and 41 per cent. respectively.

Mr. Alton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people were proceeded against for having an article with a blade or point in a public place; and how many were found guilty for the last year for which figures are available; [1653]

(2) how many people were proceeded against for possession of an offensive weapon; and how many were found guilty for the last year for which figures are available. [1652]

Mr. Maclean: Information for 1995, which is provisional, is given in the table.

Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for offences involving carrying weapons

England and Wales[1] 1995

Offence description	Prosecutions	Convictions
Carrying article with blade or point in a public place *[Criminal Justice Act 1988, Sec 139]*	3,474	2,559
Carrying of offensive weapons[2] without lawful authority or reasonable excuse in a public place *[Prevention of Crime Act 1953, Sec 1]*	5,215	3,190

[1] Provisional.
[2] May include a small number of offences involving truncheons etc.

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many crimes ended in a court conviction in England and Wales in *(a)* 1993, *(b)* 1994 and *(c)* 1995; [2229]

(2) how many crimes ended in a caution in England and Wales in *(a)* 1993, *(b)* 1994 and *(c)* 1995. [2230]

Mr. Maclean: Information readily available centrally on the number of offenders found guilty or cautioned in each of the years 1993, 1994 and 1995 is shown in the table.

Number of offenders found guilty at all courts or cautioned by type of offence 1993–95[1]

England and Wales

Type of offence	Convicted 1993	Convicted 1994	Convicted [1]1995	Cautioned 1993	Cautioned 1995	Cautioned [1]1994
Indictable	307,584	314,148	302,177	209,555	209,769	202,585
Summary non-motoring	453,079	454,731	[2]410,021	101,759	98,670	88,662
Summary motoring	664,651	638,814	[2]642,386	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—
All offences	1,425,314	1,407,623	[2]1,354,584	311,314	308,439	291,247

[1] Provisional.
[2] In 1995 it is estimated that there were shortfalls of 70,300 and 4,800 offenders convicted for certain summary non-motoring and summary motoring offences respectively.
[3] Not applicable. Motoring offences may attract written warnings.

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes were cleared up by the police in England and Wales in *(a)* 1993, *(b)* 1994 and *(c)* 1995. [2231]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested is given in the following table:

Number of recorded offences cleared up in England and Wales

Year	Number of recorded offences cleared up
1993	1,328,155
1994	1,326,366
1995	1,276,875

Fire and Rescue Authorities

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to introduce legislation to protect fire and rescue authorities against legal action of the sort taken in the case of Digital *v.* Hampshire Fire and Rescue Services; [1939]

(2) what assessment he has made of the financial and legal consequences for fire and rescue services of the judgment in the case of Digital *v.* Hampshire Fire and Rescue Services. [1940]

Mr. Sackville: Once the outcome of the appeal proceedings is known, the Government will decide whether there are any implications which fire authorities in general ought to consider and, if so, will circulate advice accordingly.

Tattooing and Skin Piercing

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the operation of the law relating to the tattooing of under-16s, and what are his reasons for deciding against the introduction of an age limit for other forms of skin piercing. [1946]

Mr. Maclean: The Tattooing of Minors Act 1969 prohibits the tattooing of anyone under the age of 18. The Government have received no evidence to suggest that the law provides inadequate protection for children in regard to other forms of skin piercing and have no current plans for a statutory age limit in this area. The Law Commission is, however, looking at the general issue of tattooing, piercing and other forms of body decoration, as part of its study of consent in the criminal law, and the Government will give careful consideration to the recommendations which they make in their final report.

Recidivism

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminals have been convicted of a third or subsequent serious violent or sexual offence following two previous such convictions since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [2448]

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. and learned Friend wrote to my hon. Friend on 1 November. A copy of the letter has been placed in the Library.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [1395]

Mr. Howard: The timetable for the laying of draft deregulation orders is a matter to be agreed between the Government and the Deregulation Committee, but we hope the Committee will receive draft deregulation orders on the following before the end of 1996:

- Licensing Act 1964: simplifying procedures on liquor licence transfers;
- Gaming Act 1968: allowing payment by debit cards in casinos and bingo halls;
- Gaming Act 1968: allowing advertising for bingo, betting shops and on-site amusement with prizes machines;
- Licensing (Occasional Permissions) Act 1983: simplifying the procedures for, and extending the number of occasional permissions for, non-profit making bodies;
- Licensing Act 1964: allowing off-licences to obtain occasional licences.

Stray Dogs

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what guidance is issued to police authorities in circumstances where dogs are presented as strays with regard to *(a)* the identification of the owner and *(b)* the placing of the animal in suitable care; [1546]

(2) how many dogs were placed in kennels by the police in the last year for which figures are available; and at what cost; [1547]

(3) how police authorities select kennels for the purpose of housing stray dogs; and what criteria are applied to the length of time the animals are kept at public expense. [1548]

Mr. Maclean: The policing of stray dogs is an operational matter for the police using their powers provided under the Dogs Act 1906, as amended. Guidance was issued to the police following amendments to this Act contained in the Environmental Protection Act 1990. A copy of the joint Department of Environment, Welsh Office and Home Office circular—Home Office circular No. 5/1992—is available from the Library.

The additional information requested is not available centrally.

Boot Camp (Thorn Cross)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost of setting up the boot camp at Thorn Cross; what is the cost per inmate; and what is the staffing ratio. [1669]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Mr. Doug Hoyle, dated 5 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the cost of setting up the boot camp at Thorn Cross, the cost per inmate and the staffing ratio.

The start up costs were about £1.75 million for construction and about £160,000 for other costs, mainly staff recruitment and training. The expected cost per inmate place for the current financial year, calculated by dividing the full year's anticipated running costs by the full inmate population, is £27,600. The personal officer to inmate ratio is 1:3.5.

Internet Pornography

Sir Michael Shersby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions have taken place between his Department and the Internet Service Providers Association on the issue of child pornography; what proposals have been made to him for the creation of a mechanism to prevent the transmission of pornographic material; and if he will make a statement. [2050]

Mr. Sackville: On 23 September, my hon. Friend the Minister for Science and Technology and I welcomed the setting up of an independent industry body to tackle the problems of illegal material, particularly child pornography, on the Internet. This followed discussions between our two departments, the police and representatives of Internet service providers.

The new body, the Internet Watch Foundation, will establish a "hotline" so that users can report the presence of child pornography in a newsgroup. The foundation will determine whether particular newsgroups carry child pornography, then forward the information to the relevant service provider, who will trace the originator and request that it is removed. Details will be passed to the police—or to the National Criminal Intelligence Service, if the originator is abroad. It will also encourage Internet service providers to ensure that their users provide new material with a contents rating before placing it on the Internet, and that these ratings are compatible and can be identified by computer software being introduced to the market.

This is an important step forward, although more work needs to be done by the industry. We shall be closely monitoring developments in this area.

Criminal Records Database

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what fee was paid to the PCL group for the contract to transfer pre-1981 criminal records to the national computer's Phoenix database; what percentage of the contract was carried out by the PCL group; and how many records were transferred. [2419]

Mr. Maclean: PCL was paid £8.8 million, excluding value added tax, under the keying contract.

The contract specified two main measures, of which one was 55 per cent. complete and the other 80 per cent. complete when it was terminated by mutual consent.

About 320,000 criminal records have been added to the Phoenix database, and work on back record conversion is continuing.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of pre-1981 criminal records have been transferred to the national computer's Phoenix database. [2423]

Mr. Maclean: All criminal record data held on the police national computer were transferred to the Phoenix database on 22 May 1995. These included 2.8 million records originating before 1981 consisting of name and criminal record office number.

Paedophile Register

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the impact on the date of implementation of a national register of paedophiles of the termination of the contract for transferring pre-1981 criminal records to the national computer's Phoenix database by the PCL group. [2421]

Mr. Maclean: The termination of this contract will not affect the implementation of the national register of paedophiles.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the award of a contract to implement a national register of paedophiles. [2422]

Mr. Maclean: The register will be held as part of the Phoenix database of the police national computer.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the cost of effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2604]

Mr. Howard: My Department is aware of the problem. The Department's information technology service provider, Sema group, has produced the report to which I referred in my previous reply on 17 June 1996, *Official Report*, column *302*. The business areas in my Department have been considering the report and are now entering into discussions with suppliers on action plans, taking into account other developments and the likelihood of systems still being in place at the time of the millennium date change. As the plans are developed, costs will be assessed.

Departmental Actions (Court Rulings)

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions since May 1993 courts have deemed his Department had acted illegally; on what dates the rulings were made and in relation to which cases. [843]

Mr. Howard *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* No central record is kept of the outcome of all the cases against the Home Office since May 1993, which include judicial review applications, writ actions, industrial tribunal cases and county court cases.

Voting Register

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much is being spent in the current financial year on national advertising campaigns to encourage people to register to vote; and what was the equivalent figure in real terms for each year since 1978–79. [1461]

Mr. Howard *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* In the current financial year, £700,000 is being spent on electoral registration advertising.

In previous years, the actual spend was as follows, with equivalent figures in brackets, calculated in 1995–96 prices using the gross domestic product deflator.

	Actual spend £	*Equivalent figure* £
1982–83	87,000	160,000
1983–84	113,000	199,000
1984–85	126,000	211,000
1985–86	150,000	239,000
1986–87	300,000	463,000
1987–88	260,000	381,000
1988–89	306,000	420,000
1989–90	452,000	580,000
1990–91	468,000	557,000
1991–92	614,000	686,000
1992–93	606,000	650,000
1993–94	620,000	646,000
1994–95	650,000	666,000
1995–96	815,000	815,000
1996–97	700,000	685,000

My Department's records of advertising expenditure for the years before 1982–83 do not provide a breakdown between individual campaigns. The work involved in identifying costs of electoral registration advertising for those years would incur disproportionate costs.

The budget for television advertising spots, media spend and agency fees in 1996–97 is nearly the same as that for 1995–96. The difference between the years shown in the table is primarily because of production savings achieved this year through re-use of the 1995–96 commercial. Research showed it to be an effective advertisement capable of continuing to get the message across. After allowing for this, the real terms advertising spend was £685,000 in 1996–97 compared with £700,000 in 1995–96. Last year, general awareness of registration publicity among people surveyed rose from 29 per cent. pre-campaign to 61 per cent., post. This year, it rose from 20 per cent. pre to 70 per cent. post.

Repatriations

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when documents concerning the application by John Blair to be repatriated to a prison in the Irish Republic were sent to the appropriate authorities in the Republic; when he expects John Blair will be repatriated; and if he will make a statement; [1972]

(2) when Harry Duggin and Joe O'Connell applied to be repatriated to a prison in the Republic of Ireland; if the necessary documents have been referred to the appropriate authorities of the Republic; when he expects both prisoners will be repatriated; and if he will make a statement. [1973]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The necessary documentation relating to Mr. Blair's repatriation request was referred to the Republic of Ireland on 18 September 1996. Referral of an application does not mean that repatriation will necessarily take place. Repatriation is as well as of the prisoner, following consideration of all the relevant information.

Mr. Duggin's request was originally made on 18 September 1995 and Mr. O'Connell's on 19 July 1995. However, neither request could be considered until the Republic of Ireland brought the Council of Europe convention on the transfer of sentenced persons into force in the Republic on 1 November 1995. Both these requests remain under consideration and have not been referred to the Republic.

Prisons

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give an estimate of the number of places for prisoners in Her Majesty's prisons in each of the years 1996 to 2006. [52]

Miss Widdecombe: I will write to the hon. Member.

Learco Chindamo

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the immigration status of Learco Chindamo; and what power exists to deport him at the end of his sentence. [1091]

Mr. Kirkhope: It is not our normal practice to disclose the immigration status of individuals. In accordance with domestic and international law, the Secretary of State has power to deport a serious offender on completion of his sentence if it would be in the public interest to do so.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Argentina (Naval Engine Spares)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the initial advice he gave to Rolls-Royce following its request of October 1993 for approval of an export licence for naval engine spares to Argentina; and when that advice was given. [1066]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* The company made no such request in October 1993. In a letter dated 20 October 1993, the company requested advice on the licensability of the Tyne RM1 engine and

its components. After carrying out a detailed technical and legal assessment in consultation with MOD experts, my Department advised, in a letter dated 2 June 1995, that, irrespective of the destination, the company would require a licence under the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 to export components and assemblies specially designed to fulfil the requirements imposed by the combat environment of a warship. A licence would be required to export these military components or entire Tyne engines in which they were included.

My Department also advised the company that under the terms of the order it would not require a licence to export other Tyne components that were not specially designed or modified for military use, or engine modules and sub-assemblies which did not include the military components, unless they had been modified from components for an aeroengine, in which case a licence would in certain circumstances be required. This assessment did not constitute either a variation or a relaxation of the embargo on sales of military equipment and arms to Argentina announced on 3 April 1982. Before this advice was received, the company submitted two applications, dated 17 December 1993 and 29 August 1994, for a licence to supply the Argentine Navy with engines and components specially designed or modified for military use. These applications were refused in letters from my Department dated 24 June 1994 and 24 January 1995 respectively.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the first occasion on which he received a request from Rolls-Royce to consider approving export licences for naval engine spares for Argentina; and what response he gave. [1067]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 29 October 1996]:* Computerised records before January 1991 are not readily available. Since then my Department has received two applications from Rolls-Royce for export licences with respect to proposals to supply the Argentine Navy with engines and components specially designed or modified for military use. The first such application was dated 17 December 1993, and both applications were refused. My right hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Mr. Garel-Jones) announced to the House by written answer on 16 January 1991, *Official Report* column *521*, that the Government had decided to allow a limited supply of essential maintenance spares for vessels deployed as part of the Argentine contribution to the Gulf as an exception to the embargo. On 18 October 1990, Rolls-Royce had applied for a licence to supply an Argentine naval vessel with parts for the Olympus engine and, under the provisions of the export control legislation in force at that time; a licence was issued to the company on 6 March 1991 for the supply of these parts; a limited supply of spares was also provided for the same purpose by the Ministry of Defence.

Exports

Sir Wyn Roberts: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the change in the value of *(a)* EU and *(b)* United Kingdom exports and for other OECD countries since 1987; and how British exports have fared in this context. [1651]

Mr. Nelson: The information requested is in the following table:

Growth in UK, EU15 and other OECD[1] exports of goods since 1987[2]

	US$ billion		Per cent. change
	1987	*1995*	*1987–95*
UK	131	239	82.4
EU15	1,049	1,911	82.2
Other OECD	715	1,508	110.8

Notes:

[1] Comprises Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and USA.

[2] Values in US$ at current prices and exchange rates.

Source:

IMF Direction of Trade.

Fireworks

Mr. Snape: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what response he has received to his discussion paper on firework control issued in August 1996; what plans he has to introduce new statutory measures to control the use and sale of fireworks; and if he will make a statement; [2273]

(2) what plans he has to review the control and sale of fireworks. [2272]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Stoke on Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 28 October, *Official Report*, column *112* in which I gave details of the review of fireworks.

A large number of businesses and organisations responded to the public discussion document. As expected, a wide range of views and suggestions were put forward and I am giving careful consideration to all the points made. If it appears that additional measures would be appropriate I will consult on specific proposals early next year.

Coal Production

Mr. Trickett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many tonnes of coal were produced in Britain *(a)* in the current year, *(b)* in 1979 and *(c)* in 1990 utilising (i) opencast and (ii) deep mine production methods. [2212]

Mr. Page: The information requested is given as follows:

Thousand tonnes

Coal production	*Opencast*	*Deep-mined*
(a) 1995	16,369	35,150
(a) 1996[1]	10,795	22,172
(b) 1979	12,862	107,775
(c) 1990	18,134	72,899

Sources:

Energy Trends Table 4.

Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics.

Note:

[1] To end August.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many people are currently employed by the opencast mining industry and the deep mining industry; and what were the figures in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1990. [2211]

Mr. Page: Available information is as follows:

	Employees in Great Britain			
	[1]1979	*[2]1991*	*[2]1993*	*[3]1995*
Deep coal mining	233,900	70,200	26,300	10,600
Opencast mining	7,700	5,700	5,900	

[1] *Source:* Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics, 1980. Figures are for employees engaged in production in December 1979.

[2] *Sources:* Census of employment September 1991 and September 1993, Office for National Statistics. The census of employment was conducted every two years, so data are not available for even numbered years.

[3] *Source:* annual employment survey September 1995, which replaced the biennial census of employment, Office for National Statistics. The figure covers all mining and agglomeration of hard coal; separate figures are not available for deep coal mining and opencast coal working.

Uranium Tailings

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total volume of uranium tailings currently created by the processing of uranium for use in the British nuclear energy programme; and in which countries the stocks of uranium mining tailings are *(a)* stored and *(b)* disposed of. [2125]

Mr. Page: Uranium tailings are a by-product of uranium mining and arise at the site of mining. No uranium mining is carried out in the United Kingdom. The question of tailings and their storage and disposal is a matter for the uranium mining companies concerned.

Nuclear Industries

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the conclusions reached by the European Commission in its report on nuclear industries in the European Union (COM/96) 339, 25 September 1996, paragraph 6, page 23, in respect of the presence of plutonium in the civilian nuclear fuel cycle. [2126]

Mr. Page: The Government agree that there are many considerations which determine fuel choice in the civil nuclear sector. It is a matter for the owners of the plutonium to decide how it is utilised. Mixed oxide fuel incorporating plutonium oxide is one option, subject to meeting the appropriate regulatory requirements including those in respect of safeguards.

Company Density Statistics

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the company density by sector per 10,000 of the population in each of the last three years, using VAT data in *(a)* the London borough of Lewisham, *(b)* the South London training and enterprise council—SOLOTEC, *(c)* the wider central London area, *(d)* Greater London and *(e)* the rest of southern England. [2301]

Mr. Page: I will place a copy of the data in the Library of the House.

Business Start-Ups

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the business start-up rate by sectors and in total, per 10,000 of the population, using VAT data in *(a)* the London borough of Lewisham, *(b)* the south London training and enterprise council—SOLOTEC, *(c)* the wider central London area, *(d)* Greater London and *(e)* the rest of southern England for the latest available period for which data are available and the equivalent period in (i) 1995 (ii) 1994 and (iii) 1993; and if he will indicate the number of deregistrations in each period. [2348]

Mr. Page: I will place a copy of the data in the Library of the House.

Compensation (Terrorist Acts)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to review the rights to claim compensation for loss suffered as a result of damage to property by terrorist acts in Britain. [2309]

Mr. Nelson: There is no need to consider any compensation arrangements as insurance is available against losses arising from damage caused to property by acts of terrorism in Great Britain.

Diesel Engine Emissions

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what reports he has received of problems in obtaining investment in the United Kingdom for industrial research and development in respect of removing particulates from the exhaust emissions of diesel engines; and if he will make a statement. [2043]

Mr. Greg Knight: My Department has not received any reports of problems of this kind.

Regional Assistance

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to the paper, "Regional Policy, Review of the Assisted Areas of Great Britain", if he will place in the Library a statement on the process informing his decision in determining development area and intermediate area status, including the specific weightings attached to the factors considered in the case of the Workington travel-to-work area. [2015]

Mr. Greg Knight: The Government published the background document, "Regional Policy, Review of the Assisted Areas of Great Britain", on 23 July 1993. This document set out the basis for the map of the assisted areas introduced on 1 August 1993. The Government have no plans to publish additional information about the decisions taken on individual travel-to-work areas for the purposes of that map.

Brazilian Mahogany

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many cubic metres of Brazilian mahogany were imported annually from 1990 to 1995. [2465]

Mr. Nelson: The UK imported 62,168 cu m of mahogany from Brazil in 1990, and 45,762 cu m in 1991. In 1992 the United Kingdom trade classification no longer identified mahogany separately from other non-coniferous woods.

On 16 November 1995, Brazilian mahogany was listed in appendix III of the convention of international trade in endangered species of wild flora and fauna. Between then and 25 October 1996 CITES import permits received and verified by HM Customs and Excise indicate that 10,141 cu m were imported into the UK.

Business Assistance

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many *(a)* individuals and *(b)* companies have been assisted by (i) the Isle of Wight business link and (ii) his Department in the last three years. [2567]

Mr. Page: Business links are private sector partnerships, not Government bodies. National statistics on businesses using business link are available in the quarterly "Report on Business Link and Business Link Regional Supply Network Management Information" and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House. Local statistics are a matter for local business link partnerships and I will ensure that the chief executive of business link Isle of Wight is aware of my hon. Friend's question.

Information on the number of individuals and companies assisted by my Department in the last three years can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Non-prescription Drug Pricing

Dame Jill Knight: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on proposals to change the basis for pricing non-prescription drugs in shops. [622]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The Director General of Fair Trading announced on 18 October that he was seeking leave of the restrictive practices court to apply for a discharge of the medicaments order made by the court in 1970 in respect of resale price maintenance on certain medicines. The Secretary of State has no statutory role of discretion in relation to the director general's application or in relation to the court's consideration of the matter.

Coal Stocks

Mr. Hardy: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what volume of coal was taken from stock for the purposes of electricity generation in 1995–96; and what was the total volume of stocks remaining on 1 April. [2337]

Mr. Page: Between the beginning of April 1995 and the end of March 1996, stocks of coal at power stations fell by 3.5 million tonnes to stand at 6.4 million tonnes. Stocks of coal held by coal producers also fell by 3.5 million tonnes over this period to stand at 5.5 million tonnes at the end of March 1996 but it is not possible to state exactly what proportion of these stocks were delivered to the electricity industry. However, it is known that 77 per cent. of supplies from the coal industry—that is, stocks plus newly mined coal—were delivered to power stations during this period.

Source: Table 6 "Energy Trends".

Research Councils

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the estimated cost of guaranteeing the pension rights of employees on privatisation of research council laboratories; and who bears these costs. [2468]

Mr. Ian Taylor: Privatisation does not increase the costs of the pension entitlements of research council employees, which are the responsibility of the relevant pension scheme. It may however result in the crystallisation of some existing staff pension liabilities, and these considerations will be taken into account in the relevant prior options reviews.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the legal fees incurred so far by *(a)* Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, *(b)* Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, *(c)* Medical Research Council, *(d)* Natural Environment Research Council and *(e)* Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council in the course of the prior options review of their laboratories; if these costs are borne out of current budgets; and what assessment he has made of the effect of meeting such charges on the funding of research by the research councils. [2467]

Mr. Taylor: BBSRC, EPSRC, MRC, NERC and PPARC have so far incurred no legal fees in the course of the prior options reviews of the research establishments they sponsor.

Following my announcement in April that the Government accepted the conclusions and recommendations of the prior options review of the Royal Observatories, PPARC has incurred legal fees amounting to £270,000 in taking forward implementation of the recommendations.

Such charges form part of the normal administrative expenditure of the research councils, and therefore feed into the councils' established planning systems.

Chernobyl

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his letters of 12 June and 27 September on the European Union funded report on options for dealing with the sarcophagus at Chernobyl, what action is being taken. [1004]

Mr. Page: Results of the European Union funded study are expected shortly. Action will be decided in the light of discussions of the study's findings with the Ukrainian Government.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what arrangements have been made to ensure that contracts signed with British Nuclear Fuels plc by foreign customers for the production of mixed oxide—MOX—nuclear fuel at the Sellafield MOX plant include a stipulation that plutonium contaminated wastes arising from the MOX manufacture are returned to the country of origin of the external contract for the fuel. [2140]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* BNFL has confirmed that there will be no additional quantity of plutonium remaining in the UK as a result of contracts with foreign customers for the production of MOX nuclear fuel at the Sellafield MOX plant.

"The Social Chapter: British and Continental Approaches"

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many copies of his Department's publication, "The social chapter: British and Continental Approaches", have been printed; what was the cost *(a)* per copy and *(b)* in total; and how many requests his Department has received for copies. [1232]

Mr. John M. Taylor *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* A total of 40,000 copies of the booklet have been printed. The printing cost per copy was approximately 32p, and the total printing cost £12,840. The total costs including design, storage and distribution is approximately £17,000. The text was prepared internally and it is not possible to quantify the staff costs involved. In addition to the original distribution of approximately 18,500 booklets, my Department has to date—30 October—received a further 244 requests for more than 6,000 booklets.

A smaller number of copies are being prepared in French, German, Italian and Spanish for distribution in other EU member states. The estimated cost of these booklets is £6,500.

Public Relations

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much his Department spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* public relations and *(c)* entertainment in each of the last five financial years. [1261]

Mr. John M. Taylor *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Total departmental spend on advertising is not held centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost. The advertising expenditure from centrally managed budgets for the years in question is as follows:

1991–92: £966,000
1992–93: £1,139,000
1993–94: £784,000
1994–95: £561,000
1995–96: £1,088,000.

While DTI has no expenditure on public relations from centrally managed budgets, its information directorate is responsible for providing information about my Department's policies and activities to businesses, the public and the media. It does this through a wide range of communications means including news releases, answering inquiries from the media, publicity campaigns, briefings, exhibitions and publications.

For the expenditure on official hospitality I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, columns 955–56.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1244]

Mr. John M. Taylor *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* On 29 October the DTI, excluding its executive agencies, employed 2,665 female staff, which is 44 per cent. of the total of staff employed.

I have asked the chief executives of the DTI's executive agencies to respond directly to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Joyce to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply to your question about the employment of women in The Insolvency Service.

Number of permanent staff	*Number of permanent female staff*	*Proportion of female staff to total staff*
1,336	649	48.5 per cent.

Information source:
DTI PERMIS Computer Records
Date: October 1996.

Letter from J. C. Octon to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

In the absence of the Chief Executive I am replying for the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question about the number of women currently employed by the Department of Trade and Industry. Below are the figures for the Patent Office:-

Total number of established staff as at 1 October 1996: 725

Number of women employed: 284

Women as a percentage of employees: just over 39%

I hope this information is helpful.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November, 1996:

I have been asked to answer the question you raised on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency.

Currently 116 women are employed in the Agency, representing 22 per cent. of employees.

Letter from John S. Holden to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

You recently tabled a Parliamentary Question for the President of the Board of Trade asking how many women are currently employed by his Department and what proportion this is of the total. I am responding as Chief Executive of Companies House Executive Agency.

Companies House currently employs a total of 1,056 staff, of which 679 (64.3%) are women.

Letter from Zélie Armstrong to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory to your question about the number of women employed and the proportion of the total. This agency employs 17 women. This represents 34% of the total number of staff employed.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1278]

Mr. John M. Taylor *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be inappropriate for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such

data. The Department provides some assistance with child care, but is unable to monitor what proportion of staff who are parents have received such assistance.

I have asked the chief executive of the DTI's executive agencies to respond direct to the hon. Member.

Letter from John S. Holden to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

I have been asked to reply as Chief Executive of Companies House Executive Agency to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question for the President of the Board of Trade, asking about the provision of childcare assistance for mothers and fathers within DTI.

Companies House operates a holiday playscheme in Cardiff during the Easter and summer school holidays. During last Easter and this summer, 12 mothers and 5 fathers, and 27 mothers and 3 fathers, respectively, made use of this facility.

Companies House does not keep information on which members of staff are parents. It is therefore, not possible to provide you with the proportions of staff the above figures represent.

Letter from Zélie Armstrong to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory to your question about the number of women and men who are parents and receive help with childcare from this Agency. NWML contributes towards the management of a joint nursery at Teddington. The facility is available to all staff who wish to use it.

Letter from Peter Joyce to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply to your question about what proportion of women who are mothers and men who are fathers who are employed by The Insolvency Service have received any assistance from the Service with childcare.

The Insolvency Service does not collect statistics specifically showing the parental status of staff. This is personal information which would be supplied by members of staff on a voluntary basis and it would be difficult to justify the formal collection of such data. I am therefore unable to give an overall accurate assessment as requested.

The Service provides a facility whereby members of staff may apply for reimbursement of additional childcare costs incurred as a result of a temporary change to their working routine, or if they are attending Insolvency Service training courses. However such claims are not separately recorded. Staff who have domestic responsibilities involving childcare may also apply for periods of special leave without pay or for a career break—although this is not financial assistance.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

I have been asked to answer the question you raised on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency.

The Radiocommunications Agency does not keep records of what proportion of the (a) women who are mothers and (b) men who are fathers.

Two members of staff took advantage of the DTI playscheme.

Letter from Paul Hartnack to Mrs. Barbara Roche, dated 5 November 1996:

I am replying for the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question to the President of the Board of Trade about childcare.

I am unable to give you information about the proportion of staff who are parents since the Patent Office does not have this information readily available and could generate it only at disproportionate cost. The Patent Office is, however, sensitive to the needs of parents and has obtained access to a number of places in an on site nursery. We also operate a holiday play scheme during the Easter and summer periods. Both the nursery and play schemes are subsidised by the Patent Office. The Patent Office is also sympathetic to requests for special leave without pay to allow parents to be with their children during school holidays and to requests for special leave with pay to meet short term domestic needs.

The figures on usage for the nursery and play schemes are detailed below for the last 3 years:

	Nursery		*Playscheme*			
	Male	*Female*	*Male*		*Female*	
	Number	*Number*	*Number*		*Number*	
			Easter	*Summer*	*Easter*	*Summer*
1994	2	6	4	4	5	8
1995	2	8	3	4	4	6
1996	2	7	1	3	4	4

I hope this information is useful.

PRIME MINISTER

Union Flag and Royal Standard

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has for Wales to be represented on *(a)* the Union flag and *(b)* the royal standard. [2188]

The Prime Minister: The Union flag is representative of all parts of the United Kingdom. Wales, as an integral part of the United Kingdom, is therefore represented by the Union flag. Similarly, the royal standard representing the sovereign of the United Kingdom applies to Wales as much as to every other part of the Union.

Engagements

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 5 November. [1005]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 5 November. [1006]

The Prime Minister: This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what guidance is given to doctors by the Benefits Agency medical services regarding the conduct of all work tests for incapacity benefit; what is the time estimated for each test; what medical examinations, tests or procedures are undertaken during the test; what account is taken of *(a)* general practitioners' and *(b)* consultants' reports as part of the test; and what monitoring is undertaken of the doctors who carry out the tests. [1350]

Mr. Burt: The administration of incapacity benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr George Foulkes, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what guidance is given to doctors by the Benefits Agency Medical Services regarding the conduct of the All Work Tests for Incapacity Benefit (IB), what is the time estimated for each test; what medical examinations, tests or procedures are undertaken during the test; what account is taken of (a) general practitioners' and (b) consultants' reports as part of the test; and what monitoring is undertaken of the doctors who carry out the tests.

All doctors, who are already experienced in this area of work, undergo four days of theoretical training plus one supervised examination session, and have to demonstrate a satisfactory standard before being approved by the Secretary of State to carry out IB assessments. This training covers in detail all aspects of carrying out All Work Test assessments. In addition to the training, all doctors are issued with a copy of the "IB Handbook for Medical Services Doctors", which acts as an aide memoir on the contents of the training course. A copy of this publication is available in the Library of the House of Commons.

A national study of examination session timings carried out in May 1996 has shown that the average time for an All Work Test assessment by a BAMS doctor is 47 minutes. This includes time spent interviewing and examining the customer and writing the report.

For an All Work Test assessment, the doctor gathers whatever evidence is appropriate to enable him or her to make an objective and impartial assessment of the customers abilities and a limitations in all the functional areas relevant to their disabling condition. This evidence will usually include interviewing the customer about their perception of the effects of their condition on their ability to carry out everyday activities; observation of the customers behaviour at the examination centre; and formal clinical examination of the relevant system or part of the body.

The BAMS doctor's role for the All Work Test is to provide an independent impartial assessment of the customer based on their clinical judgement taking into account evidence provided by the customer, their own doctor and their consultant, where available. It is the Adjudication Officer who, in deciding entitlement to benefit, will take into account all available evidence, including any from the client's GP or consultant.

Following initial training, the first three assessments carried out by the BAMS doctor are monitored, and must reach a satisfactory standard for the doctor to be approved to carry out IB assessments. The work of all doctors is subsequently monitored by BAMS; monitoring is by random or targeted study of completed reports, and also in response to any work returned by Adjudication Officers as being of an unsatisfactory standard.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what written representations he has received from *(a)* clients, *(b)* legal representatives, *(c)* hon. Members and *(d)* others regarding all work tests and incapacity benefit at the Ayr benefit office for the most recently available 12-month period. [1345]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: One representation has been received from an hon. Member.

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many written representations he has received from hon. Members regarding all work tests and incapacity benefit in respect of each Benefit Agency office in Scotland for the most recently available 12-month period. [1344]

Mr. Mitchell: Eleven representations have been received from hon. Members between November 1995 and 17 October 1996.

Benefit Offices

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of reports by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration for each of the benefit offices in Scotland for the last five years and this year to the latest available date. [1347]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is in the table.

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Aberdeen	1	1	0	1	0
Galashiels	0	0	0	1	1
Glasgow Lauriston	1	0	0	0	0
Glasgow Maryhill	1	1	0	0	1
Glasgow Cumbernauld	0	0	0	1	0
Glasgow south west	0	0	0	1	1
Perth	0	1	0	0	1
Inverness	0	0	2	0	0
Dumfries	0	0	1	0	0
Edinburgh west	1	0	0	0	0
Dumbarton	0	0	0	1	0
Clydebank	0	0	0	1	0

1. The 12 offices listed have been affected by reports on complaints investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration for the years shown. The remaining 47 offices in Scotland have not been affected.
2. Records are no longer available for 1991.

Cold Weather Payments

Sir Andrew Bowden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cold weather payments were paid in each year since 1993–94. [1879]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is set out in the table:

Year	*Number of payments (000s)*
1993–94	2,100
1994–95	11
1995–96	7,200

Figures rounded to the nearest thousand.

Sir Andrew Bowden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many cold weather payments would have been paid if cold weather payments had been triggered after *(a)* three and *(b)* five consecutive days in a period of seven days in the years 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96; [1926]

(2) how many times cold weather payments would have been made at each weather station used to calculate cold weather payments, if cold weather payments had been triggered after *(a)* three and *(b)* five consecutive days in a period of seven days in each year since 1993–94. [1925]

Mr. Evans: The information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Sir Andrew Bowden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many times cold weather payments were triggered at each weather station used to calculate them in each year since 1993–94. [1880]

Mr. Evans: The information is set out in the table.

Number of cold weather payment triggers from 1993–94 to 1995–96

Weather station	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Aberdeen	3	0	2
Aberport	0	0	2
Aughton	0	0	3
Aviemore	6	3	6
Bedford	1	0	4
Birmingham	1	0	3
Boscombe Down	0	0	3
Boulmer	0	0	1
Bournemouth	0	0	2
Braemar	[1]	5	7
Brize Norton	0	0	4
Capel Curig	[1]	[1]	4
Carlisle	1	0	2
Chivenor	0	0	0
Cilfynydd	0	0	3
Coltishall	1	0	3
Culdrose	0	0	0
Dumfries	1	0	3
Dunkeswell	0	0	3
Easthampstead	1	0	4
Edinburgh	3	0	2
Eskdalemuir	5	1	5
Eskmeals	0	0	2
Finningley	1	0	[1]
Gatwick	1	0	3
Glasgow	3	0	3
Heathrow	0	0	1
Herstmonceaux	0	0	1
Honington	1	[1]	[1]
Kinloss	3	0	3
Kirkwall	0	0	2
Leeds	0	0	1
Leeming	2	0	2
Lerwick	0	1	2
Leuchars	3	0	3
Lyneham	1	0	4
Machrihanish	0	0	1
Manchester	0	0	3
Manston	0	0	2
Marham	1	0	4
Mount Batten	0	0	[1]
Mumbles	0	0	0
Rhoose	0	0	2
Shawbury	1	0	4
Southampton	0	0	0
St. Mawgan	0	0	0
Stansted	0	0	4
Stornoway	0	0	1
Tiree	0	0	0
Trawsfynyd	0	0	[1]
Tulloch Bridge	3	3	3
Tynemouth	0	0	1
Valley	0	0	0
Waddington	1	0	3
Watnall	1	0	[1]
Wattisham	0	0	4
Whitby	0	0	2
Whithorn	0	0	[1]
Wick	1	0	2
Wilsden	3	0	6
Wyton	0	0	[1]
Yeovilton	0	0	3
Total	49	13	138

[1] Not used in the scheme in that year.

Industrial Deafness

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he next plans to review criteria for industrial deafness disablement benefit. [1936]

Mr. Roger Evans: The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council advises the Government on the prescription of diseases for the purposes of industrial disablement benefit. The council continually monitors the scientific literature with regard to all occupational diseases, including those already on the prescribed list such as occupational deafness.

Benefits Agency Helpline

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the annual cost, for the last year in which figures are available, for the operation of the Benefits Agency freephone helpline; and what are the projected costs in the current year. [187]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Hinchliffe, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what was the annual cost, for the last year in which figures are available, for the operation of the Benefits Agency freephone helpline; and what are the projected costs in the current year.

The Benefits Agency freephone helpline closed on 12 July 1996. The budget allocation for 1995/96 was £6.3 million and the projected expenditure for this current year, taking account of the closure, is £2 million. These figures have been rounded.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Agency (South Yorkshire)

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the Benefits Agency offices which are scheduled for closure in South Yorkshire under the change programme. [2138]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is an operational matter for Peter Mathison, chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Helen Jackson, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will list the Benefits Agency offices which are scheduled for closure in South Yorkshire under the change programme.

Yorkshire Area Directorate (AD), along with the rest of the BA and the Department of Social Security, is currently undertaking a radical reappraisal of its services and the way they are delivered. The Change Programme aims to restructure the way we deliver our business, producing administrative efficiencies whilst maintaining our quality of service. We are directing our resources to where they are needed most. However, Yorkshire AD remains committed to providing a high level of service to its customers and equal access to the benefit system for all members of the public.

The Benefits Agency offices in South Yorkshire which are currently under consideration for closure are Wath, Maltby, Dinnington and Stocksbridge. Closure of the first three offices is awaiting Ministerial decision, the proposals for Stocksbridge are still in the consultation stage.

With the advent of Job Seekers Allowance, unemployed customers have access to enquiry facilities throughout South Yorkshire, including six Employment Services Job Centres in the Sheffield area, as well as in Wath, Maltby and Dinnington.

Should you require any additional information please contact Mr Vince Gaskell, Benefit Agency Yorkshire Directorate, 19th Floor, Royal Exchange House, Boar Lane, Leeds, LS1 5NS.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Agency (Emergency Services)

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if the review of out of office hours emergency services provided by the Benefits Agency is now complete; what consultations with outside bodies he has conducted during the review; and what instructions he has issued concerning the future operation of such services; [1974]

(2) how many people requested help from the out of office hours service operated by the Benefits Agency this year, to date, and in each of the last five years; what was the total cost of operating the service during that period; and what was the total number of staff designated to the service in each year; [1976]

(3) what discussions he (i) has had and (ii) plans to have with *(a)* the Association of County Councils, *(b)* the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and *(c)* the Association of Directors of Social Services concerning the future operation of the out of office hours service by the Benefits Agency; [1977]

(4) what estimates he has made of the impact on local authorities of ending the out of office hours service operated by the Benefits Agency; and what financial assistance he will offer to local authorities to provide additional services for the public seeking emergency help. [1975]

Mr. Roger Evans: The administration of income support is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Max Madden, dated 4 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking:

"if the review of out of office hours emergency services provided by the Benefits Agency is now complete; what consultations with outside bodies he has conducted during the review; and what instructions he has issued concerning the future operation of such services".

"what discussions he has (i) had, and (ii) plans to have, with (a) the Association of County Councils, (b) the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and (c) the Association of Directors of Social Services concerning the future operation of the out of office hours service by the Benefits Agency."

"what estimates he has made of the impact on local authorities of ending the out of office hours service operated by the Benefits Agency; and what financial assistance he will offer to local authorities to provide additional services for the public seeking emergency help."

"how many people requested help from the out of office hours service operated by the Benefits Agency this year, to date, and in each of the last five years; what was the total cost of operating the service during that period; and what was the total number of staff designated to the service in each year."

The review of the Out-of-Hours Service (OOHS) is not complete. A consultation exercise to assess the impact of a reduction or withdrawal of the OOHS was conducted during August and early September. This involved consultations with representatives from Department of Health, Local Authorities, the Scottish Office and welfare agencies. The results of the exercise are now being evaluated.

In the course of the review meetings were held with the Department of Health, on 21 August and with representatives from the Association of County Councils and the Association of Directors of Social Services, on 22 August. Although invited, there is no record that the Association of Metropolitan Authorities were represented at the later meeting.

Until the review is complete the impact on the local authorities cannot be assessed. Further meetings to assess the financial implications have been arranged with Department of Health, Department of the Environment and the Scottish Office.

I have provided the available information on the number of OOHS referrals and the administration costs for the last five years. It should be noted that a referral means a contact by the customer or a third party. Approximately 50% of the referrals require a visit. Figures about the success or otherwise of these visits are not maintained.

The information on the number of staff designated to the service can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Period	*Number of referrals*
1 October 1991 to 30 September 1992	21,709
1 October 1992 to 30 September 1993	42,722
1 August 1993 to 31 July 1994	47,958
1 August 1994 to 31 July 1995	48,744
1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996	54,868

Financial year	*Administration costs £ million*
1992–93	0.561
1993–94	0.987
1994–95	1.720
1995–96	1.754
1996–97	1.834

These figures are provisional and subject to amendment.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefit Payment Cards

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has for the extension of benefit payment by plastic card. [2741]

Mr. Lilley: The first benefit payments under the new payment card scheme have been successfully made to a small number of child benefit customers in the Stroud area. Payments are being made using both the new payment card and new benefit encashment systems. Co-operation with our private sector supplier, ICL-Pathway, has enabled us to deliver these in less than six months from the award of contract.

Ten post offices have so far been automated to enable card payments to be made. From this we will progress to live trials at a further 190 post offices from April next year. When all aspects of the new systems have been fully tested we will push ahead quickly, automating an average of 300 post offices per week from next summer.

The payments in Stroud represent the first step in a huge programme which will affect about 20 million people who collect DSS benefits through post offices in the UK. In view of the scale and importance of the

changes we intend to trial the systems thoroughly with child benefit before paying further benefits by card. We will be taking account of our experience of child benefit before implementing these changes and I shall be making a further announcement in due course.

Lone Parents

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the change in the number of single parents dependent on state benefits since 1979. [1243]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The information is in the table.

Number of lone parent recipients[1]

Benefit[2]	*1979*	*1995*
Supplementary benefit—income support[3]	306,000	1,061,000
Family income supplement—family credit[4]	42,000	290,000
Rent allowance—housing benefit[5]	n/a[6]	894,000
Rate rebate—council tax benefit[5]	n/a[6]	959,000

Notes

[1] All figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

[2] There may be a small overlap between income support and family credit, but this would not be significant. There are considerable overlaps between housing benefit and council tax benefit and between these benefits and both income support and family credit.

[3] Supplementary benefit was replaced by income support in April 1988.

[4] Family income supplement was replaced by family credit in April 1988.

[5] For the purposes of income support, housing benefit and council tax benefit, lone parents have been identified as those awarded the lone parent premium in the assessment of benefit.

[6] Housing benefit and council tax benefit were not in payment in 1979. There is no information on the number receiving help through income-related rent allowances and rates rebates.

It should be noted that the figures for each year cannot be totalled because more than one benefit may be in payment at the same time.

Sources

1. Supplementary benefit annual statistical inquiry—November 1979.
2. Income support quarterly statistical inquiry—November 1995.
3. Social security statistics 1980.
4. Family credit 5 per cent. sample of all awards.
5. Housing benefit management information system, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiries, with and without income support, taken at the end of May 1995.

The growth in the number of lone parents dependent on state benefits largely reflects the increase in the lone parent population. The Government's strategy has been to improve systematically work incentives, and the success of this strategy has been confirmed by independent research. The growth in the number of lone parents on income support has slowed since 1992, while the number in work and on family credit continues to grow steadily. Latest figures show that there are now around three lone parents working and receiving family credit for every 10 on income support, compared with just over one for every 10 in 1979. This is despite continuing growth in the number with young children.

We have also recently announced that a major new scheme–parent plus–will be piloted from April 1997. This scheme will offer advice and help to up to 100,000 lone parents on income support who wish to get back into work. Different approaches will be tested to establish which is most cost effective.

ENVIRONMENT

Aquifers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the principal cause of the pollution of aquifers in the United Kingdom; and how many have been sterilised since 1990. [900]

Mr. Clappison: A recent Environment Agency study suggested that landfills are the most numerous point sources of pollutants affecting aquifers and that chlorinated solvents from a variety of sources may cause the most serious contamination. No aquifers have been wholly taken out of service or sterilised since 1990. Remedial action has been taken in some cases.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps he is taking to increase the penalties for fly–tipping following the introduction of the landfill tax. [1147]

Mr. Clappison: We have already taken steps to ensure that the penalties for fly-tipping are severe. The maximum penalties for waste-related offences are set out in the table:

Offence	*Magistrates' court*	*Crown court*
Sections 33(1)(a), (b) or (c) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 Unlawful deposit, recovery or disposal of non–special waste	Imprisonment for six months and/or a fine of £20,000	Imprisonment for two years and/or an unlimited fine
Sections 33(1)(a), (b) or (c) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 Unlawful deposit, recovery or disposal of special waste	Imprisonment for six months and/or a fine of £20,000	Imprisonment for five years and/or an unlimited fine
Special Waste Regulations 1996 Regulation 18 Unlawful movement of handling of special waste	A fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale	Imprisonment for two years and/or an unlimited fine
Section 34(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 Breach of the duty of care or Regulations on retention etc. of documents	A fine of £5,000	An unlimited fine
Section 1(1) Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989 Unlawful transportation of waste	A fine of £5,000	n/a
Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994: Regulation 20(5) Failure to register as a waste broker	A fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale	n/a

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what extra help he is proposing to make available to local authorities to counter the problem of fly-tipping following the introduction of the landfill tax. [1148]

Mr. Clappison: The main security against fly-tipping is an adequate regulatory framework. Regulations implemented on 1 May 1994 introduced a new waste management licensing system. These controls, along with section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the associated duty of care for waste which came into force on 1 April 1992, provide a strong regulatory framework to support the tax.

The Environment Agency is the competent authority for the purposes of waste management licensing. The agency has both resources and expertise to advise on the legal and sound management of waste, to investigate offences and to carry out enforcement action. The Government's guidance to the agency on its objectives and contribution to sustainable development clarifies its role in this area. Ministers expect the agency to review procedures for preventing and handling cases of fly-tipping and to use its enforcement powers.

The duty of care, which is a self-regulating system, is an important weapon in the fight against fly-tipping since it requires that waste is passed only to a person authorised to accept it. This helps to identify the person who commits an offence, as consignments of waste can be tracked through the system of transfer notes completed by all parties involved in any waste transfer. Powers to enforce the duty are not specific to the Environment Agency, and it is open to any organisation or individual to bring a prosecution where they consider that the duty has been breached. The penalties which can be imposed for offences relating to waste are severe.

To help minimise the impact of fly-tipping, section 59 of the 1990 Act provides local authorities with the means to effect the removal of illegally deposited waste and to eliminate or reduce the consequences of the deposit. Section 59(6) and (8) provides for the reimbursement in part or in full of the costs incurred.

Basking Sharks

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will include basking sharks in the next tranche of species for the biodiversity action plans. [1156]

Mr. Clappison: No. Basking sharks were not among the 286 species which the UK biodiversity steering group recommended should be included in the second tranche of species action plans to be produced within the next three years. The Government endorsed the steering group's recommendations in the response published in May 1996.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will submit a proposal for an appendix 11 listing under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species for the protection of basking sharks, *in time for the next CITES conference in June 1997; and* if he will make a statement. [1157]

Mr. Clappison: We have no plans to include such a proposal among the United Kingdom's initiatives for the next CITES conference.

Conservation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how he plans to consult the public about the third tranche of candidate special areas of conservation in accordance with the EC habitats and species directive; [1195]

(2) if the third tranche of sites will include candidate special areas of conservation for the great crested newt, triturus cristatus. [1196]

Mr. Clappison: A third tranche of candidate special areas of conservation was forwarded to the European Commission on 14 October 1996. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment on Wednesday 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, columns *1073–74*. A second public consultation on possible special areas of conservation is planned to commence shortly—this will include possible sites for the great crested newt. The House will be informed and details will be placed in the Library in due course.

Biodiversity Convention

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the Government's objective at the conference of the parties to the biodiversity convention in November. [1209]

Mr. Clappison: The Government attach much importance to achieving progress under the convention on biological diversity, and the UK will be participating fully in the forthcoming conference of parties. My right hon. Friend hopes to attend the ministerial segment of the meeting, when he intends to encourage the setting of national objectives and the monitoring of progress under the convention. Other UK priorities include securing progress on the assessment and monitoring of biodiversity, including promoting taxonomy; the conservation and sustainable use of agricultural and forest biodiversity; and the need to improve the operation of the convention, for example by prioritising activity under it and moving to a less concentrated cycle of meetings.

Plutonium

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what environmental impact assessments have been conducted *(a)* on the storage of separated plutonium at (i) Sellafield and (ii) Dounreay and *(b)* on the transport of plutonium by air in *(x)* metal, *(y)* oxide and *(z)* nitrate solution forms from and to (1) Carlisle, (2) Wick, (3) Herne and (4) other airports licensed to handle plutonium cargoes. [1817]

Mr. Clappison: The plutonium stores at Sellafield and Dounreay were constructed prior to the introduction of the 1985 Council directive on the Assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment (85/337/EEC)—the environmental impact assessment directive. Questions on the transport of radioactive materials are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what consultations he has had with *(a)* his Japanese counterpart, and *(b)* Japanese officials about the environmental appraisal of the interim storage of plutonium separated from reprocessed Japanese spent fuel at Sellafield; and what contribution (i) the Environment Directorate of the European Commission, (ii) the Health and Safety Directorate of the European Commission and (iii) the Health and Safety Department of EURATON made to the environmental assessment of plutonium storage at (1) Sellafield and (2) Dounreay. [1832]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment has had no consultations with Japanese Ministers or officials about the interim storage of plutonium separated from reprocessed Japanese spent fuel at Sellafield. All nuclear sites, including Sellafield and Dounreay, are subject to regulations governing health and safety, the protection of the environment and the safeguarding of nuclear materials. Questions about the contribution made by the European Commission should be referred to the Commission itself.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) what plans the United Kingdom has to put onto the agenda of *(a)* the United Nations General Assembly and *(b)* the United Nations Environment Programme the issue of the environmental implications of the planned extended use of mixed oxide plutonium–based nuclear fuel in reactors; [1819]

(2) what plans he has to raise at the next European Environment Council meeting the environmental implications for *(a)* European Union member states and *(b)* non-European Union member states trading with the United Kingdom in nuclear fuels of the extension of the use of mixed oxide nuclear fuel in the European Union. [1820]

Mr. Clappison: The Government have no plans to place the environmental implications of the extended use of mixed oxide nuclear fuel on the agenda for the United Nations General Assembly or the United Nations Environment Programme, or to raise the issue at the next European Environment Council meeting.

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment which reports have been placed before the EU Environmental Council on the implications for environmental protection of the decision of the Transport Council in October to accept a new code of control covering irradiated nuclear fuel. [1818]

Mr. Clappison: No reports have been placed before the EU Environment Council on this matter.

Polluted Mines

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of *(a)* the range of toxic contaminants, *(b)* the quantities of polluted water and *(c)* the methods of remedy available at closed coal mines; and which bodies are responsible for funding the clean-up of polluted mine water. [1816]

Mr. Clappison: The Environment Agency monitors discharges from abandoned coal mines and their impact on receiving waters. Such discharges can contain a range of substances, of which the most common is iron. The quantity of water discharged is highly variable, according to location, geology and season. A typical range is 200 to 15,000 cu m per day. The selection of methods used to treat mine water discharges depends on site-specific factors such as the nature of the mine water and the amount of land available near the discharge.

Liability for water pollution from abandoned coal mines varies according to the local circumstances, but we have said that we expect the Coal Authority to go beyond its strict legal duties and seek to achieve the best environmental results within its available resources. On this basis, the Coal Authority is currently pumping and treating mine water in several locations. In addition, the authority, in consultation with the Environment Agency, is assessing the best options for the remediation of a number of other sites where the environmental impact is most serious. I understand that the information resulting from this assessment will be used to identify a programme of specific projects for which finance will be sought from the Government.

Building Research Establishment

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what conditions designed to guarantee the *(a)* quality, *(b)* impartiality, *(c)* independence and *(d)* integrity of the work of the Building Research Establishment will be imposed on organisations submitting a bid to purchase the Building Research Establishment. [2250]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: We will require prospective purchasers to demonstrate that BRE would under their ownership remain capable of providing the Government with high-quality, independent and impartial research and development and advice across a broad range of building and construction disciplines. BRE's reputation for integrity derives in large part from its staff, who will transfer with the business.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) on what criteria he reached his conclusion that the construction industry's proposals for a national centre for construction did not provide a satisfactory basis for the future of the Building Research Establishment; [2252]

(2) in what respects the proposal from the construction industry for the establishment of a national centre for construction failed to meet the criteria he laid down. [2253]

Mr. Jones: The decision we had to take was whether the proposals put forward on behalf of the construction industry—the package of proposals, including the national centre for construction, the arrangements for BRE within the national centre and the Construction Industry Council's indicative offer—offered a basis on which to take forward single tender sale negotiations that would demonstrably result in the best arrangements for the taxpayer. We did not feel that the package as a whole did that.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what factors led him to select February 1997 as the target date for the privatisation of the Building Research Establishment. [2251]

Mr. Jones: It is important for both its staff and its customers that the uncertainty about future ownership of BRE should be ended as soon as practicable. February 1997 is the earliest practicable date for completing the transfer of BRE to the private sector.

Harmful Substances (Smuggling)

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what recent studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated in respect of the smuggling into and out of the United Kingdom substances harmful to the environment or contrary to protocols protecting the natural environment; and if he will place copies of these studies in the Library. [2278]

Mr. Clappison: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise are currently carrying out an assessment of the extent to which UK imports and exports of chlorofluorocarbons and other ozone-depleting substances may be in breach of UK and EC restrictions.

Rock Characterisation Facility

Dr. John Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) when he expects to make a decision on the planning appeal for the construction of a rock characterisation facility at Longlands farm, Gosforth, Cumbria; [2386]

(2) when he expects to receive the planning inspector's report relating to the inquiry into the construction of a rock characterisation facility at Longlands farm, Gosforth, Cumbria. [2385]

Mr. Jones: The Planning Inspectorate has advised that it expects to send the report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in mid-December. Until we have received and considered the report, I cannot say when the decision on the appeal might be made.

Disablement Facilities Grant

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the future of the disabled facilities grant. [2464]

Mr. Clappison: Mandatory disabled facilities grants are retained under part I of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, which is due to

come into force during December. The new provisions will extend the availability of disabled facilities grants, and new means test regulations will ensure that only the resources of disabled persons and their spouses—or parents in the case of disabled children—will be taken into account.

Sewers

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many critical sewers were *(a)* renovated and *(b)* replaced in each area in England and Wales in each of the 10 years immediately before the privatisation of the water industry; and how many critical sewers have been (i) renovated and (ii) replaced in each year since privatisation. [1888]

Mr. Clappison: The information was not collected centrally prior to privatisation or in 1989–90, and figures for 1990–91 are not available on a consistent basis. Figures for 1991–92, 1992–93 and 1993–94 are still subject to verification on a company-by-company basis and will be made available in December this year by the Director General of Water Services when the July returns are placed in the public domain. The figures for the last two years, which have been published by the Director General of Water Services, are contained in the tables:

Company	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Critical sewers renovated (km)		
Anglian	13	14
Dwr Cymru	13	7
North West	82	26
Northumbrian	102	16
Severn Trent	79	5
South West	29	2
Southern	19	0
Thames	113	24
Wessex	37	14
Yorkshire	17	2
Critical sewers replaced (km)		
Anglian	31	3
Dwr Cymru	46	18
North West	85	16
Northumbrian	15	1
Severn Trent	225	9
South West	12	4
Southern	14	1
Thames	47	20
Wessex	14	2
Yorkshire	0	2

Water Mains

Mrs. Peacock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many kilometres of water mains were *(a)* renewed and *(b)* relined in each area of England and Wales in each of the 10 years immediately before the privatisation of the water industry; and how much has been (i) renewed and (ii) relined in each year since privatisation. [1887]

Mr. Clappison: The information was not collected centrally prior to privatisation or in 1989–90, and figures for 1990–91 are not available on a consistent basis. Figures for 1991–92, 1992–93 and 1993–94 are still subject to verification on a company-by-company basis and will be made available in December this year by the Director General of Water Services when the July returns are placed in the public domain. The figures for the past two years, which have been published by the Director General of Water Services, are contained in the tables:

Company	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Water mains relined (km)		
Anglian	147	0
Dwr Cymru	487	64
North West	186	0
Northumbrian	623	741
Severn Trent	5,202	407
South West	905	156
Southern	162	30
Thames	316	129
Wessex	197	78
Yorkshire	785	167
Bournemouth and West Hampshire	0	0
Bristol	31	9
Cambridge	12	0
Chester	0	0
East Surrey	23	0
Essex and Suffolk	79	55
Folkestone and Dover	131	13
Hartlepool	8	8
Mid Kent	6	0
Mid Southern	13	50
North East	596	0
North Surrey	0	0
Portsmouth	1	7
South East	561	81
South Staffordshire	2	2
Sutton and East Surrey	1	23
Tendring Hundred	49	17
Three Valleys	16	22
Wrexham	100	4
York	0	0
Water mains renewed (km)		
Anglian	1,889	518
Dwr Cymru	907	429
North West	2,470	612
Northumbrian	481	280
Severn Trent	2,236	499
South West	179	10
Southern	123	27
Thames	144	15
Wessex	280	184
Yorkshire	699	114
Bournemouth and West Hampshire	29	23
Bristol	83	3
Cambridge	91	17
Chester	15	2
East Surrey	157	0
Essex and Suffolk	42	117
Folkestone and Dover	3	1
Hartlepool	14	3
Mid Kent	178	4
Mid Southern	104	20
North East	131	0
North Surrey	25	8
Portsmouth	179	36
South East	113	38
South Staffordshire	220	102
Sutton and East Surrey	13	179
Tendring Hundred	34	8
Three Valleys	151	49
Wrexham	43	5
York	16	2

Cyclotetramethylenetetra-nitramine

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what environmental impact assessment has been *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned by his Department into cyclotetramethylenetetra-nitramine. [1834]

Mr. Clappison: As far as I am aware, an environmental impact assessment into cyclotetramethylenetetra-nitramine has neither been undertaken nor commissioned by this Department.

Water Efficiency Plans

Mr. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) if he will make arrangements for the water efficiency plans to be *(a)* made publicly available to hon. Members and *(b)* placed in the Library; [2287]

(2) what consultation has taken place with consumer, industry and environmental bodies during the compilation of the water efficiency plans; [2289]

(3) if he will list the water undertakers which have submitted their water efficiency plans to the Director General of Water Services; and if they are publicly available; [2286]

(4) when he plans to report on the water efficiency plans. [2288]

Mr. Clappison: The Director General of Water Services has received water efficiency plans from all the companies and will be reporting on them in due course. It is for each water company to publish its plan and disseminate it to its customers.

The director general asked the companies to prepare their plans in consultation with the Environment Agency and the Office of Water Services customer service committees. They are also assisting the director general in his assessment of the plans.

The companies will report on their plans in their July returns to the director general. The first reports will be included in the 1997 returns.

British Coal (Land Transfers)

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) what recent discussions he has held about the transfer of land to English Partnerships for British Coal; when such a transfer will be completed; and if he will make a statement; [2334]

(2) when he expects the transfer of land from British Coal to English Partnerships to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [2335]

Sir Paul Beresford: An announcement will be made shortly.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2616]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department is aware of the potential problems to departmental computer systems that may be caused by the millennium date change. As previously stated when answering the same question in June of this year, our replacement programme for older systems should ensure a high level of 2000 compliance. Notwithstanding this we are undertaking a study taking guidance from colleagues in CCTA-CITU which will produce a year 2000 compliance audited inventory of systems to form the basis of a costed departmental year 2000 programme. The Department is also working with others as a participant of the year 2000 public sector group.

Global Warming

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the impact of global warming on the sea level in Hampshire in each of the last five years. [1971]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* My Department published an independent "Review of the Potential Effects of Climate Change on the UK" in July 1996 which provides an assessment of how climate change could affect the UK. The review suggests a global sea level rise of up to 19 cm by 2020 and a range of 26–50 cm by 2050 against a 1961–1990 baseline, with more rapid sea level rise along the East Anglian and south coasts taking into account projected vertical land movements. Only global assessments of the effects of climate change on sea level rise are available.

Air Pollution

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the contracts which his Department has placed with consultants to investigate air pollution since 1979. [2285]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Detailed summary documents of the research undertaken to investigate air pollution between the years 1990 and 1995 have been placed in the Library of the House. For the years 1979 to 1990, a list of contracts has been collated and a copy also placed in the Library of the House. This list may not be complete, as this information can be collected only at disproportionate costs.

SCOTLAND

Farmers' Income

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the changes in farmers' income in real terms for each month since January 1990; and if he will make a statement. [1590]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The Scottish Office operates the farm accounts surveys, which collects information on farm incomes in Scotland on an annual basis. This information is published each year in "An Economic Report on Scottish Agriculture", "Agriculture in the United Kingdom", "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom" and "Farm Incomes in Scotland", all of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

Algrade Trust

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of the

investigations by *(a)* the police and *(b)* the Scottish Charities Office into the affairs of the Algrade trust and the application of public and other funds by that trust. [2135]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The police inquiries are continuing. The case against Robert Herriott has been reported by the procurator fiscal and is being considered by Crown counsel. The accounts of the Algrade trust have been completed by the accountants. Some further minor inquiries require to be done by the investigators at the Crown office, after which a decision will be made on whether any action is appropriate under the supervision of charities legislation.

A1

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of plans for dualling the A1 road between Haddington and Dunbar; and when he intends the construction work to start. [2136]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The Department published revised draft orders on 28 June this year following changes to the original scheme design and a second draft compulsory purchase order was published on 25 October.

A number of objections to the proposals have been received, which Scottish Office officials are seeking to resolve. It is difficult to forecast at this stage the time needed for the completion of the statutory procedures.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2606]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The Scottish Office does not expect to incur substantial additional costs as a result of the effect of the millennium date change on computer systems which it operates.

Oil and Gas

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of oil and gas landed from the UK continental shelf comes under the jurisdiction of Scottish legal administration. [1531]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Contracts for the disposal of oil and gas once landed are generally subject to whatever civil law and jurisdiction procedures and purchasers choose to apply. The Government have no record of the choices made.

Health Care International Hospital

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much public sector funding was spent on the Health Care International hospital in current prices. [1530]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) on 21 May, *Official Report*, columns *152–54* which set out all support from public funds given to Health Care International (Scotland) Ltd. in actual and in March 1996 prices. There has been no additional support to HCI from public funds since then.

Housing

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each district and islands council the number of council houses sold through *(a)* right to buy and *(b)* rent to mortgage in 1995–96. [1617]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The available information is set out in the table which follows. These are provisional figures as a number of returns are still outstanding.

Number of sales of council houses to sitting tenants in Scotland by district/islands council for the financial year 1995–96 (provisional)

	Right to buy	*Rent to mortgage*
Scotland	11,836	80
Berwickshire[1]	0	0
Ettrick and Lauderdale	60	0
Roxburgh	116	[2]0
Tweeddale	[2]30	[2]0
Clackmannan	148	1
Falkirk	395	0
Stirling	198	0
Annandale and Eskdale	103	0
Nithsdale	163	0
Stewartry	56	0
Wigtown	130	[3]—
Dunfermline	[3]95	0
Kirkcaldy	380	[2]1
North east Fife	[3]—	[3]—
Aberdeen	575	[4]46
Banff and Buchan	221	1
Gordon	125	8
Kincardine and Deeside	[2]55	8
Moray	229	2
Badenoch and Strathspey	30	[3]—
Caithness	[2]73	[2]0
Inverness	118	[2]0
Lochaber	57	0
Nairn	28	0
Ross and Cromarty	128	1
Skye and Lochalsh	23	[3]—
Sutherland	[2]18	0
East Lothian	[2]141	7
Edinburgh	705	1
Midlothian	150	2
West Lothian	363	1
Argyll and Bute	166	1
Bearsden and Milngavie	23	0
Clydebank	98	0
Clydesdale	[2]107	[3]—
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	92	0
Cumnock and Doon Valley	196	0
Cunninghame	336	0
Dumbarton	[2]90	0
East Kilbride	[2]9	[2]0
Eastwood	[3]—	[3]—
Glasgow	1,688	0
Hamilton	468	0
Inverclyde	336	0

Number of sales of council houses to sitting tenants in Scotland by district/islands council for the financial year 1995–96 (provisional)

	Right to buy	*Rent to mortgage*
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	[2]188	0
Kyle and Carrick	431	0
Monklands	547	0
Motherwell	647	[3]—
Renfrew	386	0
Strathkelvin	139	[3]—
Angus	230	0
Dundee	401	0
Perth and Kinross	[2]223	[2]0
Orkney Islands	35	0
Shetland Islands	57	[2]0
Western Isles	30	0

[1] All local authority housing stock has now been disposed of.
[2] Data incomplete: figures for part-year only.
[3] No information has been received for this period.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he estimates the Scottish fishing industry will reach the targets laid down in the current multi-annual guidance programme; what additional *(a)* grants and *(b)* other public funds will be made available to the fishing industry when this target is reached; and if he will make a statement. [1543]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* We estimate that the UK fishing industry will be close to the targets laid down in the current multi-annual guidance programme when that programme ends on 31 December 1996. Details of the next multi-annual guidance programme remain under discussion. It is too early to say what changes in public expenditure may result.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate the loss to the Scottish fishing industry in terms of decommissioning grants and other assistance due to the fact that the United Kingdom has not reached the targets laid down in multi-annual guidance programme 3; and if he will make a statement. [1544]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Decommissioning grants are provided in order to help meet the targets laid down in MAGP 3. The Scottish fishing industry has benefited from substantial UK public sector assistance for that purpose, with support from the European Union.

The fact that the UK Government may not provide certain other types of grant assistance does not affect the overall volume of resources available for EU structural spending, which has been fixed for the period 1994 to 1999. There is thus no quantifiable loss to the Scottish fishing industry.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what conditions must be met by a fisherman seeking to access grants towards the building of a new fishing vessel; and if he will make a statement. [1462]

Mr. Robertson *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* In view of the overcapacity of the fishing fleet, fishermen in Scotland do not have access to grants towards the building of new fishing vessels.

East Ayrshire Community Hospital

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he received the alternative proposals for funding the East Ayrshire community hospital from the Ayrshire and Arran community health trust; when he expects to announce his decision; and if he will make a statement. [1488]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* I received the full business case from the Ayrshire and Arran community health trust on 2 September. However, the preferred bidder sought time to revise the bid and was given until 1 November to submit final figures in support of his bid. I expect to be able to announce my decision shortly.

Value Added Tax

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's proposed changes to the rules for the reclaim of VAT on local authorities in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [2045]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* None. The matter has not been raised with the Department by any Scottish local authority.

Dounreay Nuclear Plant

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from *The Scotsman* newspaper about the public supply of published health and safety reports covering activities at the Dounreay nuclear plant since 1975; and if he will make a statement. [2363]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend has received no such representations.

Environmental Radioactivity

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what instructions he gave in respect of the release of data contained in the report on "Environmental Radioactivity in Caithness and Sutherland" part 4 to the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment relating to the investigation into the incidence of childhood leukaemia in the Thurso area in 1988; and if he will make a statement. [2365]

Lord James Douglas Hamilton *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* My right hon. Friend gave no instructions on this matter. The data contained in the report were available to COMARE at the time of its deliberations about the Dounreay site.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Schools

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will provide a breakdown of schools in Northern Ireland by the percentages which they attract from each of the major traditions in Northern Ireland. [971]

Mr. Ancram: The breakdown of schools in Northern Ireland by the percentages which they attract from each of the major traditions is given in the tables.

Table 1a: Controlled nursery school (attended mainly by protestant pupils)

Percentage catholic	*Number of schools*
0	13
.01–1	0
1.1–5	11
5.1–10	7
10.1–20	4
20.1–50	12
50.1+	18

Table 1b: Maintained nursery schools (attended mainly by catholic pupils)

Percentage protestant	*Number of schools*
0	22
.01–1	0
1.1–5	2
5.1–10	0
10.1–20	1
20.1–50	1
50.1+	0

Table 2a: Maintained primary school (attended mainly by catholic pupils

Percentage protestant	*Number of schools*
0	384
.01–1	26
1.1–5	17
5.1–10	1
10.1–20	3
20.1–50	3
50.1+	0

Table 2b: Controlled/other maintained primary schools (attended mainly by protestant pupils)

Percentage catholic	*Number of schools*
0	278
.01–1	52
1.1–5	88
5.1–10	25
10.1–20	14
20.1–50	14
50.1+	11

Table 3a: Controlled secondary/non-denominational voluntary grammar schools (attended mainly by protestant pupils)

Percentage catholic	*Number of schools*
0	28
.01–1	25
1.1–5	36
5.1–10	7
10.1–20	8
20.1–50	6
50.1+	1

Table 3b: Maintained secondary/voluntary grammar under Roman Catholic management (attended mainly by catholic pupils)

Percentage protestant	*Number of schools*
0	83
.01–1	22
1.1–5	2
5.1–10	0
10.1–20	1
20.1–50	1
50.1+	0

Class Sizes

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* five, *(b)* six and *(c)* seven-year-olds in Northern Ireland are currently educated in classes of more than 30 pupils. [1170]

Mr. Ancram: The information is not collected in the form requested.

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many children in Northern Ireland in *(a)* primary education and *(b)* secondary education are in a class of more than 30 pupils. [1175]

Mr. Ancram: The number of children in primary education in a class of more than 30 pupils is 21,595. This information is not collected for secondary education.

School Computers

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school pupils have access to the Internet through a computer in their school. [1172]

Mr. Ancram: This information is not currently available, but a forthcoming survey of information technology provision in schools in Northern Ireland will provide the information in April 1997. I will write to the hon. Member at that time.

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school pupils have access to a computer. [1171]

Mr. Ancram: All primary and secondary pupils in Northern Ireland schools have access to a computer.

Nursery Education

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* three-year-olds and *(b)* four-year-olds are currently in nursery education in Northern Ireland. [1174]

Mr. Ancram: In 1995–96 there were *(a)* 8,170 three-year-olds; and *(b)* 12 four-year-olds in nursery education in Northern Ireland.

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many nursery places are currently available in Northern Ireland. [1173]

Mr. Ancram: A total of 6,750 full-time equivalent places are available at grant-aided nursery schools and nursery units attached to grant-aided primary schools.

Pupil Exclusions

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many pupils have been excluded from schools in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. [1177]

Mr. Ancram: Information on the number of pupils expelled from Northern Ireland schools in recent years is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. A monitoring system is, however, in the process of being established to provide such information in future years.

Pupil Numbers

Mr. Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many pupils are currently in full-time education in Northern Ireland in *(a)* nursery, *(b)* primary and *(c)* secondary education. [1179]

Mr. Ancram: In 1995–96 there were 4,752 nursery, 187,872 primary and 151,576 secondary pupils in full-time education in Northern Ireland.

Criminal Records (Access)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in what ways the Northern Ireland criminal records computer system can be accessed by police in Great Britain; and what plans he has to assist in bringing about a single United Kingdom system. [1201]

Sir John Wheeler: Police forces in Great Britain currently access the Northern Ireland criminal records system by direct contact with the RUC criminal records office.

The RUC can access criminal records in Great Britain via police national computer—Phoenix—terminals located in Northern Ireland.

There are no plans to bring a single United Kingdom system, although methods of improving access to Northern Ireland criminal records by forces in Great Britain are currently under consideration.

Education Spending

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money has been spent per pupil in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. [1167]

Mr. Ancram: Expenditure per pupil figures are as follows:

	Expenditure per pupil (1994–95 prices) £
1992–93	1,699
1993–94	1,802
1994–95	1,913

Information is not available for 1990–91 or 1991–92 on a comparable basis.

Hotels and Guest Houses

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list by heading and amount the grant aid given to hotels and guest houses for *(a)* new build and *(b)* renovation since 1 January 1989 in the North Down constituency indicating the current room size criteria; and if he will make a statement. [1200]

Mr. Ancram: The table shows the amount of grant aid given to hotels and guest houses in the North Down constituency for both new build and renovation work since January 1989. It also indicates the Northern Ireland tourist board's current room size criterion for new hotels and guest houses.

Financial assistance to accommodation developments in North Down constituency since 1989

	A: New build £	*B: Renovation £*	*C: Minimum room size (including en-suite facilities)*
Hotels	1,400,000.00	344,622.60	25 sq. metres
Guesthouses	—	37,970.68	20 sq. metres
Total	1,400,000.00	382,593.28	—

Nursery Vouchers

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the estimated cost will be for each of the next five years for administration of nursery vouchers for Northern Ireland. [1180]

Mr. Ancram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on 1 November 1996, *Official Report*, column 282.

GCSE Passes

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland achieved passes in GCSE mathematics in each of the last five years. [1178]

Mr. Ancram: Information is not available in the form requested. The percentage of pupils entered for the GCSE mathematics examinations of the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and

Assessment and its predecessor bodies, and achieving grades A* to G (A to G in 1992 and 1993), in each of the last five years, are:

1992: 93.8

1993: 92.7

1994: 94.5

1995: 98.2[1]; 96.4

1996: 98.1[2]; 95.1[2]

[1] Syllabus A

[2] Syllabus B

Belfast Airport (Sale)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on whose advice and by what criteria the price of Belfast international airport at Aldergrove was set when originally sold; and by what actual and percentage amount that price was bettered when the airport was subsequently sold. [1202]

Mr. Moss: The Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland engaged the services of consultants for the privatisation process. Details of the appointment remain commercial in confidence. The valuation exercise formed part of that process. The criteria used to value the airport were those applicable to a transaction of this type.

The airport was sold by means of a trade sale in a competitive bidding situation which generated a considerable degree of price tension. The purchase price was £32.75 million and the Government withdrew a further £15.51 million in cash from the former company, giving a total return on the transaction of £47.9 million.

We understand that in August 1996 TBI plc acquired the shares in Belfast International Airport Holdings Ltd.—BIAHL—for £72.4 million. In addition, BIAHL paid a dividend of £4.5 million to shareholders. As part of the deal, TBI repaid £28 million of BIAHL's bank borrowings and transaction costs of £2 million. This resulted in a total purchase consideration of £106.9 million.

This figure represents an increase of £59 million on the amount received by Government from the sale of Northern Ireland Airports Ltd. In percentage terms, the increase is equivalent to 123 per cent.

Area Plans

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) if the reviews of the area plans in respect of the Down and Newry and Mourne district council areas will be included in the Planning Agency's business case for the financial year 1997–98; [2384]

(2) what is the time scale for the commencement and execution of the work required in respect of the Down and Newry and Mourne area plans; [2402]

(3) what factors led to the exclusion of the area plans for the Down and Newry and Mourne district council areas form the Planning Agency's business case for the financial year 1996–97; [2383]

(4) when he expects the reviews of the area plans in respect of Down and Newry and Mourne district councils to take place; [2417]

(5) if he will make a statement on the adequacy of resources for the *(a)* review and *(b)* preparation of the area plans for the Down and Newry and Mourne districts. [2418]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to a Planning Service under its chief executive, Mr. T. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 5 November 1996:

Mr. Moss has asked me to reply to your questions about the Down and Newry and Mourne Area Plans.

Only Development Plans which were to be adopted in 1996/97 were included in the Agency's Business Plan for that year. The position will be the same for the 1997/98 Business Plan. When drawing up the development plan programme for 1997/98 and future years, the programming of work on both plans will be taken into account. The work programme will be established in accordance with competing priorities and the available resources.

Although the notional end date for the Down Area Plan is late 1997 and for the Newry and Mourne Area Plan late 1999, they will remain material planning considerations in the determination of any planning applications submitted after those dates.

Tuberculosis Vaccination

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of school leavers in Northern Ireland have been vaccinated against tuberculosis; and if he will make a statement. [1627]

Mr. Moss: The information is not available in the form requested; however, I would refer the hon. Member to the statistical information contained in the publication "Health and Personal Social Services Statistics 1 April 199—31 March 1994" issued by the Department of Health and Social Services which is available in the Library. The Government recommend that BCG vaccine to protect against tuberculosis should be routinely offered to all school children between the ages of 10 and 14 years.

Prisoners (Terrorist Offences)

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what is his policy in relation to the *(a)* release, *(b)* transfer, and *(c)* repatriation of prisoners detained in Northern Ireland and convicted of terrorist offences; and if he will make a statement; [2051]

(2) how many prisoners detained in Northern Ireland and convicted of terrorist offences have been *(a)* released, *(b)* transferred, *(c)* notified of their release by the end of 1996 and *(d)* repatriated to prisons in the Republic of Ireland since August 1994; [2143]

(3) in what way the criteria for approving applications by prisoners convicted of terrorist offences and detained in Northern Ireland for *(a)* release, *(b)* transfer and *(c)* repatriation to the Republic of Ireland differ from those applied in other parts of the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [2144]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject of these questions has been delegated to the Northern Ireland Prison Service under its chief executive, Mr. Alan Shannon. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Alan Shannon to Mr. Max Madden, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to the 3 Parliamentary Questions you tabled about policies with regard to the release, transfer and repatriation of prisoners detained in Northern Ireland, who have been convicted of terrorist offences.

Determinate sentence prisoners in Northern Ireland are released automatically once their full sentences, with the appropriate period of remission, have been served. A prisoner may only be released earlier in exceptional circumstances where the Royal Prerogative of Mercy is exercised. The statistical information you are seeking on releases since 1 August 1994 and prospective releases by 31 December 1996 is not readily available in the format requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However I can confirm that since 17 November 1995, 160 scheduled offenders have been released on licence, between the half way and two thirds part of sentence, as a result of the changes in remission rules brought in by the Northern Ireland (Remission of Sentence) Act 1995.

The release on licence of life sentence prisoners is at the discretion of the Secretary of State who is advised by the Life Sentence Review Board. Since 1 August 1994 58 life sentence prisoners convicted of terrorist related offences have been released on licence and a further 4 prisoners with provisional release dates are expected to be released by 31 December 1996.

The transfer of prisoners between the 3 UK jurisdictions on either a permanent or temporary basis is governed by the provisions of the Criminal Justice Act 1961 and administered according to criteria announced in Parliament in 1992. Since 1 August 1994 2 prisoners convicted of terrorist offences in Northern Ireland have transferred to England & Wales; one permanently and the other on a temporary basis.

The repatriation of prisoners from or to Northern Ireland is governed by the Repatriation of Prisoners Act 1984. Repatriation may be considered where the country to which application is being made is a signatory to the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons or to the Commonwealth Scheme for the Transfer of Convicted Offenders or has a separate bilateral agreement with the United Kingdom. No prisoners convicted in Northern Ireland have been repatriated to the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service is not in receipt of any applications from prisoners seeking repatriation. However one prisoner who was convicted in England, but detained temporarily in Northern Ireland on an intra-UK transfer, was subsequently repatriated to the Republic of Ireland on the authority of the Home Secretary.

You have asked in what way the criteria for approving applications for release, transfer and repatriation differs from those applied in other parts of the United Kingdom. Intra-UK transfers and repatriations are governed by the same legislation and criteria in all 3 UK jurisdictions.

On the question of release each jurisdiction has separate legislation and powers. In Northern Ireland there is no system of parole or discretionary release for determinate sentence prisoners who are released automatically at the completion of their sentences with remission. The procedure for reviewing the sentences of life sentence prisoners also differs from that in other jurisdictions and I attach an explanatory memorandum which illustrates in detail the life sentence review process in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for each year since 1971 the number of *(a)* new houses built, *(b)* improvements made to the housing stock and *(c)* existing houses purchased by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. [2370]

Mr. Moss: The information is provided in the table. The data requested at part *(c)* are available only at disproportionate cost.

New build completions and improvements by Northern Ireland housing executive 1971 to 1995

	New build completions	*Improvements*
1971	1,710	305
1972	5,589	244
1973	5,808	296
1974	5,012	249
1975	5,022	152
1976	7,224	325
1977	6,724	746
1978	5,132	1,277
1979	2,952	1,207
1980	2,701	319
1981	2,342	4,791
1982	3,628	3,763
1983	3,874	1,439
1984	3,384	6,250
1985	3,160	3,860
1986	2,222	852
1987	1,805	2,484
1988	1,653	3,049
1989	1,577	2,943
1990	1,324	3,178
1991	961	2,656
1992	958	2,498
1993	888	2,823
1994	878	2,239
1995	1,362	2,464

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the income and expenditure of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for each year of its existence expressed as an actual figure and as a percentage of the Northern Ireland budget. [2371]

Mr. Moss: The information is provided in the table. Although the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was formed in 1971, expenditure and income figures are available only from 1973–74.

Income and expenditure 1973–74 to 1995–96 Northern Ireland Housing Executive NIHE)

	Capital expenditure	*Capital receipts*	*Revenue expenditure*	*Rental income*	*Net capital and revenue expenditure*
1973–74	65.1	0.2	34.2	21.7	77.4
1974–75	46.5	0.7	48.3	23.2	70.9
1975–76	73.5	1.8	62.1	31.3	102.5
1976–77	108.2	4.7	81.7	39	146.2
1977–78	109.6	5.1	100.5	50.5	154.5
1978–79	102.7	7.1	130.3	58.5	167.4
1979–80	97.5	9.3	171.3	53	206.5
1980–81	110.7	16.7	199.2	72.6	220.6
1981–82	119.9	54	241	100	206.9
1982–83	177.4	55.2	248.4	119.5	251.1
1983–84	177.2	55.6	269.4	126.7	264.3

Income and expenditure 1973–74 to 1995–96 Northern Ireland Housing Executive NIHE)

	Capital expenditure	Capital receipts	Revenue expenditure	Rental income	Net capital and revenue expenditure
1984–85	174.2	48.6	308.6	131.6	302.6
1985–86	171.9	41.9	328	135.5	322.45
1986–87	151.3	34.1	341.2	141.6	316.8
1987–88	150.2	30.2	350.1	147.6	322.5
1988–89	151.3	36	358.8	160.3	313.8
1989–90	141.5	46.4	334.6	174.6	255.1
1990–91	124.5	42.3	347.9	189	241.1
1991–92	123.3	34.6	370.2	198.3	260.6
1992–93	122.3	36.7	369.3	213.1	241.8
1993–94	129.1	45	378.4	225.3	237.2
1994–95	132.9	55.6	393.6	235.7	235.2
1995–96	136.4	56.3	414.1	247.5	246.7

Public expenditure 1973–74 to 1995–96 Northern Ireland block

	Expenditure
1973–74	803
1974–75	1,116
1975–76	1,414
1976–77	1,620
1977–78	1,808
1978–79	2,132
1979–80	2,446
1980–81	2,889
1981–82	3,215
1982–83	3,500
1983–84	3,816
1984–85	4,121
1985–86	4,275
1986–87	4,499
1987–88	4,828
1988–89	5,111
1989–90	5,395
1990–91	5,525
1991–92	6,018
1992–93	6,580
1993–94	7,085
1994–95	7,407
1995–96	7,823

NIHE net expenditure expressed as percentage of total NI public expenditure

	Percentage
1973–74	9.6
1974–75	6.4
1975–76	7.2
1976–77	9
1977–78	8.5
1978–79	7.9
1979–80	8.4
1980–81	7.6
1981–82	6.4
1982–83	7.2
1983–84	6.9
1984–85	7.3
1985–86	7.5
1986–87	7
1987–88	6.7
1988–89	6.1
1989–90	4.7
1990–91	4.4
1991–92	4.3
1992–93	3.7
1993–94	3.3
1994–95	3.2
1995–96	3.2

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2608]

Sir John Wheeler: Northern Ireland Departments are progressing the audits of their computer systems to determine which systems will continue to be in operation as year 2000 approaches and the amount of work that will be necessary to make them compliant. The audits will include an assessment of costs, priorities and time scales.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many civil servants are employed in the drafting and production of statutory instruments. [1683]

Mr. Freeman: Civil servants in many areas of government are involved from time to time in preparing and drafting statutory instruments relating to their areas of work. The staff time spent on this is not recorded separately and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Rendering Facilities

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many inspectors are currently appointed by the Government to ensure existing *(a)* legislation and *(b)* guidelines are met with regard to rendering facilities; and if he will make a statement. [432]

Mrs. Browning: All veterinary staff employed by the Department are appointed as veterinary inspectors under the Animal Health Act 1981 and are empowered to carry out inspections at rendering facilities. A total of 356 veterinary inspectors are employed at present. In addition, 152 technical staff are currently appointed by the Department and they, too, are able to carry out inspections.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the procedure for registering as a rendering facility. [424]

Mrs. Browning: Owners of premises wishing to operate a rendering facility must submit an application to the appropriate MAFF animal health divisional office. The premises are then inspected by State Veterinary Service staff to ensure that the hygiene, structural and processing requirements set out in EC directive 90/667, as amended, and implemented in Great Britain by the Animal By-Products Order 1992, as amended, are met before approval to operate a rendering plant is granted.

Operators wishing to process specified bovine material must be similarly approved but under the Specified Bovine Material (No. 3) Order 1996.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the dates on which those rendering plants which deal exclusively with cattle culled in the 30–month scheme began dealing solely with such cattle; if he will indicate for each the products they were previously rendering; and if he will make a statement. [434]

Mr. Baldry: Details of when those rendering plants processing solely over-30-month scheme—OTMS—material, and in some cases specified bovine material from cattle under 30 months also, began to take OTMS carcases and the material that they processed immediately before that date are listed below:

Name of company	*Date started rendering OTMS carcases*	*Material previously rendered*
Canterbury Mills Ltd.	May 1996	SBM and other animal waste
Granox Ltd.	May 1996	SBM and other animal waste
J. G. Pears (Newark) Ltd.	October 1996	animal waste other than SBM
J. L. Thomas Ltd.	May 1996	animal waste other than SBM
Peninsular Proteins Ltd.	May 1996	animal waste other than SBM
Prosper de Mulder and Sons Ltd.(Hartshill)	October 1996	animal waste other than SBM

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all rendering facilities that render mammals without producing mammalian meat and bonemeal; and if he will make a statement. [430]

Mrs. Browning: In Great Britain, the following premises are approved under the Animal By-Products Order 1992, as amended, to part render mammalian by-products, the proteinaceous end product from which must be sent to an approved full renderer for further processing.

ABP Ltd., Shrewsbury

Croda Colloids Ltd., Market Harborough

D. S. Cooper Ltd., Huddersfield

Mitchell By-Products Ltd., Bradford

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all rendering facilities, indicating for each whether they render *(a)* exclusively cattle culled under the 30-month scheme, *(b)* exclusively cattle not included in the 30-month scheme and *(c)* both cattle within the 30-month scheme and cattle not within the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [433]

Mr. Baldry: Of the plants rendering cattle by-products in Great Britain the following are processing:

(a) Over-30–month scheme cattle, and in some cases specified bovine material from under-30–month cattle, on an exclusive basis:

Canterbury Mills Ltd., Canterbury

Granox Ltd., Widnes

J. G. Pears (Newark) Ltd.

J. L. Thomas Ltd., Exeter.

Peninsular Proteins Ltd.

Prosper de Mulder and Sons Ltd., Hartshill.

On *(b)*, no rendering plant in Great Britain is exclusively processing cattle which are under 30 months of age. Generally plants processing non-SBM from cattle under 30 months of age also process other clean offals—for example, from pigs, sheep, and so on. The plants falling into this category—that is, plants which operate without processing OTMS cattle carcases or SBM are as follows:

ABP Ltd., Shrewsbury

Chambers Ltd., Huddersfield

D. S. Cooper Ltd., Huddersfield

Croda Colloids Ltd., Market Harborough

A. Hughes (Skellingthorpe) Ltd., Skellingthorpe

J. Knights Ltd., Silvertown

Mitchell By-Products Ltd., Bradford

Pimlotts Ltd., Norwich

Smith Brothers, Manchester

Sykes, Castleford

Waddington, Bradford

Dundas Chemicals Ltd., Dumfries

McIntosh Donald Ltd., Aberdeen

On *(c)*, the following Great Britain rendering plants are processing OTMS carcases and SBM from cattle under 30 months of age in dedicated rendering lines and, separately, non-SBM in dedicated clean rendering lines:

Fats and Proteins (UK) Ltd., Lancaster

Gilberts Animal By-Products Ltd., Stafford

Dundas Bros Ltd., Aberdeen

William Forrest and Son (Paisley) Ltd.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the conditions required to be met prior to approval being granted to a rendering facility; and if he will make a statement. [425]

Mrs. Browning: Prior to approval being granted under the Animal By–Products Order 1992, rendering plants must meet the range of hygiene, constructional and processing requirements set out in schedule 4 to the order.

Prior to approval being granted under the Specified Bovine Material (No.3) Order 1996, rendering plants must meet the range of hygiene, constructional and processing requirements set out in schedule 1 and article 18 of the order.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the names and locations of rendering plants that *(a)* produce and *(b)* do not produce mammalian meat and bonemeal in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [423]

Mrs. Browning: In Great Britain, the following premises are approved under the Animal By–Products Order 1992, as amended, to render fully mammalian by–products and could therefore produce mammalian meat and bonemeal:

Canterbury Mills Ltd., Canterbury
Chambers Ltd., Huddersfield
Fats and Proteins (UK) Ltd., Lancaster
Gilberts Animal By-Products Ltd., Stafford
Granox Ltd., Widnes
Hughes (Skellingthorpe) Ltd., Skellingthorpe
J. G. Pears, (Newark) Ltd.
J. Knights Ltd., Slivertown
J. L. Thomas Ltd., Exeter
Lloyd Maunder Ltd., Cullompton
Peninsular Proteins Ltd., Exeter
Pimlotts, Norwich
Prosper de Mulder and Sons, Hartshill
Smith Brothers, Manchester
Sykes, Castleford
Waddington, Bradford
Dundas Brothers Ltd., Aberdeen
Dundas Chemicals Ltd., Dumfries
McIntosh Donald Ltd., Aberdeen
William Forrest and Son (Paisley) Ltd.

In Great Britain, the following premises are approved under the Animal By–Products Order 1992, as amended, to part render animal by–products or render materials other than mammalian by–products—for example fish, poultry—and do not, therefore, produce mammalian meat and bone meal:

ABP Ltd., Shrewsbury
Alba Proteins Ltd., Penrith
Chaettles Ltd., Nottingham
Croda Colloids, Market Harborough
D. S. Cooper Ltd., Huddersfield
F. Howard Jones and Sons Ltd., Gwent
Grampian Ltd., Aberdeen
Grimsby Fish Products Ltd., Grimsby
Interfish Ltd., Plymouth
Marshall Foods Ltd., Perthshire
Mitchell By-Products, Bradford
Shetland Fish Ltd., Shetland
Sun Valley Ltd., Hereford
United Fish Ltd., Aberdeen.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many Government inspections during *(a)* 12 June to 12 July, *(b)* 12 July to 12 August and *(c)* 12 August to 12 September 1996, were carried out to ensure existing (i) legislation and (ii) guidelines have been met with regard to rendering facilities; and if he will make a statement. [431]

Mrs. Browning: The number of inspection visits made by State Veterinary Service staff to rendering plants during the periods concerned are:

12 June 1996 to 11 July 1996: 87
12 July 1996 and 11 August 1996: 72
12 August 1996 to 11 September 1996: 91

Casualty Animals

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received relating to the reluctance of contractors to pick up bulls as casualty animals; and if he will make a statement. [468]

Mrs. Browning: No such written representations appear to have been made.

Feline Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the incidence of reported feline spongiform encephalopathy for each month since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [454]

Mrs. Browning: The number of feline spongiform encephalopathy cases confirmed by date of clinical onset for each month since 1990 at 29 October 1996 is:

	January	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*
1990	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	2	4	0	1
1991	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	3	1	0	1	2
1992	0	1	1	3	1	0	0	2	1	3	0	1
1993	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	3	1	1
1994	1	2	2	1	0	0	2	0	2	2	2	0
1995	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
1996[1]	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Data incomplete.

Note:

1. The data do not include five cases confirmed in 1996 for which detailed information is not yet available.
2. Previous figures supplied for numbers of FSE cases have been on the basis of year of administrative confirmation and not on the basis of date of clinical onset of disease as is the case with those in the table. It would not be appropriate to provide monthly figures by the month of confirmation because of the time lag between suspicion and confirmation. The above figures will therefore not necessarily reflect previcus figures given.

Organophosphate Dips

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what liaison there is between his Department, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Defence on the subject of organophosphate dips and their use; and if he will make a statement. [1857]

Mrs. Browning: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) on 28 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *52*. In addition, I have held a series of meetings with Baroness Cumberlege, Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2605]

Mr. Boswell: We are currently in the process of assessing the resources required to address the problems faced by computer systems when handling the millennium date change.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the current requirements on local veterinary inspectors to conduct an examination of all sheep and goats being exported; and if he will make a statement. [1981]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The local veterinary inspector responsible for completing an export health certificate for sheep and goats is required to certify that, within 48 hours of loading, they were inspected and showed no clinical sign of disease. For the purposes of export certification, the terms inspection and examination are considered to be synonymous. The instructions to local veterinary inspectors specify that the pre-export examination or inspection of animals should consist of visual appraisal and, if deemed appropriate, physical examination.

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many copies of certificate EC 618 have been issued by his divisional veterinary managers during *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September in the county of Kent to local veterinary inspectors certifying live sheep for export destined for further fattening. [1983]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The information requested is as follows:

(a) July: 251

(b) August: 204

(c) September: 233

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the working procedures of the export health certificate, Council directive 91/68/EEC, for the export of sheep for further fattening and the current certificate issued by his Department for the export of sheep for further fattening. [1982]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* The official health certificate issued by my Department for sheep and goats for further fattening consigned to other European Union member states is known as EC2747. The certificate fully reflects the conditions in the model health certificate laid down in Council directive 91/68/EEC. Specific notes for guidance and checklists are provided to local veterinary inspectors to enable them to complete certificate EC2747.

Quarantine

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will take steps to set up a trial scheme with a view to replacing current quarantine regulations with a passport for pets system; [2366]

(2) if he will make guide, hearing and appropriate police and customs dogs exempt from current quarantine regulation subject to the microchip identification, vaccination, and blood testing in a passport for pets system. [2367]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Last year, in reply to the Agriculture Committee, the Government said that they would continue to monitor our current quarantine regulations with a view to replacing them if alternatives offering the same degree of protection became available.

We are now looking at the matter, taking account of the most recent information. If new moves are decided upon an announcement will be made.

WALES

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many agricultural holdings and what area of agricultural land in hectares came within the arable area payments scheme in each county in Wales in (i) 1995 and (ii) 1996. [773]

Mr. Jonathan Evans *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The information for 1995 is given in the table. The equivalent figures for 1996 are not yet available.

Arable area payments scheme 1995 (Number of holdings and area claimed by county)

	Simplified scheme		*Main scheme*			
County	*Number of holdings*	*Area claimed (ha)*	*Number of holdings*	*Area claimed (ha)*	*Total number of holdings*	*Total area claimed (ha)*
Clwyd	334	3,350.90	52	3,689.22	386	7,040.12
Dyfed	884	7,925.23	137	8,411.32	1,021	16,336.55
Gwent	184	2,080.45	81	5,115.92	265	7,196.37
Gwynedd	158	1,468.04	19	1,089.70	177	2,557.74
Mid Glamorgan	33	367.14	14	1,392.20	47	1,759.34
Powys	309	3,043.57	60	4,115.76	369	7,159.33
South Glamorgan	61	761.77	33	3,322.79	94	4,084.56
West Glamorgan	66	549.88	10	483.52	76	1,033.40
Total	2,029	19,546.98	406	27,620.43	2,435	47,167.41

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will set out by county a breakdown of the *(a)* 1994 and the *(b)* 1995 arable area payments scheme.

Mr. Evans *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* The information is given in the table.

Arable area payments scheme, by county, 1994

County	Simplified scheme Area claimed (ha)	Main scheme Cereals area claimed (ha)	Oilseeds area claimed (ha)	Protein area claimed (ha)	Linseed area claimed (ha)	Set-aside area claimed (ha)	Total
Clwyd	3,450.22	2,489.48	237.33	184.70	47.82	562.91	3,522.24
Dyfed	8,231.86	4,492.30	543.66	249.33	160.53	1,346.99	6,792.81
Gwent	2,189.71	3,032.24	392.13	169.96	118.88	843.80	4,557.01
Gwynedd	1,486.72	813.84	23.62	14.80	24.15	218.52	1,094.93
Mid Glamorgan	349.48	1,030.08	161.74	0.00	0.00	226.72	1,418.54
Powys	3,323.99	2,610.82	271.71	62.26	6.98	602.63	3,554.40
South Glamorgan	870.89	2,016.49	337.89	49.23	14.06	509.22	2,926.89
West Glamorgan	597.14	233.94	66.41	0.00	15.33	41.40	357.08
Total	20,500.01	16,719.19	2,034.49	730.28	387.75	4,352.19	24,223.90

Arable area payments scheme, by county, 1995

County	Simplified scheme Area claimed (ha)	Main scheme Cereals area claimed (ha)	Oilseeds area claimed (ha)	Protein area claimed (ha)	Linseed area claimed (ha)	Set-aside area claimed (ha)	Total
Clywd	3,350.90	2,844.03	162.65	143.62	6.47	532.45	3,689.22
Dyfed	7,925.23	5,994.84	557.72	157.22	145.91	1,555.63	8,411.32
Gwent	2,080.45	3,646.54	310.69	178.13	178.13	801.99	5,115.92
Gwynedd	1,468.04	827.38	19.95	18.43	0.00	223.94	1,089.70
Mid Glamorgan	367.14	1,017.43	119.76	33.04	28.14	193.83	1,392.20
Powys	3,043.57	3,254.64	222.46	54.60	9.14	574.92	4,115.76
South Glamorgan	761.77	2,483.01	257.42	21.84	91.20	469.32	3,322.79
West Glamorgan	549.88	331.59	24.83	0.00	0.00	127.10	483.52
Total	19,546.98	20,399.46	1,675.48	607.32	458.99	4,479.18	27,620.43

Brain Injuries

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what additional provision of rehabilitation services for brain injured patients in Wales he has made in the current year; what variations in provision there have been since 1994; and if he will make a statement. [1746]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Provision of rehabilitation for brain injured patients is a matter for health authorities. In response to the Welsh Affairs Committee report on severe head injuries, the chairmen and chief executives of health authorities in Wales have established a steering group to consider the main recommendations. My Department is currently awaiting a full report.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his latest estimate of the total costs of implementing the nursery voucher scheme in Wales. [1492]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) on 16 October 1996, *Official Report*, column 984.

Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the proposed levels of hill livestock compensatory allowances for 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [1856]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: My right hon. Friend and I have received representations from individual farmers, industry bodies and Members of Parliament. The farming unions in particular have made detailed representations, including expressing appreciation of the early announcement that across the UK there would be an additional £60 million for cattle payments in 1997. We are now considering, with Ministers from all the agriculture departments, the representations that we have received before making final decisions on rate levels for 1997.

Farmers' Incomes

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the changes in farmers' incomes in real terms for each month since January 1990; and if he will make a statement. [1585]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Data on farm incomes are collected through the farm business survey on an annual basis. They are published in "Farm Incomes in the United Kingdom", 1994–95 being the latest edition, a copy of which is held in the Library of the House.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many grant-maintained schools there were in Wales in *(a)* 1993, *(b)* 1994, and *(c)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [1742]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information requested is presented in the following table.

Number of grant-maintained schools in Wales[1]

Year	*Primary*	*Secondary*	*All schools*
1993	4	7	11
1994	5	11	16
1995	5	11	16

[1] At 1 September each year. On 1 September 1996 St. Brigid's school in Denbighshire became the first independent school in Wales to opt into the grant-maintained system.

Bala to Dolgellau Road

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when the road improvement works on the main Bala to Dolgellau road at Drws Y Nant are going to be put in hand; and if he will make a statement. [1854]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 24 January 1996, *Official Report*, column 297.

Elderly People

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the current service provision for elderly people with long-term continuing health care needs. [1934]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Assessment of provision for all persons with long-term continuing health care needs is a matter for determination by health authorities.

Health Trust Funding

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many health trusts in Wales have reported their dissatisfaction with their levels of funding; and if he will make a statement. [1864]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: NHS trusts are operationally independent and receive no direct revenue funding from the Welsh Office. All trust income is earned through contracts with commissioners of health care including health authorities and GP fundholders. It is for trusts to determine, together with their health commissioners, what is the appropriate level of funding.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2609]

Mr. Hague: An assessment of the effect of the millennium date change has been undertaken. I do not expect there to be any major costs involved in ensuring that my Department's computer systems can cater for the year 2000.

HEALTH

Dental Services

11. **Mr. Bellingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for improving dental care in Norfolk and Cambridgeshire; and if he will make a statement. [619]

Mr. Malone: The general dental service reforms that I announced on 12 June will bring improvements in dental care generally. Funding to improve the availability of national health service dentistry has recently been approved for Cambridge and Huntingdon health authority.

24. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the proposed new local contracting arrangements for NHS dentistry. [634]

Mr. Malone: The White Paper, "Choice and Opportunity", set out the Government's proposal to introduce local flexibility in the delivery of national health service primary care dental services. We intend to introduce a Bill this Session. It will enable health authorities and providers to propose local arrangements for securing services targeted at local needs. These arrangements will be piloted and evaluated. Participation will be by volunteers and the existing system will remain for dentists who wish to work under it.

26. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists are practising in Berkshire; and how many of them are taking on new adult national health service patients. [636]

Mr. Malone: The information is contained in the table.

General dental service: number of dentists[1][2] *practising in Berkshire health authority and number of dentists*[1][3] *who had additions to their register*

Number of dentists practising at 30 June 1996	*Number of dentists with an addition to their register in the year to 31 December 1995*[3]
284	269

[1] Includes principals, assistants and vocational trainees.

[2] Some dentists have a contract with more than one health authority. The number of dentists practising includes all dentists who practise in Berkshire as well as in other authorities.

[3] The additions to the register include instances of patients registering with a dentist after a break in attendance and reinstatement of registrations which had been cancelled in error.

The count relates to registrations for which payments were authorised during the year. Payments are made one month in arrears.

Zinc-based Dental Amalgams

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has initiated into the safety of the use of zinc-based dental amalgams; and if he will make a statement. [1859]

Mr. Malone: None. While some dental amalgams contain a small proportion of zinc, we are not aware of any in which zinc is a main constituent.

NHS Waiting Lists

12. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on national health service waiting lists in Dorset in relation to those in the rest of England. [620]

Mr. Horam: I am pleased to say that the national health service in Dorset has continued to maintain an excellent position on hospital waiting times. The latest figures show that only 1 per cent. of Dorset health authority residents on a waiting list are waiting longer than six months, the lowest proportion for any health authority in England. No Dorset resident was waiting more than 12 months for treatment.

Small Community Pharmacies

13. **Mr. Pope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to provide assistance to small community pharmacies. [621]

Mr. Malone: The essential small pharmacy scheme already provides financial support to pharmacies located more than 1km from the next nearest pharmacy and which dispense fewer than 18,432 national health service prescriptions in a year.

Health Care Facilities (Yorkshire)

14. **Mr. Riddick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve health care facilities in Yorkshire hospitals. [623]

Mr. Horam: We are improving health care facilities in a number of hospitals in Yorkshire. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State saw some excellent examples of this recently when he visited Huddersfield Health Care National Health Service Trust.

Victoria Hospital, Lichfield

15. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will visit the Victoria hospital, Lichfield; and if he will make a statement. [624]

Mr. Horam: I have no plans to visit the Victoria hospital in the foreseeable future. However, my hon. Friend the Minister for Health visited the Victoria hospital, Lichfield on 2 June 1995, where he was most impressed with the improved and new facilities.

Fireworks Injuries

16. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost to the NHS of injuries by fireworks in the last year for which figures are available. [625]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available. However, information requirements are kept under continuous review.

Asthma

17. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has carried out into possible links between diesel exhaust emissions and asthma; and if he will make a statement. [626]

Mr. Horam: The Government have evaluated a range of research related to possible health effects of air pollution, including diesel emissions. The reports of the expert advisory committee on the medical effects of air pollutants, "Asthma and Outdoor Air Pollution" and "Non-biological Particles and Health", were published in autumn 1995. Copies are available in the Library.

Health Care (Manchester)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Manchester health authority and family practitioners committee about health care in Manchester. [629]

Mr. Horam: I met representatives of the former Manchester Health Commission and community health councils in January to discuss the difficult challenges that Manchester faces.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Austin-Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action his Department is taking to reduce the mortality rate from breast cancer. [630]

Mr. Horam: The Government are fully committed to reducing deaths from breast cancer, which is why we have made the reduction in breast cancer mortality a "Health of the Nation" target. We have a national breast screening programme and continue to fund research in this area. In 1995 we published the "Policy Framework for Commissioning Cancer Services" to help improve the quality of cancer services and issued further guidance to purchasers in July 1996 with the specific aim of making further progress on breast cancer outcomes.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase breast cancer services; [1234]

(2) what plans he has to increase the provision of mobile breast cancer services. [1239]

Mr. Horam: The provision of breast cancer services is a matter for individual health authorities in the light of local priorities and available resources.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much was spent by his Department on breast cancer services in each of the last six years; and how much is planned to be spent in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1997; [1235]

(2) what was the average expenditure, in the last financial year, on detecting and treating each case of breast cancer. [1242]

Mr. Horam: This information is not held centrally.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve awareness of breast cancer among young people at school. [1236]

Mr. Horam: We have no plans at present. Higher priority is given to health messages more relevant to young people at school, since there are no appropriate behavioural changes for young people that would reduce their risk.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to provide assistance to general practitioners to deal with the medical, emotional and practical problems caused by breast cancer. [1237]

Mr. Horam: "Guidelines for referral of patients with breast problems", produced jointly by the national health service breast screening programme and the Cancer Research Campaign on behalf of the Department of Health's advisory committee on breast cancer screening was issued to general practitioners in January 1996. A summary of "Improving Outcomes in Breast Cancer: Guidance for Purchasers", published by the NHS executive in July 1996, was sent to all general practitioners in October. Both these publications will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated regarding the detection and treatment of breast cancer. [1238]

Mr. Horam: The United Kingdom Health Departments, along with the Medical Research Council and the two major cancer research charities—the Cancer Research Campaign and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund—are currently funding four studies into breast cancer screening costing at least £5 million over five years. The trials are being co-ordinated by the United Kingdom Co-ordinating Committee on Cancer Research, UKCCCR. The Department of Health's contribution is expected to be some £2.4 million.

The Department's policy research programme also funds the cancer screening evaluation unit—CSEU—at the Institute of Cancer Research by some £420,000 per year. The CSEU is undertaking work into two of the above UKCCCR trials. These are a trial of breast screening of women from age 40 and a trial of the early detection of breast cancer. The CSEU is also undertaking work on the national breast cancer screening record, and is evaluating the results of two pilot studies into breast screening for women aged 65 to 69. When the current CSEU contract comes to an end in December 2000, the Department will have invested some £7.3 million in the unit.

In addition, the NHS research and development programme is currently undertaking 12 studies into breast cancer at a cost of some £1.2 million.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on breast cancer services by (i) France, (ii) Germany and (iii) the Netherlands in the most recent year for which figures are available. [1240]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected routinely.

Health Authority Deficits

21. **Mr. Spearing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to ascertain the likely financial deficits of district health authorities for each financial year until 1999–2000. [631]

Mr. Horam: The current year forecast outturn positions of health authorities are the subject of regular monitoring by the national health service executive. The forecast positions for each health authority, as at quarter one 1996–97, were recently placed in the Library. Future year projections are not routinely collected.

27. **Ms Lynne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of current health authority deficits in the present financial year. [637]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) on 17 October 1996, *Official Report*, columns *1104-105*.

NHS Trusts (North Thames Region)

22. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the chairman of North Thames region and with the Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority and Redbridge and Forest NHS trusts about their performance as published in league tables [632]

Mr. Horam: The Secretary of State regularly meets regional chairman to discuss the performance of the national health service in their region. Redbridge Healthcare NHS Trust and Forest Healthcare NHS Trust are working with Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority to improve their performance.

Incontinence Products

23. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the full cost to the NHS in the current financial year of the removal of zero rating from incontinence products. [633]

Mr. Burns: Under the Value Added Tax Act 1994, schedule 8, group 12, item 2(g), incontinence products are zero rated only when supplied directly to a disabled person or to a charity which makes them available to disabled persons. As the national health service falls into neither of these categories, supplies of these products are, and always have been, standard rated. Since there is no change, there will be no associated increased cost for the NHS. It is only through a temporary relaxation in the interpretation of the VAT regulations by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise that the NHS has been able temporarily to claim a VAT reimbursement on these products.

Prescription Charges

25. **Mr. Robert Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the level of the prescription charge in 1979 at current prices. [635]

Mr. Malone: At 1996–97 prices, the prescription charge at 1 January 1979 would have been £0.52, actual charge £0.20, until 16 July, when it increased to £1.18, actual charge £0.45.

Mixed Wards

Mr. David Martin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on mixed wards in NHS hospitals. [627]

Mr. Horam: It is for health authorities and trusts to decide whether and, if so, how to use mixed sex accommodation, but they must respect the dignity and privacy of patients.

Private Finance Initiative

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospitals in England processing PFI bids have reached the preferred bidder stage; and what proportion of the total number of bids this figure represents. [1123]

Mr. Horam: Information is collected centrally on the first wave of major private finance initiative schemes with a capital value of £10 million or more. There are 33 in total and, of these, 22 schemes have reached preferred bidder stage.

Specialist Registrars

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many specialist registrar posts there are in England and Wales for *(a)* oncology, *(b)* palliative care and *(c)* pathology; and how many of these posts are currently vacant. [1122]

Mr. Malone: The phased introduction of the new specialist registrar grade commenced on 1 April 1996 in six specialties. Transition on oncology, palliative care and pathology commenced on 1 October 1996. Transition to the new grade in all specialties will be completed on 1 April 1997. The most recent census data—30 September 1995—do not include any information about the specialist registrar grade. The only available information relates to the previous grades for registrar.

Surgeons and Anaesthetists

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* surgeon and *(b)* anaesthetist vacancies there are at each grade in England [1110]

Mr. Malone: The annual medical work force census gathers data, as at 30 September each year, on vacancies by grade and specialty. These refer to posts which were vacant for whatever reason on the actual day of collection. Figures for England, as at 30 September 1995, are shown in the table.

Whole-time equivalent

	Consultant	*Staff grade*	*Senior registrar*	*Registrar*	*Senior house officer*
All surgical specialties	140	20	40	70	60
Anaesthetics	110	10	10	10	20

Source:
The Medical and Dental Workforce Census 30 September 1995.

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
2. Many vacant posts are wholly or partly occupied by locums.
3. Surgical group includes general surgery, cardio-thoracic surgery, otolaryngology, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, paediatric surgery, plastic surgery, orthopaedic surgery, urology.

Head Lice

Mrs. Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children suffered from head lice in the United Kingdom in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [1944]

Mr. Horam: This information is not collected centrally.

Long-term Care

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish a summary of the responses to his consultation paper on long-term care; if he will list the organisations and individuals who responded; and if he will put a copy of the responses in the Library. [1821]

Mr. Burns: The Department of Health received 598 responses to the consultation exercise launched by the publication of "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age".

Of these, 319 responses commented on the consultation paper itself. Copies of these will be placed in the Library, except where respondents asked for them to be treated as confidential. The other responses commented on media reports or the Department's own summary of the consultation paper. The table shows the source of the different comments.

Source of comments	*Comments on: Consultation paper*	*Summary/comments on media reports*	*Total*
Financial services industry	83	3	86
Local authority/social services	73	2	75
NHS	44	9	53
Other care providers	33	1	34
Voluntary organisations	53	5	58
Individuals	33	259	292
Total	319	279	598

We are grateful to all those who commented and will take their comments into account in taking our proposals forward.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of school leavers in England have been vaccinated against tuberculosis; and if he will make a statement; [1579]

(2) at what age children are offered vaccination against tuberculosis in schools; [1563]

(3) if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on vaccination against tuberculosis. [1564]

Mr. Horam: The Government recommend that BCG vaccine to protect against tuberculosis should be routinely offered to all school children between the ages of 10 and 14 years. This policy is based on the recommendation of the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation, which advises the UK health departments on immunisation. The committee has reviewed this recommendation and advised that the schools

immunisation programme should continue. Ministers have endorsed this and a statement to this effect was made in the House, on 4 July 1996, *Official Report*, column *493*; health authorities were advised of this recommendation in July 1996. In addition, immunisation continues to be offered to certain high-risk groups outside the routine school programme, including babies born to parents from countries with a high prevalence of tuberculosis. It is estimated that over the two years 1994–95 and 1995–96 around 73 per cent. of school leavers had been given a BCG vaccination.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many registered homeless people have died from tuberculosis in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1565]

(2) how many cases of tuberculosis among the registered homeless have been diagnosed in England in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1577]

(3) how many people have died from tuberculosis in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1558]

(4) how many cases of tuberculosis have been diagnosed in England in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make statement. [1578]

Mr. Horam: The figures are in the following table.

Year	*Notifications of number of cases of all tuberculosis (excluding chemoprophylaxis) in England*[1]	*Number of deaths due to tuberculosis*[2] *in the United Kingdom*[1]
1986	5,743	538
1987	4,853	487
1988	4,960	535
1989	5,223	512
1990	5,010	441
1991	5,270	485
1992	5,597	475
1993[3]	5,721	494
1994[3]	5,409	475
1995	5,426	[4]501

Source:
[1] Office of National Statistics.
[2] International Classification of Diseases (9th Revision), codes 010–018.
[3] England and Wales figures for 1993 and 1994 represent the number of deaths occurring in each year. All the other figures are the number of deaths registered in the year. Also, new procedures for coding cause of death in England and Wales from 1993 mean that figures for 1993 onwards may not be exactly comparable with earlier years.
[4] Provisional.

ONS statistics on infectious diseases do not identify registered homeless people separately. National data on rates of tuberculosis infection amongst homeless people are not available.

The United Kingdom has an excellent record of tuberculosis control. The Government are strengthening policies to protect the health of the nation against this disease.

Ministers established an interdepartmental working group on tuberculosis with the remit to consider policies for tuberculosis control in the UK and to recommend best practice. The first two reports of the group, one of which deals with tuberculosis and homeless people, have been published and generally welcomed as important steps towards improvements in the control of tuberculosis in the UK.

The Government have also taken several initiatives to improve the access of homeless people to health care, including funding of primary health care projects.

Childbirth

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the percentages of women delivering in England and in each former NHS region in 1994–95 *(a)* by category of person conducting the delivery, *(b)* by duration of post-natal stay and *(c)* by place of delivery; [1840]

(2) if he will list for each of the 14 former NHS regions and for special health authorities for the financial year 1994–95 *(a)* the total number of maternities, *(b)* the total number of birth episodes in the maternity hospital episode system and *(c)* the total number of birth episodes in the maternity hospital episode system which had a maternity tail; and if he will make a statement about progress with improving the quality and completeness of the data; [1842]

(3) what estimate he has made of the percentages of women delivering in England and in each former NHS region in 1994–95 *(a)* whose labours were induced surgically, *(b)* whose labours were induced by oxytocic drugs, *(c)* whose labours were induced by a combination of these, *(d)* whose labours were of spontaneous onset and *(e)* who had elective caesarean sections; [1841]

(4) what estimate he has made of the percentages of women delivering in England and in each former NHS region in 1994–95 whose deliveries were *(a)* spontaneous, *(b)* instrumental, *(c)* by caesarean section and *(d)* by other and unspecified means. [1839]

Mr. Horam: The information requested, together with a statement, were published on 14 October in the Health Commission report on public expenditure on health and personal social services memorandum received from the Department of Health containing replies to a written questionnaire from the Committee, HC 698, pages 101 to 105, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what notification his Department receives of obstetric interventions carried out by court order *(a)* without the consent of and *(b)* against the express wish of the patient; and how many such notifications he has received in the last five years. [1848]

Mr. Horam: There are no requirements to provide notifications of obstetric interventions provided under a court order.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has commissioned into methods of treatment for CJD. [1592]

Mr. Horam: The development of treatment for patients suffering from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease will be a high priority in our centrally directed research strategy, details of which will be published shortly.

Child Minders

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what conclusion he has reached since 29 March 1994 as to corporal punishment of children by child minders; and what assessment he has made of the need for further clarification of his Department's guidance on behaviour and sanctions by child minders, if minded children misbehave, is required; and if he will make a statement. [1954]

Mr. Burns: Physical punishment is a matter for parents and for negotiation between them and their child minders. Government guidelines on the use of physical punishment by child minders are set out in a circular to local authorities "The Children Act 1989: Registration of Childminders", which was issued in December 1994. Copies will be placed in the Library.

Medical Staff (Recruitment)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses were recruited from abroad into the NHS in each of the past 10 years, broken down by country of origin. [1949]

Mr. Malone: The information requested is not available centrally.

Hospitals (Single Rooms)

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many single rooms are currently used for national health service patients; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [1007]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

Riluzole

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance has been given to health authorities about the prescribing of Riluzole. [1623]

Mr. Malone: No guidance has been issued.

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evaluation he has made of the value of Riluzole in the treatment of motor neurone disease. [1646]

Mr. Malone: A marketing authorisation for Riluzole was submitted to the European Medicines Evaluation Agency through the new centralised procedure set out in regulation 93/2309 EC. The United Kingdom was appointed as the rapporteur with France as the co-rapporteur for the assessment of this product. The initial assessment was therefore made by the Medicines Control Agency and advice obtained from the Committee on Safety of Medicines.

The final assessment and opinion were given by the Committee on Proprietary Medicinal Products and the authorisation to market Riluzole was given by the European Commission according to the procedure set out in regulation 93/2309 EC. This marketing authorisation is binding across all 15 member states of the European Union.

The summary of product characteristics defines the indications and use of the product and a European public assessment report describes the evaluation of the product and is available from the European Medicines Evaluation Agency at 7 Westferry Circus, Canary Wharf, London E14 4HB.

Cancelled Operations (South Thames Region)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the annual increase in the number of patients who have had operations cancelled on the day they were due to go into hospital or after admission since 1994–95 in the South Thames region. [608]

Mr. Horam: The latest information has been placed in the Library.

Minor Accident Units

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many minor accident treatment service units there are in the NHS; where they are located; and when they were established. [2151]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average budget of *(a)* a minor accident treatment service unit, *(b)* a medical receiving room and *(c)* an accident and emergency department. [2150]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of Barnet health authority's proposal for a minor accident treatment service unit at Edgware general hospital; and if he will make a statement; [2152]

(2) when the minor accident treatment service unit at Edgware general hospital is expected to be open; and if he will make a statement. [2149]

Mr. Malone: The minor accident treatment service at Edgware opened in November 1995. Barnet health authority has asked the Wellhouse NHS Trust to develop proposals for an enhanced service, to be open 24 hours a day with medical cover, to operate from April 1997.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the minimum level of service necessary to run *(a)* a minor accident treatment service unit and *(b)* a medical receiving room. [2145]

Mr. Horam: It is for health authorities and national health service trusts to decide what levels of service are necessary locally.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many acute beds per head of population there are in an average *(a)* minor accident treatment service unit, *(b)* medical receiving room and *(c)* accident and emergency department. [2147]

Mr. Horam: Information on acute beds is not collected centrally at this level of detail. Information on the average daily number of available beds by broad ward type is published annually in "Bed Availability for England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* consultants, *(b)* registrars, *(c)* junior

doctors and *(d)* nurses are standard to *(a)* a minor accident treatment service unit, *(b)* a medical receiving room and *(c)* an accident and emergency department. [2148]

Mr. Horam: It is for health authorities and national health service trusts to decide what levels of staffing are necessary locally.

Hospital Development

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when *(a)* the planned redevelopment of the Barnet general hospital and *(b)* the expansion of services at (i) Northwick Park and (ii) the Royal Free hospital will be completed. [2228]

Mr. Malone: Phase 1A of the redevelopment of Barnet general hospital, including an enhanced accident and emergency department, is expected to become operational in spring 1997. Plans are well advanced for phase 1B of the redevelopment, under which construction work is expected to commence in summer 1997, subject to approval.

Extra capacity is also planned to be available at Northwick Park and the Royal Free hospital from April 1997.

Acute Care

Sir George Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 October, *Official Report*, column *135*, what information he has to indicate the number of acute beds in NHS hospitals blocked by patients awaiting discharge into retirement or nursing homes in different parts of the country. [2336]

Mr. Horam: Since April 1996, the national health service executive has started to collect information twice yearly from health authorities about patients aged 75 and over whose discharge from hospital has been delayed.

Sir John Gorst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's definition of acute care. [2146]

Mr. Horam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave on 4 November.

Insulin Pen Needles

Sir Keith Speed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the inquiry into providing insulin pen needles on the NHS. [2028]

Mr. Malone: We are currently considering whether insulin injection pen needles should be made available on general practitioner prescription.

Millennium Date Change

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by her Department. [2614]

Mr. Horam: Further analysis, including an audit of all the Department of Health's computer systems, is being carried out. A full assessment of the impact, including the likely costs, will be completed by 1 April 1997.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 6 November 1996

HOME DEPARTMENT

Shotguns

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation in respect of shotguns providing that *(a)* they are limited solely to use for pest control on agricultural land, *(b)* they require annually renewable licences held in the name of either the land-owner or tenant, *(c)* all users are named on the licence, *(d)* the maximum number of shotguns and registered users is determined in relation to the acreage owned or tenanted, *(e)* no more than one licence is issued in respect of any piece of land and *(f)* they must be stored in secure safe-type cabinets with at least two separate keys; and if he will make a statement [2199]

Mr. Maclean: No. It is already a requirement that shotguns must be stored securely.

Young Offenders

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in implementing the Government's policy in respect of eliminating the remanding of youths in prison. [2315]

Mr. Maclean: We are committed to ending the remand of 15 and 16-year-old boys to Prison Service establishments as soon as there are sufficient secure local authority places to accommodate them. A building programme of 170 new secure places is under way for this purpose. The first places came on stream last December and all additional places will be available during 1997.

Gun Clubs

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to gun clubs of the increased security measures which will be required as a result of the Government's proposals. [1479]

Miss Widdecombe: The proposals will result in increased costs for clubs which choose to become licensed pistol clubs. The level of costs involved will depend on the extent of their existing security arrangements. These costs cannot currently be quantified.

General Election Campaign

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish details of the present expenditure limits which candidates may not exceed in a general election campaign; and what plans he has to increase these limits before the next election. [1679]

Mr. Sackville: The current maximum amounts for candidates' election expenses at a general election are set out in the Representation of the People (Variations of Limits of Candidates' Election Expenses) Order 1994. Those limits are as follows. Consideration is being given to increasing these levels before the next general election in line with inflation movements since they were last increased in 1994.

Parliamentary general election	£	*Plus pence per elector*
County constituency	4,642	5.2
Borough constituency	4,642	3.9

Involuntary Manslaughter

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to respond to the Law Commission report, "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter", with particular reference to its implications for health and safety at work. [2012]

Mr. Maclean: The Law Commission's report on involuntary manslaughter raises some important but complex issues, which the Government are still considering. A major element of that consideration is whether a failure to ensure the health and safety of persons employed in or affected by a company's activities should constitute a new offence of corporate killing. We will announce our response to the report in due course.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each repeal. [1403]

Mr. Howard: I do not propose to repeal any regulations by the end of 1996, but on present plans the Licensing Act 1964 will be amended by the end of this year. Amendments to a number of other Acts should be made in the new year.

The aim of each amendment will be to reduce rather than increase compliance costs, so a compliance cost assessment is not required. We do, however, seek to estimate approximate savings wherever possible. The cost of undertaking a CCA varies from case to case, but it is generally modest. Because part of the cost falls on the businesses consulted, a full CCA would be inappropriate for measures designed to reduce business burdens.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently in detention; how many of them are detained in HM prisons; how many asylum seekers have been detained at the port of entry since July; and if he will make a statement. [1763]

Mr. Kirkhope: As at 1 October 1996, a total of 864 persons, who had sought asylum at some stage, were detained, of whom 343 were held in Her Majesty's prisons.

A total of 642 persons who had sought asylum at ports between 1 July and 30 September 1996 are recorded as having been placed in detention during that period.

Merseyside Police Authority

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to enable the Merseyside police authority to recruit more police officers in the years 1997 to 2000. [2472]

Mr. Maclean: It is for the police authority and the chief constable to determine the number of police officers in the force, having regard to the resources available to them. On the present basis of allocation, Merseyside police authority's share of the additional funds being made available for the recruitment of 5,000 extra officers in England and Wales would be sufficient for it to recruit 110 constables between April 1997 and March 1999.

Speed Cameras

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* speed cameras and *(b)* live speed cameras are currently installed in the UK. [2061]

Mr. Maclean: The deployment of speed cameras is an operational matter for chief officers of police and highway authorities. The information requested is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Modern Apprenticeship Scheme

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have taken up places on the modern apprenticeship scheme since the scheme was created. [2591]

Mr. Paice: As of August 1996, the latest date for which information is available, 46,100 had started on modern apprenticeships in Great Britain.

Teacher Education Allocations

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps she is taking to control the increase in administration costs in respect of teacher education allocations; and what is her estimate of the increase in those costs in 1996–97. [2243]

Mr. Forth *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The Teacher Training Agency has reformed the allocations methodology in order to reward quality and increase the value for money obtained from its annual investment of over £160 million in initial teacher training. The agency's total running costs, which also cover the promotion of teaching as a career, the development of national standards and training for headteachers and teachers, and work on the new national curriculum for initial teacher training, are planned to increase by some £0.6 million in 1996–97. This reflects increased activity in pursuit of the agency's statutory objectives of raising the standards of teaching and improving the quality and efficiency of training.

School Budgets

Mr. Porter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many local education authorities in East Anglia increased the amount spent on administration and reduced the amount spent on schools in the last year for which information is available. [2049]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The following table sets out changes in spending on schools and on administration, in cash and in percentage terms, between 1993–94 and 1994–95, the latest years for which data are available. The table also shows the relevant pupil numbers. Figures are given for Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex LEAs. Pupils in, and expenditure on, grant-maintained schools in these areas are not included.

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*Variance*	*Variance percentage*
Cambridgeshire				
Pupils (number)	86,480	84,063	–2,417	–2.8
Net current expenditure				
Administration (£000s)	7,799	8,323	524	6.7
Schools (£000s)	162,551	163,096	545	0.3
Essex				
Pupils (number)	160,305	139,815	–20,490	–12.8
Net current expenditure				
Administration (£000s)	7,608	7,854	246	3.2
Schools (£000s)	354,345	313,766	–40,579	–11.5
Norfolk				
Pupils (number)	93,114	92,657	–457	–0.5
Net current expenditure				
Administration (£000s)	5,469	5,668	199	3.6
Schools (£000s)	190,063	191,726	1,663	0.9
Suffolk				
Pupils (number)	91,060	93,002	1,942	2.1
Net current expenditure				
Administration (£000s)	5,721	5,215	–506	–8.8
Schools (£000s)	188,864	196,896	8,032	4.3

Teachers Superannuation Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when she received the Government Actuary's report on the teachers superannuation scheme for the period 1 April 1986 to 31 March 1991; what estimates she has made of the contributions required to meet liabilities; if she will place a copy of the report in the Library; and if she will make a statement. [2471]

Mrs Gillan: My right hon. Friend received the Government Actuary's report on 21 October 1996. The Department asked for the report to be drawn up on the basis that the cost of future premature retirements would be met directly by employers. On that basis, the report recommends the introduction from 1 April 1997 of a combined contribution rate of 13.2 per cent. of salaries—6 per cent. from employees and 7.2 per cent. from employers. The Government Actuary has indicated that if the cost of premature retirement continued to be borne

by the scheme, the combined contribution rate would be 14.8 per cent. of salaries. The report was included as part of a package setting out proposals for the reform of the early retirement provisions of the teachers superannuation scheme, issued on 22 October 1996. I am placing copies of the consultation package in the Library. My right hon. Friend will lay the report formally before the House when she has taken decisions following the consultation.

Remploy

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how Remploy has performed against its 1995–96 annual performance agreement. [3088]

Mr. Paice: Now that Remploy has published its report and accounts for 1996 and audited figures are available, my noble Friend the Minister of State has today confirmed that Remploy has exceeded its 1995–96 APA targets. The targets and achievements are contained in the following table:

	Target	*Achievement*
The average number of disabled people employed by Remploy	at least 9,200	9,334
Average number of disabled people employed in factories	no more than 7,200	7,144
The number of disabled employees to move from Remploy factories to Interwork having been employed there for at least one year, or from Interwork or factories to open employment	at least 125	177
The unit cost of Interwork to be	no more than £4,500	£4,242
Remploy to keep within a unit cost target (operating deficit per disabled worker) of	£10,400	£10,175
Choices programme' to be in place in every factory	By end March 1996	Available in all factories

' The choices programme is a programme designed to give new recruits to Remploy, as well as the company's existing employees, the opportunity, guidance and training to plan a career best suited to their individual needs.:
Copies of Remploy's 1996 annual report and accounts have been placed in the Library.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will make a statement on the progress made on piloting arrangements for education and training undertaken by people receiving jobseeker's allowance. [3089]

Mr. Forth: We have submitted proposals to the Social Security Advisory Committee. These are being discussed by the committee today. Copies of the papers submitted to the committee have been placed in the Library.

The pilot would provide different arrangements for education and training undertaken by people receiving jobseeker's allowance. The pilots are intended to start, subject to parliamentary approval, in April 1997.

In addition, we announced on 10 October the intention to extend the project work pilot approach to up to 100,000 people, in all parts of the country. The areas in which project work will began to operate early next year will be announced tomorrow.

DUCY OF LANCASTER

Draft Legislation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make it his policy for all draft legislation to carry a compliance cost assessment relating to public and private sectors. [2723]

Mr. Freeman: The Government require a compliance cost assessment for all draft legislation likely to affect business. The purpose of the assessment is to assess the costs likely to fall on business. Other costs, such as any cost to the public sector, must be included in the regulatory appraisal which must also be prepared for all legislative proposals likely to affect business. Guidance booklets on compliance cost assessment and regulatory appraisal are available in the House Libraries as follows:

"checking the Cost of Regulation: A Guide to Compliance Cost Assessment"

"Regulation in the Balance: A Guide to Regulatory Appraisal Incorporating Risk Assessment".

Crown Copyright

Mr. Butler: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has for the future administration of Crown copyright. [3220]

Mr. Freeman: I am pleased to announce that my Department will be co–ordinating an inter–departmental review of the future management of Crown copyright, with the following terms of reference:

"To review the management of Crown copyright with a view to facilitating the growth of new information services both in printed and electronic formats, in line with the Government's policy of maximising public access to official information, and subject to the continuing need to protect the taxpayer's interest and the integrity of Crown copyright material."

Following this internal review, the Government propose to publish next year a Green Paper inviting views from interested parties.

Electronic Services

Mr. Butler: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the progress which has been made on the Government's proposals to use information technology to deliver Government services electronically to *(a)* businesses and *(b)* individuals. [3241]

Mr. Freeman: I informed the House on 11 July 1996 that the Government intended to produce a Green Paper on this subject. I have today presented to Parliament a Command Paper, Cm 3438, entitled "government.direct—A Prospectus for the Electronic Delivery of Government Services". This paper sets out the Government's vision for the delivery of Government services to business and the citizen in the electronic age, harnessing the power of the information revolution to ensure that Government services are provided in the most effective and efficient way, making use of advanced technology to improve the quality of service and the value provided to the taxpayer.

The vision set out in the Green Paper describes how access to Government can be made via personal computers, electronic terminals in public places and via ordinary TV sets. Three pilot projects are also launched today which exemplify the possibilities for the future.

This Command Paper is a first step in a new phase of this Government's continuing public service reforms. It heralds an era where Government services will be more accessible and easy to use than ever before. They will be more convenient, quicker in response and less costly to the taxpayer. The benefits to the citizen, to business and ultimately to the competitiveness of this country will be considerable.

The Command Paper is intended to stimulate debate and to encourage reaction and comment from all interested parties. The Government want to develop this new revolution in public services in line with public demand and acceptance.

WALES

Environment Report

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to publish a report on the environment. [3180]

Mr. Hague: The "Environment in Wales Fifth Report", which is being published by my Department today, gives an overview of the state of the Welsh environment. It also provides details of the initiatives which are under way, or planned and places a particular emphasis on progress toward achieving sustainable development. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of both Houses.

School Security

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what additional resources have been given to each local authority in Wales to meet the recommendations of the Government working party on school security. [1491]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Measures to improve school security have been included in the grants for education, support and training programme for 1997–98. The overall level of local authority funding has yet to be determined.

Tir Cymen

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what financial provision he has made for the expansion of Tir Cymen over the next six months; what was the figure for the previous six months; and if he will make a statement; [1587]

(2) what plans he has in respect of the expansion of Tir Cymen over the next six months; and if he will make a statement. [1586]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Countryside Council for Wales was given £5.36 million grant in aid for Tir Cymen for the financial year 1996–97. The future shape of support measures for environmental conservation on farms is being considered by the agri-environment working group announced by my right hon. Friend in the rural White Paper. The Welsh Office Agriculture Department plans to issue a consultation paper later this year.

Cattle Cull

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress has been made in ensuring that Welsh farmers are given access to the approved abattoirs authorised under the 30-month cattle cull scheme; and if he will make a statement. [1752]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Intervention Board executive agency is ensuring that an appropriate proportion of cattle from Wales is slaughtered each week in both Welsh and English abattoirs.

A5

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when are the necessary remedial works on the A5 between Betws-y-Coed and Corwen at Padog bends planned to be undertaken; and if he will make a statement. [1739]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The north Wales trunk road Agency, as agent of the Welsh Office, is currently engaged on the design of the retaining wall remedial works.

It is planned to undertake the works in 1997 on completion of the necessary procedures, including land acquisition.

Elderly People

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to encourage local authorities and health authorities in Wales to agree criteria plans for continuing health care needs of elderly people. [1933]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: In line with guidance already issued, from 1 April this year health authorities should have in place policies and eligibility criteria for continuing health care which have been agreed with local authorities and GP fundholders.

A470

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when is the scheduled completion date for the current road improvement works on the A470 between Blaenau Ffestiniog and Betws-y-Coed; and if he will make a statement. [1751]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Cancoed to Minffordd section of the A470 Lledr valley improvement is programmed for completion in autumn 1997.

Farmers' Incomes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assistance and advice is available to members of the farming community who seek to diversify operations in order to supplement income; and if he will make a statement. [1851]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund, through the rural Wales objective 5b programme, 1994 to 1999, assists farming households to develop alternative sources of income and employment opportunities on and off the farm and includes provision for capital grants, advice and training. The Leader II programme also acts as a stimulus to encourage farmers to develop new and innovative enterprises.

The processing and marketing grant scheme provides support towards the capital cost of adding value to agricultural raw materials in the food sector.

The marketing development scheme provides grant aid to farmers and producer groups to undertake feasibility studies to explore food diversification projects.

Local Management of Schools

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress he is making in reviewing Conwy local education authority's LMS scheme; and if he will make a statement. [2003]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Approval of Conwy LEA's local management of schools scheme was conditional on the resolution of certain concerns about the authority's resource allocation formula. These are still under review.

Welsh Language Speech Therapy

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on *(a)* the level of provision of Welsh-medium speech and language therapy for children in Wales, *(b)* the number of trained Welsh-medium speech therapists and *(c)* the establishment of a Welsh-medium speech therapy course at colleges in Wales. [1764]

Mr. Hague: The level of provision of Welsh-medium speech and language therapy for children in Wales is for health authorities to determine taking into account the health needs of their areas and their own assessment of priority. Information on the number of trained Welsh-medium speech therapists in Wales is not held centrally. Responsibility for training, including the provision of a Welsh-medium course rests with individual higher education institutions. A specific bilingual option for students during the third year of study already exists at the University of Wales institute, Cardiff.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the current policy for accepting patients from Powys at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital. [1765]

Mr. Hague: This is a matter for the Dyfed/Powys health authority and the trust concerned. Currently the agreement reached is that all patients should be admitted in accordance with the Welsh patients charter standards.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [2473]

Mr. Hague: None.

School Class Sizes

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many and what percentage of five, six and seven-year-olds were in classes of 31 or more, for 1995 and provisionally for 1996, per education authority and in Wales. [2425]

(2) what percentage of primary schools pupils were in classes of 31 or more for each year since 1990 *(a)* in Wales and *(b)* per authority; and what was the percentage change between 1995 and 1996. [2478]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information requested is not collected centrally. Data are collected about the number of classes by size band of class, but no data are collected about the exact number of pupils, or the age of pupils, in those classes. The following table shows the number of ordinary classes in maintained primary schools, by size band.

Numbers of ordinary classes in maintained primary schools in Wales, by class size and local education authority

	September 1990	*September 1991*	*September 1992*	*January 1994*	*January 1995*	*January 1995*
Clwyd						
Up to 15	78	68	74	71	54	52
16–20	113	103	118	100	89	85
21–25	290	310	302	273	260	275
26–30	510	513	534	518	506	516
31–35	290	294	265	328	355	373
36–40	38	34	46	47	60	51
41–45	2	1	4	3	4	4
46+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,321	1,323	1,343	1,340	1,328	1,356
Dyfed						
Up to 15	251	284	256	202	186	176
16–20	269	350	369	315	268	252
21–25	391	394	398	428	423	452
26–30	259	243	261	318	355	350
31–35	67	71	61	70	84	83
36–40	8	7	4	3	6	9
41–45	1	0	0	0	1	1
46+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,346	1,349	1,349	1,336	1,323	1,323

Numbers of ordinary classes in maintained primary schools in Wales, by class size and local education authority

	September 1990	September 1991	September 1992	January 1994	January 1995	January 1996[1]
Gwent						
Up to 15	24	15	14	11	13	16
16–20	86	59	60	65	74	49
21–25	313	289	301	331	256	239
26–30	631	648	723	688	653	660
31–35	374	403	338	357	440	460
36–40	11	16	22	24	40	61
41–45	2	1	1	1	2	1
46+	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,442	1,431	1,459	1,477	1,478	1,486
Gwynedd						
Up to 15	108	102	106	87	96	90
16–20	201	191	162	175	153	154
21–25	267	244	273	255	259	248
26–30	213	231	216	228	238	248
31–35	33	40	61	70	82	93
36–40	2	2	4	7	8	9
41–45	1	1	2	1	4	2
46+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	825	811	824	823	840	844
Mid Glamorgan						
Up to 15	12	11	7	7	10	6
16–20	58	60	67	57	47	44
21–25	279	332	331	352	360	357
26–30	862	831	854	898	901	886
31–35	491	488	486	483	487	517
36–40	24	30	30	29	22	24
41–45	0	1	2	5	3	1
46+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,726	1,753	1,777	1,831	1,830	1,835
Powys						
Up to 15	78	71	73	50	44	45
16–20	107	114	108	105	96	105
21–25	127	122	130	160	166	166
26–30	81	93	107	118	115	128
31–35	25	28	23	24	34	29
36–40	3	1	2	0	4	0
41–45	1	2	0	0	0	2
46+	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	423	431	443	457	461	475
South Glamorgan						
Up to 15	20	20	14	11	10	2
16–20	80	108	91	43	54	53
21–25	377	378	372	284	334	322
26–30	632	613	624	642	664	714
31–35	177	192	222	344	304	289
36–40	0	3	3	19	10	11
41–45	0	0	0	1	1	0
46+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,286	1,314	1,326	1,344	1,377	1,391
West Glamorgan						
Up to 15	28	17	16	14	16	20
16–20	75	78	90	92	71	95
21–25	343	327	365	392	368	382
26–30	593	564	541	530	563	548
31–35	177	209	202	209	203	200
36–40	11	5	13	5	11	2
41–45	0	0	0	0	1	0
46+	0	0	1	0	1	1
Total	1,227	1,200	1,228	1,242	1,234	1,248

Numbers of ordinary classes in maintained primary schools in Wales, by class size and local education authority

	September 1990	*September 1991*	*September 1992*	*January 1994*	*January 1995*	*January 1996*[1]
Wales						
Up to 15	599	588	560	453	429	407
16–20	*1,089*	*1,063*	*1,065*	952	852	837
21–25	2,387	2,369	2,472	2,475	2,428	2,441
26–30	3,781	3,736	3,860	3,940	3,995	4,050
31–35	1,634	1,725	1,658	1,885	1,989	2,044
36–40	97	98	124	134	161	167
41–45	7	6	9	11	16	11
46+	2	0	1	0	1	1
Total	9,596	9,612	9,749	9,850	9,871	9,958

[1] Provisional.

DEFENCE

Tornado Aircraft

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of Tornados have been grounded for each month of the last two years for failing to be in airworthy condition. [1154]

Mr. Soames: During the last two years the Tornado fleet has met all of its operational commitments and has not been grounded. RAF aircraft are only permitted to fly if it is judged safe for them to do so. To achieve and maintain this high safety standard all aircraft are subject to regular detailed engineering examination and assessment, and are subject to a rigorous scheduled maintenance programme. Although this work ensures the highest standard of safety, it does mean that the aircraft are unavailable to fly while the necessary work is being carried out. Allowance is made for this in the aircraft establishment figures. Those aircraft operating at the front line require scheduled minor maintenance. Minor faults which are discovered are usually rectified at the unit so that the aircraft can be available to fly at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the adequacy of private refurbishment contracts of Tornado aircraft. [1155]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The overall performance of private contractors in carrying out maintenance work for the RAF is good—many of them helped build the aircraft in the first place. All first-line maintenance of operational fast-jet aircraft continues to be done by RAF trades men. However, some of the deeper maintenance of these aircraft is carried-out by contractors.

We attach great importance to ensuring that contractors deliver work of the necessary quality. Contracting procedures are focused on achieving this and contracts are placed only with those suppliers who have been assessed by an accredited body to an appropriate quality management standard. The MOD aims to place full responsibility for the quality of products and services with its contractors.

Holy Loch (Pollution)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the types and quantities of radioactive or other toxic substances which have been found in the cleaning of the seabed of the Holy Loch; and if he will make a statement on the purpose of this exercise. [1501]

Mr. Soames: There is no longer a defence requirement for Holy Loch. My Department plans, therefore, to clear debris from the bed of the loch to a suitable standard to allow responsibility for it to be transferred back to the appropriate civil authorities. We have received a number of local requests to carry out such a clearance.

No clearance work has yet started. We have agreed to carry out an environmental assessment of the impact of the clearance process on the local area before any such work is undertaken, and to make public its results. Our plans have been discussed fully with the local authority and environmental agencies.

Levels of radioactive contamination in the loch are extremely low. The report of a survey carried out by the defence radiological protection service and the US Navy in 1992 concluded that there is no public radiological hazard associated with the debris, or its removal. These conclusions have been confirmed by subsequent annual surveys. No toxic materials have been identified in the various visual surveys which we have carried out in preparation for the clearance operation.

Organophosphate Dips

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what liaison there is between his Department, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the subject of organophosphate dips and their use; and if he will make a statement. [1865]

Mr. Soames: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food yesterday.

Army Vehicle Depot

Mr. Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has in respect of the rail head at the Army vehicle depot at Ludgershall. [2224]

Mr. Soames: We intend to retain part of the Army vehicle depot at Ludgershall after its closure in March 1997 to provide railhead facility for land command units. The development of a railhead facility close to the Salisbury plain training area would facilitate future operational deployments and enhance pre-deployment training, as well as having had significant advantages for

routine training, including a significantly reduced requirement for the use of public roads by heavy equipment transport vehicles.

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was his Department's initial estimate of the costs of moving military air traffic control from West Drayton to the new national en-route centre at Swanwich; and what is the current estimate of the costs. [2589]

Mr. Soames: A detailed estimate was one of the stipulated products of a project definition study carried out by Lockheed Martin. The estimate that has resulted is dependent on a number of other factors currently being studied, and is commercially sensitive.

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to announce the future location of military air traffic control. [2588]

Mr. Soames: The Ministry of Defence places great importance on the joint and integrated nature of air navigation service provision by National Air Traffic Services Ltd. and the Ministry of Defence. The Ministry of Defence endorsed the National Air Traffic Services Ltd. two-centre strategy and is participating fully in the review of that strategy which aims to identify the most efficient and cost effective means of providing air navigation services. An announcement will be made once that review has been concluded.

Environment Manual

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to update his Department's 1991 environment manual. [2585]

Mr. Soames: A revised version of my Department's environment manual was published in October 1996 and is currently being distributed. A copy will be placed shortly in the Library of the House of Commons.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [1402]

Mr. Soames: The MOD is not a regulator of business and has not, therefore, identified any such rules or regulations. My Department continues to contribute to the deregulation initiative by focusing efforts on relieving unnecessary administrative burdens on suppliers, streamlining contracts procedures, and improving communications with industry.

Bowman Programme

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the slippage in the estimated time of the signing of the contract for the Bowman programme; and what is the latest estimated date for the granting of a contract. [1552]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The project definition phase of the Bowman programme is essentially complete and development standard equipment is currently being tested in field trials. Arrangements for proceeding to the production phase are under consideration and a decision on the way ahead will be taken as soon as possible. The estimated date of contract signature for production will depend upon the outcome of our considerations but it is unlikely to be before early 1999. This would represent a slippage of about 15 months compared with the date envisaged at the beginning of the project definition phase.

Airborne Warning and Communication Aircraft

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many offset contracts have been placed after the agreement to purchase AWAC aircraft; and what is the total amount of these contracts. [1553]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Following the signature of the AWACS contract with the Boeing defence and space group in November 1986 some 250 United Kingdom companies have received contracts which discharged Boeing's industrial participation obligation of US$1.57 billion.

Offset Purchasing Agreements

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action is being taken by his Department *(a)* to monitor the amount and completion of offset defence purchasing agreements and *(b)* to assess the percentage of the agreements that are made as opposed to the amount agreed at the signing of the purchasing contract. [1631]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Companies with offset obligations are required to submit reports to my Department every six months, detailing relevant contracts awarded to the United Kingdom defence industry during the reporting period. A full audit of these reports is conducted in order to establish the validity of the claims and to ensure that the companies are complying with the terms and conditions of their offset commitment. All obligations entered into have been achieved within the period agreed.

Trained Soldiers

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the establishment total of trained soldiers *(a)* at 1 October 1996 and *(b)* planned to be at 1 April 1997, including Gurkha trained personnel but excluding trained Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) troops. [2486]

Mr. Soames: Manpower requirements are set at 1 April for each year. The requirement for trained British and Gurkha soldiers but excluding Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) personnel at 1 April 1996 and the planned requirement at 1 April 1997 are as follows:

1 April 1996: 108,000.

1 April 1997: 106,200.

Radioactive and Toxic Waste

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list each site in the United Kingdom and overseas territories where his Department has stored or located *(a)* radioactive or *(b)* toxic waste since 1966. [2622]

Mr. Soames: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Apache Helicopter Order

Mr. Mark Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what benefits have resulted to British industry from the order for 67 Apache attack helicopters. [2480]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The order for Apache attack helicopters will lead to significant benefits for British industry. Work worth some £2 billion will be undertaken in the United Kingdom and it is estimated that over 180 firms will receive contracts. The scope of the project and its high technology nature will provide excellent opportunities for British companies to benefit through the demonstration of their capabilities and cost effectiveness.

Helicopter Flying School

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the defence helicopter flying school. [3032]

Mr. Soames: In my answer of 9 March 1995, *Official Report*, column *350–51*, I outlined our plans, arising from the defence costs study, for the formation of a single, tri-service school with a strong contractorised element to provide those aspects of helicopter basic flying training common to the three services. The school will be established at RAF Shawbury and will commence training on 1 April 1997. I am now pleased to announce that we have awarded a 15-year contract to FBS Ltd. for the operation of the DHFS under contractor-owned, Government-operated arrangements.

FBS is a joint venture, UK company, comprising FR Aviation, Bristow Helicopters and SERCO and was formed specifically to bid for this contract. Collectively, the company has extensive experience of working with the services; Bristow Helicopters and SERCO already provide services to Middle Wallop and RAF Shawbury respectively.

The school will have the capacity to train approximately 230 pilot, navigator and crewmen students a year from our three services as well as a number from overseas. The helicopter fleet will consist of 38 AS350 Squirrel single engine and 9 Bell 412 twin-engine helicopters. Seventy-six military and 45 civilian flying instructors will be employed at the school. FBS will be responsible for the provision and maintenance of the helicopter fleet, all ground-school and support facilities and the provision of the civilian flying instructors.

The DHFS project has been procured in line with the private finance initiative, thus demonstrating the Government's strong resolve to continue to achieve value for money in defence support and to concentrate resources on the front line. The formation of the DHFS, utilising more modern equipment and taking advantage of the efficiencies brought about through contractorisation will provide a value for money, high quality training facility for HM forces well into the future. Compared with the current system of delivering training this represents a saving of some £80 million over 15 years.

Fixed Telecommunications System

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about his Department's proposals for the introduction of a defence fixed telecommunications system. [3033]

Mr. Portillo: Good communications are crucial to the efficient and effective operation of the armed forces. The defence fixed telecommunications system—DFTS—will provide, in a single UK-wide network, the telecommunications link and exchanges required by all defence users. It will integrate and rationalise the five existing UK networks, and provide connections to commercial networks and to those of allies. It will also reduce current equipment and manpower costs while achieving important operational benefits.

The invitation to tender invited bidders to consider solutions based on the principles of the Government's private finance initiative to enable the MOD to transfer to the private sector the ownership, operation and maintenance of the network and thus relieve the MOD of the economic risks associated with changing technology and patterns of usage. The contractor will therefore assume responsibility for providing services at the required levels of performance. Two consortia submitted best and final offers.

I am now able to announce that, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of contractual negotiations, I have approved the implementation and commercial management of DFTS services, under a 10-year contract with the INCA consortium, led by British Telecommunications plc, in conjunction with Lockheed Martin, OASIS and GEC-Marconi.

Under the PFI arrangements, INCA will make maximum use of the infrastructure serving other customers. The contract will be worth in the region of £700 million, which makes it the MOD's biggest PFI deal so far. Taut contractual arrangements will be negotiated to provide incentives for INCA to meet required levels of performance. We estimate that this will result in savings to the MOD well in excess of £100 million.

The implementation of the DFTS will entail placing under commercial management the work currently undertaken by staff in some 1,200 military and civilian posts at about 100 defence establishments throughout the UK. Detailed arrangements for this will be agreed during contracts negotiations.

Meteorological Office

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what levels of accuracy have been achieved by the meteorological office over each of the last 10 years; [2586]

(2) what was the income from the marinecall weather line in the most recent period for which was figures are available. [2587]

Mr. Arbuthnot: These are matters for the chief executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. C. R. Hunt to Mr. Barry Field, dated 6 November 1996:

I am replying to your Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Meteorological office's income from out Marinecall service and our overall forecast accuracy over each of the last ten years, as these matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office.

The income to the Meteorological Office form the Marinecall telephone weather line in the twelve month period to September 1996 was some £239,000.

Turning to forecast accuracy we only have strictly comparable figures, expressed as a composite index of forecast performance (the most useful measure), for each of the last nine years. The data are set out below. You will note that there has been marked progress in the quality of your forecasts.

1987–88: 87.48

1988–89: 92.10

1989–90: 98.56

1990–91: 98.94

1991–92: 100.95

1992–93: 105.43

1993–94: 110.48

1994–95: 114.18

1995–96: 120.88

I hope this gives you the information you need.

Advances of Pay (House Purchase)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many members of the *(a)* Army *(b)* Royal Air Force and *(c)* Royal Navy had applied for an interest-free advance of pay for house purchase as at 1 October; [1465]

(2) what annual budget has been set aside for his Department's interest-free advance of pay for house purchase scheme, and if he will make a statement. [1466]

Mr. Soames: The long service advance of pay scheme—LSAP—provides an interest-free advance of pay up to a maximum of £8,500 to assist personnel with house purchase. The advance is repaid over 10 years or a lesser period if personnel have less that 10 years to serve. The LSAP scheme has been available in the Navy since 1963, but on 1 August 1996 it was extended on a limited basis to the other two services primarily as a result of the demise of the married quarter discount sales scheme. The number of Army and RAF personnel who applied for an advance between 1 August 96 and 1 October 96 was as follows:

Army: 335

RAF: 224.

It is not known how many personnel in the RN have applied for an LSAP since 1963. However, there were 9,321 loans outstanding on 1 October 1996.

The scheme in the Royal Navy is cost neutral with repayments broadly matching advances. A total of £6 million per annum has been earmarked to fund the scheme over the early years in the Army and Royal Air Force. However, the net outlay will reduce as repayments increase and the scheme in these two services is expected to be cost neutral after 10 years' operation.

ENVIRONMENT

Unitary Authorities

Mr. Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the county councils' legal responsibilities and duties under the relevant legislation during the transition of services to unitary authorities. [1088]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Government expect the local authorities involved in local government reorganisation to use their best endeavours to ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities to the unitary authorities. Most regulations are intended to facilitate this, for example by carrying over the powers, rights or liabilities of one authority to its successor.

However, there are also specific legal responsibilities and duties placed on councils during the transition. Those which apply to county councils are listed; they are made using powers either in the Local Government Act 1992 or the Superannuation Act 1972.

The Local Government (Compensation for Redundancy) Regulations 1994 (SI 1994/3025) set out the level of compensation which shall be paid to an employee between the ages of 18 and 50 who is made redundant during the period between the making of an order for a structural change and 18 months after the reorganisation takes place. The regulations also contain requirements regarding the notification of and payment of compensation.

The Local Government Changes for England (Property Transfer and Transitional Payments) Regulations 1995 (SI 1995/402) require that authorities affected by reorganisation use their best endeavours to make agreements for the transfer of property, rights and liabilities, and the provision by county councils of information to facilitate such agreements.

The Local Government Changes for England (Miscellaneous Provision) Regulations 1995 (SI 1996/1748) require all the local authorities involved in a structural change and their officers to co–operate with each other so as to facilitate the reorganisation. The county council must also supply a successor authority with all information which it may reasonably request for the purpose of reorganisation.

Those regulations also provide that from the time of the elections to the successor authority which are provided for in the structural change order until the reorganisation, any requirements for the county council to prepare budgets or plans or consult any person shall pass to the successor authorities. This applies to the county council's functions in the areas of the future unitary authorities.

The Local Government Reorganisation (Compensation for Loss of Remuneration) Regulations 1995 (SI 1995/2837) require a local government employer to pay compensation for loss of remuneration—detriment—in certain circumstances related to reorganisation.

Charter of Local Self-Government

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if the Government will sign the Council of Europe's charter of local self-government. [1950]

Sir Paul Beresford: As stated in the White Paper, "Government Response to the Report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Relations Between Central and Local Government 'Rebuilding Trust'", which was laid before the House on 4 November, the Government do not believe that a case has been made out demonstrating the need for the United Kingdom now to adopt this charter.

Permaculture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his Department's definition of permaculture; and if he will make a statement. [1594]

Sir Paul Beresford: There is no statutory definition of permaculture.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what representations he has received from the Permaculture Association (UK); and if he will make a statement. [1595]

Sir Paul Beresford: No correspondence has been received from an organisation of this name. However, representations have been made by the Permaculture Association (Britain) on the draft revision to planning policy guidance note 7, "The Countryside—Environmental Quality and Economic Development". We have received more than 400 responses to this consultation document. These are being considered carefully at present.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to encourage permaculture within national parks; and if he will make a statement. [2353]

Mr. Clappison: The Government are committed to the concept of sustainable development in their rural planning policies. One of the key principles is to encourage environmentally-friendly economic activity while conserving the character of the countryside. It is for the national park authorities, as the local planning authorities for their areas, to determine issues of land use planning and to consider individual planning applications in the light of their wider responsibilities.

Financial Derivatives

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what guidelines are issued to local authorities about the use of financial derivatives. [1681]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department has not issued guidelines to local authorities about the use of financial derivatives. Local authorities are under a general fiduciary duty to their taxpayers to act prudently in investing funds. They should also have regard to the capital finance regulations and professional treasury management codes, as appropriate. Capital finance and approved investment regulations provide a strong incentive for authorities to make only very secure investments such as bank and building society deposits or gilts.

Timber

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to promote the greater use of timber in the construction industry; and if he will make a statement. [1759]

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend, the Minister for Construction and Planning launched Timber 2005 in February this year. This is a research and innovation strategy to promote the use of timber in construction. The Department of the Environment is now working with industry during its implementation. I am arranging to place a copy of the strategy in the House Library.

Under-Secretary of State (Committees)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the Cabinet committees and sub-committees on which the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford), serves. [1989]

Sir Paul Beresford: I currently serve on one Cabinet sub-committee, EDL(L)—the ministerial sub-committee on London.

Construction Contracts

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) if he will seek to amend section 108 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 to provide that there is an obligation on all parties to submit to an adjudicator's decision; and if he will make a statement; [2193]

(2) if he will monitor the operation of section 110 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in respect of set-off procedures; and if he will make a statement; [2197]

(3) if he will monitor the operation of section 108 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in respect of procedures subsequent to the adjudicator's decision; and if he will make a statement. [2195]

(4) what plans he has to monitor the operation of part II of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in respect of *(a)* off-site fabrications, *(b)* design by (i) contactors and (ii) specialist contractors and *(c)* process work, with particular reference to privatised utilities; and if he will make a statement; [2191]

(5) if he will bring forward proposals to amend the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in order to provide for trust funds to protect contractors and sub-contractors against the insolvency of parties higher in the contractual chain; and if he will make a statement; [2194]

(6) what plans he has to monitor the operation of part II of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in respect of maintenance and repair work; and if he will make a statement; [2190]

(7) if he will monitor the operation of section 113 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 as regards the application of the provisions of the scheme for construction contracts; and if he will make a statement; [2196]

(8) if he will monitor the operation of section 108 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 in respect of adjudication and the application of the Arbitration Act 1996; and if he will make a statement. [2192]

Mr. Clappison: The fair construction contract provisions in part II of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 have not yet commenced. The Government have no plans to amend legislation which received careful consideration during its passage through Parliament last Session. A means of monitoring the effect of the new legislation was outlined in the cost compliance assessment which was published in February 1996. A copy was placed in the Library.

Opencast Mining

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) in which parliamentary constituencies there are opencasting sites in operation; [2216]

(2) in how many parliamentary constituencies there are opencasting sites in operation. [2249]

Sir Paul Beresford: This information is not held centrally.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how many acres of land are currently the subject of opencast methods of extracting coal; and what proportion of this land was formerly green belt; [2210]

(2) how many acres of land are currently subject to planning applications for opencast coal extraction; and what proportion of this land is currently green belt. [2209]

Sir Paul Beresford: This information is not held centrally. Statistics are published annually for the County Planning Officers' Society by Durham county council.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimates he has made of the cost to public funds *(a)* of local authorities and *(b)* of his Department of planning applications for opencast mining. [2214]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department has no information about the costs to local authorities of processing planning applications for opencast coal mining; costs to the Department would occur only in the event of a planning application being called in for determination by the Secretary of State and this is an extremely rare occurrence.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many, and which, parliamentary constituencies have opencast applications *(a)* pending and *(b)* at the appeal stage. [2213]

Sir Paul Beresford: Information about opencast planning applications is not held centrally. Information about appeals is recorded only under the local planning authority and not parliamentary constitiuencies. The current outstanding appeals are as follows:

Cheshire 1, Staffordshire 1, Wakefield 1, Nottinghamshire 1, Durham 3 and Derbyshire 1.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many appeals have been heard by his inspectors in which opencast developers have sought to reverse local authority refusals of planning permission in each of the last five years; and what is his Department's estimate of the cost to public funds of these appeals. [2215]

Sir Paul Beresford: The figures are as follows: 1992, 11; 1993, 12; 1994, 20; 1995, 4; and 1996, 9. Information concerning the cost of these appeals to the taxpayer is not available.

Hereford and Worcester SSA

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the total standard spending assessment for Hereford and Worcester county council, in both cash and real terms, for each year since 1990–91, after allowing for changes in statutory responsibilities and boundaries. [2187]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information requested on Hereford and Worcester's standard spending assessment in cash and real terms is as follows. The adjusted figures are comparable with the year immediately following and take into account changes in function and geographical responsibilities. The figures in real terms have been rebased using the gross domestic product deflator for 1995–96.

£ million

	SSA in cash terms	*SSA in real terms*
1990–91	317.834	377.959
1991–92	374.058	418.040
1992–93	397.044	425.812
1992–93 adjusted	363.391	389.720
1993–94	372.565	388.404
1993–94 adjusted	379.948	396.101
1994–95	388.036	397.423
1994–95 adjusted	359.668	368.369
1995–96	364.554	364.554
1995–96 adjusted	372.168	372.168
1996–97	384.187	375.733

Information on standard spending assessments from 1990–91 onwards in cash and real terms for all local authorities has already been placed in the Library.

Young Homeless

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his Department's estimate of the number of young people who were homeless in 1995. [2038]

Mr. Clappison: Local authorities in England accepted responsibility to secure accommodation for 3,620 homeless households in priority need with a vulnerable young person, and 1,700 young single people not in priority need, under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 Housing Act in 1995.

Policy Initiatives

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the results of his policy initiatives *(a)* freedom of the cities and *(b)* initiative and trust councils. [2011]

Sir Paul Beresford: We have no plans for a freedom of the cities initiative or for a trust councils initiative.

Rural Development

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what research he has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned of low-impact development in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [2342]

Sir Paul Beresford: No such research has been commissioned or evaluated. The draft revised planning policy guidance note 7, "The Countryside—Environmental Quality and Economic Development" aims to integrate the development necessary to sustain the rural economy with protection of the countryside.

Nuclear Safety

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment on how many occasions since 1973 nuclear safety inspectors from Euratom have visited United Kingdom nuclear plants to conduct an environmental audit, pursuant to the provisions of the health and safety article 35 of the Euratom treaty; and if he will place in the Library copies of all environmental reports forwarded by nuclear plant operators to the European Commission under articles 36 and 37 of the Euratom treaty. [2117]

Mr. Clappison: Experts appointed by the European Commission have visited the United Kingdom on two occasions to verify the operation and efficiency of facilities for the monitoring of environmental radioactivity, in accordance with article 35 of the Euratom treaty. Following both visits, to the north of Scotland in May 1993 and to Cumbria in December 1993, the Commission concluded that the relevant monitoring facilities were operated in an efficient and satisfactory manner.

Information supplied under article 36, on the levels of radioactivity to which the United Kingdom public is exposed, is published periodically in a Commission document entitled, "Environmental Radioactivity in the European Community". I have arranged to place the last two issues of this document, covering the years 1984 to 1990, in the Library. The next edition, covering 1991, is due to be published shortly and I shall place it in the Library once it is available.

Submissions under article 37 Euratom are regarded as private communications of technical data between the Government and the Commission and are not normally in the public domain. However, I shall seek the agreement of the Commission and the current owners of the facilities concerned to placing in the Library copies of the submissions of data relating to decommissioning of Windscale advanced gas-cooled reactor 1995, Sizewell B 1992, THORP 1991, Windscale waste vitrification plant and vitrified product store 1989, Torness 1986 and Heysham B 1986.

Darwin Initiative

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the species included in the Darwin initiative and those currently under consideration for inclusion. [2566]

Mr. Clappison: The main aim of the Darwin initiative is to fund United Kingdom biodiversity institutions in collaborative projects with countries rich in biodiversity but lacking sufficient financial resources or capacity. The projects are varied and it is not possible to list all the species covered. There are projects which concentrate on the taxonomy of one particular species. Others study the options for sustainable use of several species. There are also projects carrying out inventories of all the species in a specific area such as a nature reserve. So far the range of species has been wide, from parasitic wasps to seahorses and from rare ferns to fungi.

We have recently called for applications for fifth round of funding to start from April 1997. We will consider all proposals which fit the principles of the initiative and which are received by 29 November 1996. I have sent my hon. Friend our Darwin information package.

Local Elections

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what mechanism he is proposing for aligning parish council and local council election dates. [2592]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Local Government and Rating Bill proposes amendments to the Local Government Act 1992 which will enable the Secretary of State by order to alter permanently the cycle of parish council elections where there is, or is to be, a unitary county council.

Coalfield Areas (Regeneration)

Mr. Riddick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what are his proposals for the regeneration of areas affected by coalfield closures; and if he will make a statement. [2924]

Mr. Gummer: British Coal non-operational properties will be transferred to English Partnerships which will take forward their regeneration, reclamation and development. English Partnerships has prepared a detailed investment plan, including a development strategy for each site. The aim is to achieve area regeneration, environmental improvements and secure new employment opportunities in the coal closure areas. Receipts from sales will be used to fund the costs of reclaiming and servicing other sites in the portfolio. A total of 2,250 acres of land will be reclaimed for residential, commercial and retail uses and a further 2,750 acres will be developed for forestry, leisure and agricultural purposes. About 55,000 jobs will be created and £850 million of private sector investment attracted.

A managed disposal strategy will ensure that the market is not flooded with development land. In this way considerable benefits will accrue to the coalfields communities in the next 10 years.

This is a challenging programme for English Partnerships but it has already shown itself capable of the challenge. The agency has quickly established itself as a key player in economic and physical regeneration throughout England with its activity carefully directed to achieve the maximum impact in areas of greatest need. I am convinced that the benefits for the coalfields communities will be considerable and that this new agreement ensures the best possible future for the coalfield sites in the north of England.

Regeneration will start immediately on a number of the sites including Agecroft in the north-west, Dawdon in the north-east, Glasshoughton in Yorkshire and the Humber and Manton Wood in the east midlands.

English Partnerships will receive £12.5 million from British Coal in a detailed agreement which has, as a key requirement, a balanced package where the cost of meeting enforceable liabilities and reclaiming sites to a minimum standard is offset by the positive value within the portfolio. The arrangements provide for an appropriate allocation of liabilities and risks between English Partnerships and British Coal.

I am today laying details of the sites being transferred in the House and copies will also be available in the Library.

City Pride Initiative

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to extend the city pride initiative. [2925]

Mr. Gummer: I am today announcing a challenge to seven new areas to join the successful city pride initiative. The seven areas are:

Bristol;

Leeds;

Liverpool, Birkenhead, Wallasey and Bootle;

Newcastle upon Tyne;

Nottingham, Ashfield, Broxtowe, Gedling and Rushcliffe;

Plymouth;

Sheffield.

City pride has already forged partnerships in Birmingham, London and Manchester in an unprecedented way. Local people have come together with a vision for their areas and have agreed the practical steps for achieving that vision. City pride has already produced considerable benefits in terms of a shared understanding between public and private sector partners about the opportunities, priorities and needs of their areas. I want to challenge other great industrial or port cities of regional importance to match this achievement.

I am writing today to the civic leaders in these seven areas to invite them to come forward with city pride proposals. I want them to develop a vision for their areas and set out the steps needed to achieve it.

Each of the seven areas is served by a Government sponsor Minister, whose responsibilities include encouraging regeneration initiatives in their area and providing a link with Whitehall Departments. I know that sponsor Minister colleagues will be working closely with the civic leaders of their areas to make city pride a success. Part of their task will be to encourage central Government programmes to work effectively alongside the local vision.

Before working up a full prospectus, city pride areas will need to satisfy four conditions. First, city pride partnerships must show that they have the capacity to deliver what they promise to local people, including a clear understanding of what each partner is prepared to contribute. Secondly, there must be a clear vision and planned targets, with an emphasis on achieving results and effective arrangements for tracking progress. Thirdly, the geographical area and population which city pride is intended to cover should be defined and be appropriate to the vision. Fourthly, there must be arrangements for involving and accounting to local people in achieving city pride goals.

I am not ruling out other areas coming forward with city pride proposals, but putting together a successful city pride prospectus and making it work requires a good deal of concentrated effort on the part of areas themselves and by Government offices for the regions and we therefore need to limit numbers. There is, of course, nothing to stop other areas from applying city pride principles, and, indeed, some are already doing so.

Contracted-out Services

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what will be the impact on local authority contracted-out services of the restrictions placed by Customs and Excise on the ability of bodies to recover VAT retrospectively; what is the estimated cost to local authorities and if he will make a statement. [2620]

Sir Paul Beresford: No assessment has been made of the estimated cost to local authorities of this proposed change. If approved, the changes limiting the repayment of VAT to three years will apply equally to both the public and private sector. Local authorities should have proper accounting arrangements to recover VAT, whether contracted out to the private sector or performed in-house.

Business Rate Relief

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to make independent petrol retailers eligible for business rate relief. [2635]

Sir Paul Beresford: Independent petrol retailers in rural villages will be eligible for discretionary rate relief under the measures introduced in the Local Government and Rating Bill.

Council Tax (Students)

Mr. David Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to assist full-time students who are jointly liable for the council tax because they share accommodation with non-students. [2766]

Mr. Curry: At present when a student shares accommodation with a recipient of council tax benefit their joint liability for council tax is higher than if each lived separately. We propose to end this anomaly by amending the council tax liability rules to exclude students from joint and several liability as soon as we have an opportunity to amend primary legislation.

As an interim measure my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Social Security, has submitted a proposal today to the Social Security advisory committee to amend the council tax benefit rules, with effect from 1 April 1997, so that where a full-time student is jointly liable with a benefit recipient their presence in the household will be ignored in the calculation of council tax benefit. This will have a similar effect to the longer-term solution.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Improvement Works

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list the current works of improvement and refurbishment being undertaken on the English Heritage estate in the south of England. [2593]

Mr. Sproat: A total of £9.2 million was spent in 1995–96 on works to the 181 English Heritage properties in the south of England—£3.5 million on day to day maintenance of properties and £5.7 million on conservation and visitor improvements works. My hon.

Friend may wish to contact Jane Sharman, English Heritage's acting chief executive, if he requires further information.

National Lottery (Sheffield)

Sir Irvine Patnick: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many grants have been awarded by the National Lotteries Charities Board in *(a)* Sheffield and *(b)* the Hallam constituency; and if she will make a statement. [2391]

Mr. Sproat: The National Lottery Charities Board has made 58 grants to charities and voluntary organisations based in Sheffield, of which six are based in Hallam.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment she has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by her Department. [2602]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The Department of National Heritage is in the process of liaising with the suppliers of the information technology software and systems that it uses to gauge the level of work required to deal with the millennium date change.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Burma

Mr. Fatchett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the discussions regarding Burma at the recent EU Foreign Ministers meeting in Luxembourg. [2485]

Mr. Hanley: At the recent General Affairs Council in Luxembourg, Ministers adopted an EU common position on Burma which imposes the following measures on the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council—SLORC:

> ban on entry visas for senior members of the SLORC and their families;
>
> ban on entry visas for senior members of the military or the security forces who formulate, implement or benefit from policies that impede Burma's transition to democracy, and their families;
>
> suspension of high-level bilateral governmental visits to Burma (Ministers and officials at level of political director and above).

Peru

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the bilateral talks in Lima between Her Majesty's Government and Peru on debt. [2424]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Following negotiations in Lima last month between officials of the Export Credits Guarantee Department and the Government of Peru, the United Kingdom-Peru agreement No. 5 (1996), covering approximately £120 million of debt owed by Peru to ECGD, was signed on 4 November 1996. This agreement follows on from the July agreement of the Paris Club of Government creditors to reschedule £6.3 billion of Peru's official bilateral debts over 20 years. Her Majesty's Government wrote off the Overseas Development Administration's outstanding aid loans to Peru, worth some £5 million, in 1995.

Mr. Clive Russell

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ensure that *(a)* public interest immunity certificates and *(b)* the Official Secrets Act are not used in the case of Mr. Clive Russell and supplies to Argentina. [275]

Mr. Rifkind *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Neither the law relating to public interest immunity nor the Official Secrets Acts provides any impediment to the proper investigation of alleged criminal offences. Mr. Russell or any other person having evidence that goods or services have been unlawfully supplied to Argentina should make that evidence available to the appropriate investigating authority, which is HM Customs and Excise.

TRANSPORT

Tunnel and Bridge Tolls

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received from the European Commission in respect of charging VAT on tunnel and bridge tolls; and what responses he has made. [2443]

Mr. Bowis: None.

Speed Limits

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has for 10 mph speed limits in residential areas. [2393]

Mr. Bowis: None.

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the (i) lives saved and (ii) injuries reduced where 20 mph speed limits have been introduced. [2394]

Mr. Bowis: The Department commissioned the Transport Research Laboratory to conduct research into the effectiveness of 20 mph zones. TRL published its report—TRL report No. 215—on 12 September 1996. The report shows that in the zones accident frequency fell by 60 per cent., pedestrian casualties fell by 61 per cent. and child pedestrian and child cyclist casualties fell by 67 per cent.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* speed cameras and *(b)* live speed cameras his Department plans to install in the next six months. [2060]

Mr. Bowis: Decisions on when and where speed enforcement camera equipment is installed are for local highway authorities to take, the Highways Agency for motorways and trunk roads and local authorities for other roads.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans his Department has to introduce legislation requiring new vehicles to be fitted with on–board variable speed limiters; and if he will make a statement. [2056]

Mr. Bowis: None.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list the principal elements of the "kill your speed" campaign over the next 24 months; and if he will make a statement; [2062]

(2) what plans his Department has to introduce measures to reduce the number of road crashes; and if he will make a statement. [2055]

Mr. Bowis: The Government regards the "kill your speed" campaign as a long-term commitment. Changing public attitudes to driving at inappropriate speeds is essential if the numbers of people killed and injured in road traffic accidents is to continue to decline.

In November 1992, the Government published a policy document, "Killing speed and saving lives", which sets out the main elements of the strategy. The more recent "Child pedestrian safety strategy", published in August this year, reaffirms the priority given to reducing urban speed. Copies of both these publications are available in the library.

Detailed plans for the next two years are under discussion.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the number of road crashes resulting in death or serious injury which involved a vehicle which was exceeding the speed limit in the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [2058]

Mr. Bowis: During the 10 years 1986 to 1995 there were 513,636 road accidents in Great Britain involving death or serious injury. A total of 604,079 people were killed or seriously injured in these accidents. It is not known how many of the accidents involved a vehicle exceeding the speed limit. However, research by the Transport Research Laboratory and in the United States has indicated that around a third of road accident casualties resulted from accidents in which a vehicle was travelling with excessive speed. Some two thirds of such accidents occurred in roads with a 30 mph speed limit.

Commission of Irish Lights

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the reduction in the United Kingdom's contribution to the Commission of Irish Lights following the court's decision on electronic aids. [2558]

Mr. Bowis: No savings to the general lighthouse fund are expected. The Irish Government are proposing the necessary legislative changes to enable the Commissioners of Irish Lights to continue with the provision of marine radio navigation aids.

Unexploded Bombs

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what liaison he has had with the Ministry of Defence over the monitoring of explosives and noxious substances from the second world war in the territorial waters of the United Kingdom. [2598]

Mr. Bowis: My Department liaises with the Ministry of Defence as the need arises. Monitoring is undertaken specifically in relation to the remains of SS Richard Montgomery, where periodic surveys on our behalf are overseen by the Royal Navy's chief salvage officer.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the implications of the recent judgment in the High Court in the case brought by Maurice and Audrey Balchin for planning blight compensation policy in connection with the channel tunnel rail link; and if he will make a statement. [2290]

Mr. Watts: The judgment has no implications for the channel tunnel rail link. Union Railways Ltd. operates a discretionary purchase scheme and considers all applications in full.

Road Accidents

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* pedestrians and *(b)* passengers have been (i) injured and (ii) killed in accidents involving vehicles in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [2054]

Mr. Bowis: The number of casualties in road accidents is shown in the table.

	1991	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Pedestrians					
Injured	52,496	50,240	46,857	47,529	45,991
Killed	1,496	1,347	1,241	1,124	1,038
Passengers					
Injured	84,521	85,820	85,422	87,632	86,368
Killed	937	864	766	746	757

Bull Bars

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans his Department has to introduce legislation to ban bull bars on vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [2057]

Mr. Bowis: Earlier this year, the European Commission proposed an amendment to the External Projections Directive, 74/483/EEC, which would control the fitting of aggressive bull bars. My Department was involved in the preparation of this draft amendment which, it is hoped, will be incorporated into the directive early next year.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the numbers of *(a)* pedestrians and *(b)* passengers who have been (i) injured and (ii) killed as a direct result of a vehicle being fitted with bull bars in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [2052]

Mr. Bowis: The Department commissioned the Transport Research Laboratory to carry out a study of data from accidents involving bull bars and to make an objective assessment of the real risks which they pose to vulnerable road users. TRL has now completed the work and expects to publish its conclusions shortly.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages or disadvantages of such a repeal. [2469]

Mr. Bowis: Subject to satisfactory completion of the consultation process, my Department is currently proposing to repeal or amend the following regulations by the end of 1996:

Number of regulations	*Type of regulations*
2	Motor Vehicle (Type Approval or Authorisation) Regulations
4	Vehicle Inspectorate Safety Codes of Practice
1	Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations
17	Merchant Shipping (Passenger Ship Construction) Regulations
7	Merchant Shipping (Cargo Ship) Regulations
13	Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection & Appliances) Regulations
5	Merchant Shipping (Life-Saving Appliances)
9	Merchant Shipping (Control of Pollution by Noxious Liquid Substances)
15	Merchant Shipping (Loadline) Regulations
11	Other miscellaneous regulations

Since the effect in each case will be to reduce rather than increase compliance costs, a CCA is not required. Departments do, however, seek to estimate approximate savings wherever possible. The cost of undertaking a CCA varies from case to case, but is generally modest. Because part of the cost falls to the business consulted, a full CCA would be inappropriate for measures designed to reduce business burdens.

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the expected date of completion of the National Air Traffic Services review of the two-centre strategy. [2687]

Mr. Bowis: The CAA advises that recommendations stemming from the review will be considered by its board in December with a view to decisions being made very early in the new year.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Questions

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Lord President of the Council what guidelines his Department issues to Government Departments and agencies in respect of procedures to be followed after a parliamentary answer is found to be incorrect. [44]

Mr. Newton: No formal guidance is issued by my Department. Government Departments do, however, follow precedents for correcting mistakes made in answering parliamentary questions, including the use of "pursuant" answers. It is for individual Departments to determine how they handle a particular parliamentary question. The advice of the Table Office would be sought on the use of a "pursuant" question.

TREASURY

Government Expenditure and Revenues

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what analysis of Government expenditure and revenues has been undertaken in respect of the other regions and countries of the UK equivalent to that undertaken in respect of Scotland. [1535]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* "Government Expenditure and Revenue—Wales 1993–94" was published by the Welsh Office in January 1996. There are no equivalent figures published for Northern Ireland. The Government Office for London will publish a consultation paper this month on a methodology for estimating the balance between public income and expenditure in London. A breakdown of expenditure for regions and counties in the UK, was published in section 7 of the "Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 1996–97", Cm 3201.

Transport Fuel Duty

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received during the past 12 months on the level of fuel duty rebate on fuel used for public transport; and if he will make a statement. [1749]

Mr. Oppenheim: I have received a number of representations on this topic from the Confederation of Passenger Transport and various bus companies. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further in the run up to the Budget.

Financial Derivatives

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidelines are issued to Government Departments and agencies about the use of financial derivatives. [1682]

Mrs. Angela Knight: No general guidance is issued to Departments on the use of financial derivatives, except in the area of foreign exchange—in relation to which paragraphs 28.7.5 and 28.7.6 of the "Government Accounting" manual tell Departments that, before starting to use currency forwards, futures and options, they should obtain sufficient expertise and that they must avoid speculation. More generally, accounting officers are required to ensure that public funds are properly and well managed, avoid waste and extravagance and ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively. Departments are not permitted to invest Exchequer money outside the public sector.

Betting Revenue

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each financial year since 1992–93, and to the latest available date in 1996, the revenue accruing to the Treasury from off-course betting on *(a)* horse racing and *(b)* greyhound racing. [2236]

Mr. Oppenheim: A breakdown of receipts between horse racing, greyhound racing and any other betting subject to general betting duty is not available. Total receipts from off-course betting duty are as follows:

	£ million
1992–93	474
1993–94	495
1994–95	509
1995–96	489
April–September 1996	244

Building Societies

Ms Lynne: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings he *(a)* has held and *(b)* proposes to hold with organisations of, or representing, disabled people to discuss the impact of building societies converting to banks and issuing bonus shares to members. [2307]

Mrs. Angela Knight: Treasury Ministers have received no requests for meetings from such groups.

Mr. French: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will announce the outcome of the consultation on the draft Building Societies Bill. [3219]

Mrs. Knight: Following the publication of the draft Building Societies Bill in March, the Government received responses from societies, from other professionals and from individual customers, all of which helped to highlight the concerns of those involved with societies. I will publish shortly a final version of the Bill, reflecting the outcome of the consultation.

The draft Bill contains three major changes to the existing legislation. It replaces the current prescriptive regime for societies with a modern, permissive framework, which—subject to a few necessary exceptions—allows societies and their members to decide what businesses to engage in. It updates the arrangements for prudential supervision by the Building Societies Commission, and it modernises and enhances societies' accountability to their members. The draft Bill received a general welcome from societies and other respondents.

A number of the comments received were technical, and have helped to produce a better Bill. I am grateful for the work which respondents put into formulating their comments, which demonstrates the value of consulting on draft legislation.

Some attractive ideas have been suggested which will be included in the new Bill. The principal changes are as follows:

Protection against takeover from converted societies

The 1986 Act provides that for five years after a society converts to a plc, no one may hold over 15 per cent. of its shares. This may be waived by the Bank of England, in certain circumstances. Some respondents asked us to remove this protection; others to keep it.

The draft Bill will provide for the protection to lapse if, during the five years, the converted society takes over another financial institution, or if its shareholders vote to waive it. If enacted, this change would apply to any converted society still within its five year period.

Deposit accounts

The draft published in March proposed that every individual who saved with a society should be a member. There would be some exceptions, for example current account holders. The previous draft would have required societies to freeze individuals' deposit accounts operating at the time of enactment. Individuals would not have been able to put new money in those accounts. I have decided to change these provisions so that further money can be put in existing deposit accounts, provided the account holder is given the choice of keeping that account or transferring to a share account with comparable terms. All new savings accounts will still have to be membership accounts.

The new draft Bill will also provide that after a society has announced its intention to put a takeover or conversion proposal to its members, it may offer deposit accounts.

Special general meetings

The draft published in March proposed a statutory right for members to requisition a special general meeting. This right has existed in societies' rules for some time. In transposing this into law, the draft would have preserved societies' ability to set thresholds for share holdings, borrowing and length of membership for those who can exercise this right. The new draft Bill retains these provisions, and furthermore will not put a society under a statutory obligation to hold a meeting within the three months before and one month after the annual general meeting. A duly requisitioned SGM would still have to be held at another time. A society could arrange to hold the SGM and AGM on the same day if it wished.

Access to the register of members

The new Bill will restrict the existing statutory right to apply to the Building Societies Commission for access to a society's register. This right will generally be restricted to members of at least two years' standing, and with a share holding balance or mortgage debt, of at least £100. A fee of £25 will be payable to the BSC with each application, and successful applicants will be required to respect the confidentiality of names and addresses taken from the register.

Priority Liquidation Distribution Right

The 1986 Act creates a residual priority liquidation distribution right for former members of a converted society. This comes into play should a converted institution subsequently fail, and relates to share accounts held at the time of the conversion. Each person's entitlement is initially equal to a percentage of his share holding at the time of conversion, but it runs down as withdrawals are made, with no increase from subsequent deposits. Because of this provision, converted societies often have to raise extra capital, and face additional costs and administrative burdens.

As societies proposing a change of status now offer substantial benefits to eligible members on conversion—effectively capitalising the reserves at that time—this additional protection seems unnecessary. And the cost of providing for it disadvantages new shareholders and customers. So the new draft Bill will remove this burden. If enacted, the repeal of this provision would apply to all societies whose business is transferred to a successor company after today's date, provided that the members had been warned in the relevant transfer statement of the possible abolition of the right.

Mergers, conversions and takeovers

The new draft Bill will include proposals modifying the procedures for conversion and takeover, while keeping necessary protection for members. It will allow societies to

send members a short version of the transfer statement, provided the full version is available to members who request it,

The 1986 Act arrangements for takeovers or mergers are cumbersome for a society in serious difficulty. All mergers and takeovers require a vote of the members of a society being absorbed. Invoking such a procedure during a rescue would be impractical. Although such circumstances may arise only very infrequently, the new draft Bill will give the BSC the power to direct a society *in extremis* to seek a merger or takeover, and to allow a merger or takeover to proceed by board resolution only, so that an ailing society's business can be taken over by another society or a bank, without the disruption that a full public proposal would cause.

Deposit and Investor Protection

Finally, the draft Bill will contain an enabling power to merge, at a point in the future, the banks' deposit and societies' investor protection schemes. This is solely a contingency provision, should it ever become necessary at some point in the future.

Child Care

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the *(a)* women who are mothers and *(b)* men who are fathers who are employed by his Department have received assistance from the Department with child care. [1282]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Although the civil service collects statistical information on staff employed in Government Departments and executive agencies, we do not collect information on the parental status of individual staff. It would be intrusive on people's personal affairs for us to request this information from staff and difficult to justify the collection of such data.

The Treasury offers staff subsidised places on the Westminster holiday play scheme. So far this year, Treasury staff have used a total of 73 places. We also make contributions to additional child care costs where staff are required to work additional or irregular hours, and we offer paid special leave to staff to enable them to care for sick close relatives and children.

Female Staff

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many women are currently employed by his Department; and what proportion this is of the total. [1249]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* As at 31 October 1996 the Treasury employed 461 women, which was 43 per cent. of total staff.

Leasehold Properties

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what recent representations he has received from *(a)* the House Builders Federation, *(b)* the Manufacturing and Construction Industries Alliance, *(c)* individual property owners and *(d)* others about the implications for housebuilders and other long leaseholders selling properties of the case of LM Tenancies Plcv IRC; and if he will make a statement; [1483]

(2) what guidance he plans to issue to stamp offices to clarify ambiguities arising from the stamp duty liabilities incurred on the sale of leasehold properties; [1484]

(3) on how many recent occasions the stamp duty liability calculated on the sale of a leasehold property has actually exceeded the sale price of the leasehold property concerned; [1485]

(4) if he will make a statement setting out the formulae used for the calculation of the stamp duty liability on the sale of leasehold property; [1486]

(5) if he will receive a delegation from the Manufacturing and Construction Industries Alliance and the House Builders Federation to discuss the implications of the case LM Tenancies plc *v.* IRC. [1487]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Stamp duty is charged on the grant of a new lease of property by reference to the premium paid for the lease and the average annual rent. Duty on the premium is charged at 1 per cent. but there is no charge on the premium where the premium is £60,000 or less and the average annual rent is £600 or less. Duty is charged on the average annual rent by reference to a sliding scale of rates which depend on the length of the lease. For example, for a lease of over 100 years, the rate of 24 per cent. (£12 per £50 or part of £50 of the average annual rent).

Where an existing lease is sold by the leaseholder to someone else, duty is charged at 1 per cent. on the price paid, in the same way as with the sale of a freehold. No duty is charged on the rent.

I have received representations from the House Builders Federation, the Manufacturing and Construction Industries Alliance, and McCarthy and Stone about the treatment of a grant of a new lease under which the rent is to be adjusted in future in line with changes in the retail prices index.

Where the terms of a lease lay down specific figures for future rent payments, or provide for the rent to be increased by a fixed percentage each year, there is no difficulty in calculating what the average annual rent is for the purpose of the stamp duty charge. The calculation is more difficult where the rent is to depend on the future movement of an index such as the RPI. Decisions of the courts, including the recent case LM Tenancies plc. *v* Inland Revenue Commissioners, have given some guidance on the calculation of the charge to duty where there is an element which is not ascertainable at the outset.

The Inland Revenue has reviewed its practice on the stamp duty treatment of leases of this type, in the light of the representations which have been made. It accepts that in some cases the calculations which have been made by Stamp Offices produce a figure which is too high.

In the LM tenancies case, the premium paid for a lease was to be calculated by reference to the market price of a Treasury loan stock 25 days after the execution of the lease. The Court decided that duty should be calculated by reference to the value of the stock at the date of execution of the lease.

The Inland Revenue's view, in the light of the court's decision in the LM Tenancies case, is that where the rent under a lease is to be adjusted by reference to changes in the retail prices index, the duty should be calculated by reference to the change in the RPI in the year ending with the date of execution of the lease. The precise method of adjustment may depend on the terms of the lease and on

the way they provide for the calculation to be made—for example, whether the rent is to be increased annually or only at longer intervals. Generally, where the adjustment is to be made by comparing the value of the RPI at different dates, the difference between the two values over the latest year will be used to measure the rent increase for stamp duty purposes. For example, if the initial rent is £300 a year and is to be adjusted annually, and the RPI has gone up from 150 to 153 (equivalent to 2 per cent.) over the relevant 12 month period, it would be assumed that the rent would go up by £6—2 per cent. of £300—each year. Thus the rent would be taken as £306 in the second year, £312 in the third year, and so on, in order to calculate the average annual rent under the lease.

The Inland Revenue is issuing instructions to stamp Offices accordingly, to ensure that individual cases are dealt with on a consistent basis. A taxpayer who disagrees with the Stamp Office's calculation of the duty in a particular case will of course have the normal rights of appeal.

Whisky

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the percentage increase in revenue from whisky sales since the reduction in the duty in the 1995 Budget; and what conclusions he has drawn from this for future policy on duty levels. [2555]

Mr. Oppenheim: The monthly receipts from excise duty on spirits for 1995 and 1996 January to September are shown in the table. The receipts cover all alcohol products subject to spirit duty, not just whisky.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will announce his decision regarding the rate of spirit duty in his Budget speech on 26 November.

Spirit duty receipts

Month	*1995 £ million*	*1996 £ million*	*Percentage change*
January	236a	119	–50
February	51	76	+49
March	74	108	+46
April	112	115	+3
May	106	117	+10
June	129	128	–1
July	121	108	–11
August	115	122	+6
September	128	123	–4
October	130	—	—
November	228	—	—
December	281b	—	—

Spirit duty is generally paid on the 29th of the month for goods cleared during the previous 15th to 14th of the month.

1. January 1995 receipts were boosted as a result of the Financial Statement of 8 December 1994 which announced an increase in the rate of duty with effect from 1 January 1995.

2. December 1995 receipts represent goods cleared both before and after the Budget of 28 November 1995.

Economic Criteria

Mr. Renton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which members of the European Union he currently forecasts will meet the Maastricht economic criteria in 1997. [2141]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* An assessment of which countries meet the conditions for joining the single currency on 1 January 1999 will be made by the Council of Ministers in early 1998. At present there are considerable uncertainties surrounding this and other issues relating to the single currency.

VAT

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total amount of VAT refunded to clubs as a result of the recent misdirection by Customs and Excise. [2584]

Mr. Oppenheim: The total amount refunded to non-profit making organisations supplying sporting services is estimated at £150 million VAT plus £30 million interest.

Gold Reserves

Mr. Butcher: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of Britain's gold reserves are held in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* the USA *(c)* western Europe and *(d)* elsewhere. [2396]

Mrs. Angela Knight: In accordance with best practice, part of the United Kingdom's gold reserves are held at the Bank of England and the remainder in secure facilities abroad. Because the number of appropriate locations is limited, for security reasons we do not disclose the amounts held at different sites.

Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent submission he has received from the Manchester chamber of commerce and industry; what reply he will be sending; and if he will make a statement. [1833]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The Manchester Chamber of Commerce wrote to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor on 25 October enclosing their budget submission. In common with all Budget submissions, it will be read carefully, and analysed further as appropriate. The Chancellor will be replying shortly to thank the Manchester chamber of commerce for sending in its proposals, but a full statement would not be appropriate in the run-up to the Budget.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Ingram: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2603]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 17 June 1996, *Official Report*, column *308*.

Aid Budget

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has had from the Bishop of Manchester in relation to the aid budget; what reply he is sending; what action he will be taking; and if he will make a statement. [869]

Mr. Waldegrave: The Bishop of Manchester wrote to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor on 24 October regarding the future level of the United Kingdom aid programme. My right hon. Friend Baroness Chalker, the Minister responsible for overseas development, will be responding shortly. Decisions on the overseas aid programme will be announced in the Budget.

Public Pension Liabilities

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the implications for public finances of unfunded future public pension liabilities in the EU. [3156]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Thanks to this Government's policies the United Kingdom's net unfunded public pension liabilities are lower as a proportion of gross domestic product than those of other major EU member states.

Article 104b—the "no bail-out" clause—of the Maastricht treaty makes clear that a member state cannot be liable for another member state's commitments in any area of spending. The treaty therefore ensures that the UK will not have to pay for the liabilities of another member state, regardless of whether or not we join the economic and monetary union.

Rules on excessive deficits, reinforced by the proposed stability pact currently under negotiation, are designed to ensure that member states participating in EMU cannot follow irresponsible fiscal policies which could destabilise the market and affect other participating member states. If a member state needs to address a build-up of liabilities of any kind, it will not be able to fund them through excessive borrowing.

Member states have future liabilities of various kinds, not just of pensions, all of which need to be considered when assessing the future state of the public finances. Furthermore a meaningful assessment should consider assets as well as liabilities. Isolated study of pensions liabilities are therefore not a useful guide to the future financial stability or fiscal policy of any nation state. The convergence criteria of the Maastricht treaty provide a clearly defined basis for forming judgments on eligibility for economic and monetary union in due course.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Services (North Staffordshire)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the services provided by his Department and its agencies covering North Staffordshire for each of the last three years, giving details of *(a)* the number of staff employed and *(b)* the efficiency savings (i) required and (ii) achieved for each of those years. [37]

Mr. Burt: A full range of services on all Social Security issues is provided to the people of North Staffordshire via the local offices at Hanley, Longton and Newcastle, where the Benefits Agency, Child Support Agency, and Contributions Agency are sited.

The number of staff employed at these sites is shown in the table:

Year	*BA*	*CSA*	*CA*
1993–94	386	16	22
1994–95	389	16	22
1995–96	362	16	17

Figures as at 1 April 1996.

The Department and its agencies are committed to carrying out its business efficiently and has set national efficiency savings targets to monitor progress. Information for each of the last three years is in the following table:

	1993–94			*1994–95*			*1995–96*		
	BA	*CSA*	*CA*	*BA*	*CSA*	*CA*	*BA*	*CSA*	*CA*
Target	44.60	[1]—	2.603	55.00	[1]—	4.005	75.00	5.728	12.670
Achievement	67.94	[1]—	3.800	79.27	[1]—	7.106	98.46	8.746	13.729

[1] No efficiency target for CSA in 1993–94 and 1994–95. It is not possible to break down these figures to local level.

Local managers are expected to seek out further efficiencies. For north Staffordshire, these include:

In 1993–94—centralisation of telephone, switchboard, typing, finance and visiting services and a reduction of two management posts;

In 1994–95—reorganisation and co-location of various benefit sections and a reduction of three management posts, and

In 1995–96—centralisation of Social Fund and returned order book operations and a further reduction of two management posts.

Fraud

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what account he has taken in respect of his legislative proposals to counter fraud of the problems identified in official reports published by the Australian and New Zealand data protection commissioners; and if he will make a statement on how his proposals would avoid such problems in the United Kingdom. [209]

Mr. Heald: We shall take into account the experiences of other countries involved in data matching exercises and are in contact with the Data Protection Registrar about the Department's legislative proposals.

Advice Line

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the call cost for employers using the social security advice line for employers; what has been

the total cost of running this service in the last year; what are its objectives; and what plans he has to revise the call cost. [2279]

Mr. Heald: On 7 October the social security advice line for employers—SSALE—was incorporated into a new employers' helpline offering an expanded and improved service which also covers Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise.

All telephone calls to the employers' helpline are charged at local rate; there are no plans to change the call cost.

For the 1995–96 tax year SSALE was allocated a budget of £749,000. The objective of the helpline was to help employers and their representatives comply with national insurance legislation by providing an advisory service.

Disability Advice and Assistance Service

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made with establishing an advice and assistance service under part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [3266]

Mr. Burt: I am pleased to announce that we are creating the disability access rights advice service. Following an open tendering and evaluation exercise during which we worked closely with the National Disability Council, we have decided to award the DARAS contract to the Deloitte and Touche consulting group. The contract is worth approximately £1.5 million over the next two and a half years.

The service will provide consistent and expert advice on the Act's rights of access to goods and services, drawing on the expertise and experience of a range of disability organisations, specialists trainers and lawyers, to organisations advising disabled people and business alike.

It will be operational from 2 December 1996, the date when disabled people's new rights come into force. In addition to providing advice over the telephone and in writing, the new service will also produce information and deliver training designed to improve the primary advisers' understanding of the Act's rights of access to goods and services. The service will also establish arrangements for conciliation of disputes. It will therefore keep to a minimum the need for cases to go to court.

Benefits Agency (Emergency Services)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each of the last five years and for each Benefits Agency office, the number of occasions payments have been made by the Benefits Agency out-of-hours service. [1430]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Pensions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of the basic rate pension *(a)* indexed to prices and *(b)* indexed to earnings in 2000, 2010, 2020, 2030, 2040 and 2050 on the basis of the 1994 OPCS population projections; and if he will estimate the comparable costs, on the same assumptions and for the same years, on the basis of the 1992 Office of Population Censuses and Surveys population projections. [2292]

Mr. Heald: The information is in the table:

£ billion

Estimated expenditure on basic state pension	*2000*	*2010*	*2020*	*2030*	*2040*	*2050*
Price uprating 1992 population projection	30.7	34.6	36.5	44.2	47.1	44.9
Price uprating 1994 population projection	30.3	33.6	35.4	43.4	46.7	44.4
Earnings uprating 1992 population projection	32.6	42.6	52.2	73.3	90.7	100.4
Earnings uprating 1994 population projection	32.2	41.3	50.7	71.9	89.9	99.2

1. Estimated expenditure is shown in 1996 benefit rate terms, rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion.

2. Estimated expenditure on basic state pension using the 1992 population projections is based on the report by the Government Actuary on the third quinquennial review under section 137 of the Social Security Act 1975 and the Pensions Bill 1994 report by the Government Actuary on the financial provisions of the bill on the national insurance fund as appropriate. It is based on 1996–97 benefit rates, is for Great Britain, assumes equalisation of state pension ages and excludes graduated pensions and additional pension.

3. Earnings uprating figures assume that earnings increase faster than prices by 1.5 per cent. per annum commencing with the uprating in April 1997.

4. Estimated expenditure on basic state pension using the 1994 population projections has been obtained by adjusting the expenditure figures described in note 2 in the light of the different numbers in the population over state pension age in the 1992 and 1994 population projections. It is based on 1996–97 benefit rates, is for Great Britain, assumes equalisation of state pension ages and excludes graduated pension and additional pension.

Bronchitis and Emphysema

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the cost of implementing the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council's recommendations on chronic bronchitis and emphysema. [2029]

Mr. Roger Evans: Any assessment of the cost of implementing the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council's recommendations could only be a broad estimated as it would be based on assumptions about the number of claimants who may come forward. The estimate annual benefit cost is around £20 million, with an additional administrative cost in the first year of around £5 million.

Expatriate Pensioners

Mr. Churchill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the current estimated cost to public funds of fully uprating Britain's expatriate pensioners whose pensions are frozen in consequence of their chosen country of abode. [2623]

Mr. Heald: The estimated cost of paying fully indexed benefits to all state retirement and widow's pensioners living abroad whose benefits are frozen is £255 million a year.

The figure is based on the number of pensioners living abroad in July 1996 and on the current rate of state pension.

Mr. Churchill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the savings to public funds in respect of social security, residential care and health care costs in respect of Britain's expatriate pensioners. [2624]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available.

We cannot say what calls British pensioners would make on these services if they lived in this country, or what the additional cost to the social security or health and social services budgets would be.

Reduced Earnings Allowance

Mr. Hain: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the amount *(a)* cumulatively and *(b)* per week by which the retirement allowance of those people transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance between 1 April and 1 October was lower than their reduced earnings allowance. [2684]

Mr. Roger Evans: The estimated average weekly difference for those transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance between 1 April and 30 September is approximately £29. The estimated average cumulative difference is about £630. This may be offset by additional income related benefits entitlement for some retirement allowance recipients.

Mr. Hain: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals against being transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance were lodged with social security appeal tribunals between 1 April and 1 October; and how many of these have been *(a)* allowed and *(b)* heard. [2685]

Mr. Evans: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Hain: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance between 1 April and 1 October; and how many of the woman were aged under 65 years at the time of conversion. [2686]

Mr. Evans: It is estimated that between 1 April and 30 September approximately 17,000 men and 4,000 women who are over pension age have been transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance. Virtually all of the 4,000 women are likely to have been under 65 years of age at the time of transfer.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the percentage withdrawal of benefit following all work test examinations at each benefit agency office in Scotland for each month from June 1996 to the latest available month. [1356]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of incapacity benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will give the percentage withdrawal of benefit following All Work Test examinations at each Benefit Agency Office in Scotland for each month from June 1996 to the latest available month.

The available information is shown in the attached table.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Percentage withdrawal of benefit following All Work Test referrals to BA Medical Services (BAMS) June 96–September 96

District	*Local Office*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*
Clyde Coast and Cowal	Greenock	14.60	10.60	10.00	11.50
Clyde Valley	Motherwell	18.80	24.00	36.00	41.20
	Hamilton	19.80	25.50	48.00	45.80
Coatbridge	Coatbridge	20.70	19.00	23.70	30.70
East Lowlands	Edinburgh South	8.00	9.84	28.20	30.10
	Edinburgh East	32.80	17.90	23.40	22.00
	Galashiels	22.20	23.40	20.00	24.70
Fife	Kirkcaldy	31.20	28.50	36.20	20.40
	Cowdenbeath	16.60	22.40	25.90	9.00
	Leven	14.20	22.60	17.10	26.50
	Dunfermline	15.80	18.10	23.00	17.00
Forth Valley	Stirling	15.20	13.60	18.90	17.60
	Falkirk	12.30	20.30	13.20	15.50
Glasgow City	Glasgow City	22.90	26.20	30.20	6.50
	Glasgow Maryhill	31.60	23.10	34.90	10.80
Glasgow East	Glasgow Shettleston	35.40	31.50	44.40	47.30
	Glasgow Bridgeton	43.60	39.50	14.10	28.80
	Glasgow Provan	17.20	31.40	15.50	30.90
Glasgow Laurieston	Glasgow Laurieston	32.40	45.70	30.70	31.60
	East Kilbride	30.20	43.1	39.1	25.6
Glasgow South West	Glasgow South West	29.40	28.00	23.40	21.30
Glasgow Springburn and Cumbernauld	Glasgow Springburn	20.00	27.00	11.90	16.00
	Glasgow Cumbernauld	27.50	32.70	18.20	18.00
Glasgow West	Glasgow Anniesland	21.50	20.70	14.00	14.50
	Glasgow Patrick	17.60	22.50	14.20	19.20
Grampian and Shetland	Aberdeen	13.4	4.1	9.2	8.6
	Lerwick	0.00	18.5	0.00	19.00
	Peterhead	3.92	6.93	8.6	3.4

Percentage withdrawal of benefit following All Work Test referrals to BA Medical Services (BAMS) June 96–September 96

District	*Local Office*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*
Highlands and Islands	Inverness	8.70	9.87	14.10	12.40
	Elgin	9.50	14.80	14.10	20.60
	Fort William	3.60	18.80	7.89	17.70
	Kirkwall	0.00	20.00	0.00	27.30
	Stornoway	2.3	10.20	8.80	13.20
	Wick	10.80	4.30	5.00	7.60
Irvine and Kilmarnock	Irvine	13.90	21.00	13.60	13.50
	Kilmarnock	2.40	16.40	19.70	8.80
Lomond and Argyll	Clydebank	12.60	10.40	13.20	11.00
	Campbeltown	8.30	21.80	3.10	26.30
	Oban	6.20	27.60	0.00	43.30
Lothian and Central	Edinburgh City	19.60	25.70	12.00	17.60
	Leith	5.10	2.10	1.40	6.60
Lothian West	Lothian West	12.00	14.90	10.90	11.60
Renfrew	Renfrew	6.80	14.80	11.30	13.10
South-west Scotland	Ayr	20.90	18.30	19.90	17.20
	Dumfries	9.81	6.50	22.40	12.90
	Stranraer	10.40	20.80	31.80	16.00
Tayside	Dundee	21.70	24.00	18.30	17.20
	Arbroath	24.80	29.60	21.20	16.05
	Perth	11.00	18.30	15.00	14.10

Source:
100 per cent. count of cases on the incapacity benefit system. Excludes a small number of clerically processed cases.
Notes:
1. Percentage withdrawal includes a small number of credits only cases withdrawn as they failed to return their questionnaire without good cause or failed to attend a medical. Some credits only cases which existed prior to April 1995 are not included.
2. The decision to withdraw benefit is made by the independent adjudication officer.
3. Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what payment is made per test to doctors carrying out all-work tests. [1351]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Benefits Agency medical services is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what payment is made to doctors carrying out All Work Tests for each test.

Doctors who are contracted to carry out all work test assessments on a sessional basis are paid at an hourly rate of £30.70. A session normally lasts three and a half hours. The number of assessments carried out in a session varies depending on the complexity of the condition involved. An average assessment takes a total of 47 minutes, therefore on average each doctor can be expected to assess up to 4 clients per session.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the absolute numbers of people who *(a)* failed and *(b)* passed the all work tests at Ayr for each month since April 1995; if he will indicate the number of those who failed who subsequently appealed for each month, the number of those appeals which were successful and the number of successful appellants who were subsequently called for a further all work test.[1357]

Mr. Mitchell: The administration of incapacity benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will list the absolute numbers of people who (a) failed and (b) passed the All Work test at Ayr for each month since April 1995; if he will indicate the number of those who failed who subsequently appealed for each month, the number of those appeals which were successful and the number of successful appellants who were subsequently called for a further All Work test.

The information is not available in the format requested because the number of successful appellants who were subsequently called for a further All Work test is unavailable.

The available information is shown in the attached tables.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

1995–96	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*
Number failing the AWT after examination	0	0	19	49	68	33	77	94	65
Number allowed under AWT following reference to BAMS	0	128	236	161	214	170	285	265	172
Number of IB AWT appeals received	0	0	0	16	20	28	21	51	52
Number of IB AWT appeals heard and decided	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	10	13
Number of IB AWT appeals found in favour of appellant	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	7

1996–97	*January*	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*
Number failing the AWT[1] after examination	97	80	124	117	106	71	59	82	60
Number allowed under AWT following reference to BAMS[2]	299	327	363	251	431	269	263	330	288
Number of IB[3] AWT appeals received	50	61	54	58	48	57	35	20	27
Number of IB AWT appeals heard and decided	11	9	7	29	8	46	70	70	43

1996–97	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September
Number of IB AWT appeals found in favour of appellant	6	4	4	19	6	21	36	41	17

Source:
100 per cent. count of cases on the Incapacity Benefit system. Excludes a small number of clerically processed cases.
Notes:
[1] All Work Test
[2] Benefits Agency Medical Services
[3] Incapacity Benefit
1. The number who failed the All Work Test (AWT) after examination includes a small number of credits only cases who were disallowed on failure to return the medical questionnaire without good cause and who failed to attend a medical. Some Credits Only cases which existed prior to April 1995 are not included.
2. The number who passed the All Work Test (AWT) includes those cases allowed following scrutiny and/or examination by BA Medical Services. Some Credits Only cases which existed prior to April 1995 are not included.
3. The information provided on appeals excludes all Credits Only Cases.
4. The decision to allow, disallow or review benefit entitlement is made by the Independent Adjudication Officer.
5. Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Benefits Agency Medical Services

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of doctors working at each Benefits Agency medical services centre in Scotland who are *(a)* full time BAMS staff, *(b)* current medical practitioners, *(c)* retired medical practitioners and *(d)* in other categories. [1348]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Benefits Agency medical services is a matter for the chief executive of the Benefits Agency, Mr. Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will list the number of doctors working at each Benefit Agency Medical Services centre in Scotland who are (a) full time BAMS staff, (b) current medical practitioners, (c) retired medical practitioners and (d) in other categories.

The information required concerning which sessional fee paid doctors are currently in practice and which are retired is not immediately available. However, BAMS is collecting this information, and I will write to you again when I have it. There are no other categories held.

Such information as is available is contained in the table at appendix A.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Appendix A: Doctors working in Scotland at each centre

Centre	Full time BAMS	Sessional fee paid
Glasgow/Shettleston/Cumbernauld	[1]22	71
Ayr/Kilmarnock	0	8
Greenock	0	4
Motherwell/Hamilton	0	6
Edinburgh	20	30
Aberdeen	2	12
Inverness	2	5
Dundee	4	10

Figures are provisional and subject to change.
[1] The Glasgow full time doctors cover a variety of areas.

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total cost of the Benefits Agency medical services in Scotland and the United Kingdom, for the most recent available year. [1349]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Benefits Agency medical services is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what is the total cost of the Benefits Agency Medical Services (BAMS) in Scotland and the United Kingdom for the most recent available year.

The most recent year for which figures are available is April 1995 to March 1996. The running costs of BAMS for Scotland were £6,298.749. The total running cost for the United Kingdom was £58,413,659.

The figures given exclude accommodation and utilities costs. The Budgets for these are not held by BAMS. The figures are provisional and subject to change.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Agency (Ayr Office)

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the current staff complement at the Ayr benefit office; how many of those have been working there for more than *(a)* one year and *(b)* five years; how many of these serve as adjudicating officers; what formal qualifications these adjudication officers have; what monitoring is undertaken of their work; and to whom the adjudication officers at Ayr are directly accountable; [1352]

(2) how many of the staff of the Ayr benefit office have formal qualifications *(a)* in medicine, *(b)* in professions allied to medicine, *(c)* in social work and *(d)* of a degree or equivalent; what arrangements are made for the monitoring of the work of the staff of the Ayr benefit office; and who is responsible for the training of staff at Ayr. [1346]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. George Foulkes, dated 5 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what is the current staff complement at the Ayr benefit office; how many of those have been working there for more than (a) one year and (b) five years; how many of these serve as adjudicating officers; what formal qualifications these adjudication officers have; what monitoring is undertaken of their work; and to whom the adjudication officers at

Ayr are directly accountable; and how many of the staff of the Ayr Benefit Office have formal qualifications (a) in medicine, (b) in professions allied to medicine, (c) in social work and (d) of a degree or equivalent; what arrangements are made for the monitoring of the work of the staff of the Ayr Benefit Office; and who is responsible for the training of staff at Ayr.

There are currently 172 staff employed in the Ayr Benefit Office of whom 172 have been there for more than one year and 139 have been in post for more than 5 years. There are 15 Adjudication Officers (AOs), 3 of whom (including one part-time) are engaged as specialist AOs dealing with Incapacity Benefit including cases which have failed the All Work Test.

All AOs have undertaken intensive training provided by BA Training Operations. Independent monitoring of adjudication is in place within Ayr Benefit Office which forms part of the Benefits Agency South West Scotland District Office. There is independent monitoring undertaken by the Central Adjudication Services. AOs are independent authorities accountable to Chief Adjudication Officers on all aspects of adjudication and standards thereof.

There are no members of staff with formal qualifications in medicine, professions allied to medicine and Social Work. There are 6 staff with a degree or equivalent.

All work is monitored as a matter of routine by checking processes, and by a dedicated quality control section. The District Manager is responsible for the training and development of staff through a structured training organisation within the District structure under the control of the District's Human Resources Manager.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Social Security Agency

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the result of the recent market-testing exercises for messengers and typing services in the Social Security Agency; on how many occasions bids were called for and how many were received; what were the costs of the market-testing operation and the estimated annual savings; and if he will list the successful bidders. [1198]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Alec Wylie, and I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from J. B. Fleming to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 1 November 1996:

Your recent Parliamentary Question on market testing has been passed to Mr. Wylie, Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency for reply. As he is away on business at present, I am replying on his behalf.

Invitations to tender for the typing service and separately for the messenger and support service in the Agency were issued on 29 April 1996. The only bids received on time were those from the in-house team, one for each service. One other bid was received after the deadline and therefore rejected.

The evaluation process has not yet been completed and it is therefore not yet possible to provide you with the final cost of this particular market testing exercise or the estimated savings from it. I shall ensure that you are given that information in due course.

Paedophile Register

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will consult with the Home Secretary with a view to including Northern Ireland in the proposed paedophile address registration legislation. [1199]

Sir John Wheeler: I am pleased to confirm that the Government intend to bring forward legislation on a United Kingdom-wide basis which will include provisions to require sex offenders in Northern Ireland to register changes of address with the police.

GCSE Passes

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of young people in Northern Ireland have achieved *(a)* five GCSE passes or equivalent and *(b)* no passes by the age of 19 years in each of the last five years. [1168]

Mr. Ancram: The estimated percentage of young people in Northern Ireland who have achieved *(a)* five GCSE passes or equivalent and *(b)* no passes by the age of 19 years in the last five years is as follows:

Percentage

	Five or more passes (A–C)[1] or equivalent*	*No passes A*–G[2]*
1995	n/a	11
1994	64.5	12
1993	63.2	14
1992	56.4	17
1991	n/a	22

Sources:
[1] School Leavers Survey and FE Leavers Survey, DENI and T and EA.
[2] School Leavers Survey and FE Leavers Survey.

Public Appointments

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for which public appointments in Northern Ireland, since 1 January 1990, a nominee has been requested from the Irish Republic; and through which channels. [1197]

Sir John Wheeler: Arrangements for consulting the Irish Government about public appointments are set out in section 7 of "Guidance on Public Appointments in Northern Ireland" which was published by Central Secretarial in October 1995. A copy was placed in the House of Commons Library.

List of category 'A' appointments

	Appointment
DANI	
Fishery Harbour Authority	Chairman
Livestock and Meat Commission for NI	Chairman
Rural Development Council	Chairman
DED	
Enterprise Ulster	Chairman
Equal Opportunities Commission	9 members including Chairman
Fair Employment Commission	8 members including Chairman
Fair Employment Tribunal (appointments made by Lord Chancellor)	5 (President, Vice-President, 2 full-time Chairmen and 1 Part-time Chairman)
General Consumer Council	Chairman
Health and Safety Agency for NI	Chairman

List of category 'A' appointments

	Appointment
Industrial Development Board	12 members including Chairman
Industrial Research and Technology Board	Chairman
Industrial Tribunals	4 (President, Vice-Presidents, and 2 full-time Chairmen)
Labour Relations Agency	Chairman
Local Enterprise Development Unit	Chairman
Tourist Board	Chairman
Training and Employment Agency	Chairman
DENI	
Armagh Observatory	1 Governor
Arts Council	Chairman/Vice-Chairman
NI Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment	Chairman
NI Higher Education Council	Chairman
Queen's University Senate	5 members
DFP	
Community Relations Council	7 members (Government appointees) including Chairman
International Fund for Ireland	7 members including Chairman
Law Reform Advisory Committee	Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 10 members
	Lay Observer
NI Citizen's Charter Advisory Panel	7 members including Chairman
NI Economic Council	Chairman
DHSS	
Eastern Health and SS Board	7 members including Chairman
Health and SS Trusts	84 members including Chairmen
Health Promotion Agency	Chairman
Mental Health Commission for NI	Chairman
NI Blood Transfusion Service Agency	Chairman
NI Regional Medical Physics Agency	Chairman
Northern Health and SS Board	7 members including Chairman
Southern Health and SS Board	7 members including Chairman
Tribunal Re: GP Disqualification	10 Professional members
Western Health and SS Board	7 members including Chairman
DOE (NI)	
Belfast Harbour Commissioners	Chairman
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside	Chairman/Deputy Chairman
Fire Authority for NI	Chairman
Laganside Corporation	10 members including Chairman
Londonderry Port and Harbour Commission	Chairman
NI Housing Executive	7 members including Chairman
NI Railways Ltd.	6 members including Chairman
NI Transport Holding Co	5 members including Chairman
Planning Appeals Commission	10 members including Chairman
Rent Assessment Panel	2 members i.e. Chairman/Deputy Chairman
Ulsterbus/Citybus/Flexibus	6 members including Chairman
Warrenpoint Harbour Authority	Chairman
Water Appeals Commission	2 members (Chief Commissioner and Principal Professional Commissioner)
NIO	
Boundary Commission for NI	11 members including Chairman
	Chief Electoral Officer
Independent Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner for Holding Centres	2 members

List of category 'A' appointments

	Appointment
Independent Assessor of Military Complaints	
Independent Commission for Police Complaints	10 members including Chairman
Police Authority for NI	20 members including Chairman
Probation Board for NI	15 members including Chairman
Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights	12 members including Chairman

List of category 'B' Appointments

	Appointment
DANI	
Agricultural Wages Board	1 Chairman and 2 members
DED	
Certification Officer for NI	1 Commissioner
Commissioner for the Rights of Trade Union Members	1 Commissioner
Enterprise Ulster	7 members
General Consumer Council	13 members
Health and Safety Agency for NI	9 members
Industrial Research and Technology Board	11 members
Labour Relations Agency	9 members
Local Enterprise Development Unit	10 members
Tourist Board	8 members
Training and Employment Agency Board	11 members
Ulster Sheltered Employment Ltd.	6 members including Chairman
DENI	
Arts Council for NI	14 members
Belfast Education and Library Board	35 members including Chairman
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	8 members including Chairman
Diocesan Education Committees of the CCMS	Totals 16 members
NI Higher Education Council	9 members
North Eastern Education and Library Board	35 members including Chairman
Negotiating Committees:	
Colleges of Education	Chairman only
Further Education	Chairman only
Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service	Chairman only
South Eastern Education and Library Board	35 members including Chairman
Southern Education and Library Board	35 members incvluding Chairman
Sports Council for NI	15 members including Chairman
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	13 members including Chairman
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum	15 members including Chairman
Ulster Museum	14 members including Chairman
Western Education and Library Board	32 members including Chairman
Youth Council for NI	18 members including Chairman
DFP	
NI Economic Council	15 members
DHSS	
NI Blood Transfusion Service Agency	2 members
Central Services Agency for H&SS	10 members (Chairmanship held by the Chief Executive of the H and SS Management Executive)
Eastern Health and SS Council	30 members including Chairman

List of category 'B' Appointments

	Appointment
Health Promotion Agency	14 members
Mental Health Commission for NI	15 members
NI Regional Medical Physics Agency	1 member
Northern Health and SS Council	23 members including Chairman
Poisons Board	Chairman
Southern Health and SS Council	24 members including Chairman
Tribunal Re: GP Disqualification	4 members (Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 2 Lay Members)
Western Health and SS Council	23 members including Chairman
DOE(NI)	
Advisory Committee on Travellers	Chairman
Belfast Harbour Commissioners	8 members
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside	18 members
Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI Advisory Board	1 member
Fire Authority for NI	16 members
Local Government Staff Commission for NI	15 members including Chairman
Londonderry Port and Harbour Commission	8 members
NI Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee	17 members including Chairman
NI Water Council	15 members including Chairman
Rent Assessment Panel	33 panel members
Warrenpoint Harbour Authority	8 members including Chairman
NIO	
Board of Visitors:	
Belfast Prison	23 members including Chairman
Maghaberry Prison	17 members including Chairman
Magilligan Prison	20 members including Chairman
Maze Prison	16 members including Chairman
Hydebank Wood	16 members including Chairman
Rathgael and Whiteabbey Schools Management Board	12 members including Chairman

Tuberculosis

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) how many cases of tuberculosis among the registered homeless have been diagnosed in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1584]

(2) how many registered homeless have died from tuberculosis in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1557]

(3) how many people have died from tuberculosis in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1574]

(4) how many cases of tuberculosis have been diagnosed in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1582]

Mr. Moss: Information on tuberculosis among homeless people is not available separately.

Notifications of, and deaths from tuberculosis are shown in the table

Year	*Notifications of all cases of tuberculosis in Northern Ireland*[1]	*Number of deaths due to tuberculosis in Northern Ireland*[2]
1986	108	14
1987	99	15
1988	86	9
1989	94	13
1990	131	12
1991	96	7
1992	84	11
1993	90	13
1994	92	8
1995	90	[3]14

Source:

[1] Return of Infectious Diseases Notified to Health and Social Services Boards.

[2] General Register Office Records.

[3] Provisional.

Gun Clubs

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many gun clubs exist in Northern Ireland; what regulations govern their conduct; and if he will provide a breakdown of membership numbers. [1611]

Sir John Wheeler: At present there are 42 firearms clubs in Northern Ireland authorised by the Secretary of State under article 54 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. Clubs must meet a number of criteria in order to obtain and retain this approval, the main elements of which are:

(i) a club may introduce a potential member to the sport at a club session. This "interim member" must be introduced and sponsored by at least one full club member or officials before his/her application to become a "probationary member" is accepted, the interim member must attend the club regularly on a number of occasions and become known to club officials.

(ii) Before becoming a full member, the probationary member must have been a member of the club for at least 12 months during which time he/she must attend and shoot regularly. The probationary member must be given a course in the safe handling and use of firearms on a one-to-one basis by someone who is either a full member of the club or who is a qualified coach. Once a probationary member has satisfactorily completed a course in the safe handling and use of firearms, he/she must for the remainder of the probationary period be supervised at all times when in possession of firearms or ammunition by either the range officer, a full member of the club or someone who is a qualified coach;

(iii) the security arrangements for the storage of club firearms and ammunition must meet the approval of the RUC.

There are approximately 3,500 members attending these clubs. Individual club membership totals are not readily available, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Firearms

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will provide a breakdown of the reasons given for the legal possession of firearms in Northern Ireland. [1609]

Sir John Wheeler: The following are accepted as "good reason" for the possession of firearms in Northern Ireland, as required by the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981:

Sporting purposes;

Vermin control;

Personal protection;

Target use;

Collectors' items;

Possession only;

Miscellaneous (including humane killing, starting pistols, and firearms held by fishermen for protection of their nets).

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many of the firearms licences currently issued in Northern Ireland are for handguns. [1608]

Sir John Wheeler: It is not possible to say how many current firearms certificates are solely for handguns in Northern Ireland as some certificates may include more than one firearm. There were however 12,872 hand guns held on firearm certificates at 30 September 1996.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions in each of the past 10 years firearms licences have been revoked. [1612]

Sir John Wheeler: The Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has informed me that firearm certificates have been revoked in each of the last 10 years as follows:

1986: 144

1987: 157

1988: 148

1989: 135

1990: 131

1991: 110

1992: 94

1993: 97

1994: 113

1995: 115

1996: 75 (to 22 October).

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what limit exists on the number of firearms that may be possessed by an individual; and if he will make a statement about the number of legal weapons possessed and the number of firearms licences. [1610]

Sir John Wheeler: There is no specific limit to the numbers of firearms which may be held on a person's firearm certificate but, in accordance with article 28 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, the Chief Constable must be satisfied that the holder has shown "good reason" for purchasing, acquiring or having in his possession each firearm for which an application is made.

At 30 September 1996 there were 134,103 firearms held on 87,302 firearm certificates issued by the Chief Constable.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the number of firearms and shotguns, by the categories used by the RUC, held in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years; and how many of these were identified as being used in crime in each of those years. [1965]

Sir John Wheeler *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* (i) The figures for the number of firearms held on certificate in each of the last three years is as follows:

	1993	*1994*	*1995*
Shotguns	84,270	84,733	85,269
Air Weapons	19,939	20,447	21,074
Rifles	13,079	13,175	13,460
Handguns	12,008	12,833	12,917
Miscellaneous	1,214	1,250	1,307
Totals	130,510	132,438	134,027

(ii) At present the RUC is unable to distinguish, from its records, whether the firearms used in crimes have been held legally or illegally. The RUC is, however, currently considering whether it is possible to set up a system which would facilitate the retrieval of such information. The Chief Constable estimates that less than 1 per cent. of these cases would have involved legally held firearms.

The following is a record of cases in which firearms have been used in the last three years:

1993: 1,185 (including 86 crimes involving shotguns)

1994: 963 (including 77 crimes involving shotguns)

1995: 518 (including 73 crimes involving shotguns).

Low Impact Development

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what research he has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned of low impact development in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [2343]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. Martyn Jones, dated 6 November 1996:

Mr. Moss has asked me to reply to your Question about research into low impact development in rural areas.

The Planning Service has neither evaluated nor commissioned any research into low impact development in rural areas.

Amenity Site, Millisle

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when work commenced at the new amenity site at Moss road, Millisle; which agency is the promoter of this scheme; how many objectors there were to this scheme; when the scheme was given planning permission; and if he will make a statement. [2439]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its chief executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 6 November 1996:

Mr. Moss has asked me to reply to your question about the new amenity site at Moss Road, Millisle.

Outline planning permission for a proposed civic amenity site on land between 2 and 32 Moss Road, was granted to Ards Borough Council on 28 September 1995. Four letters of objection were received in response to public advertisement and neighbour

notification. Planning consent to an application for reserved matters was granted on 5 August 1996. The start date for work is a matter for Ards Borough Council as promoter of the scheme.

Day Care Services

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many elderly people attended the statutory day care facilities at (i) Loanda house, Newry and (ii) Millview, Bessbrook, prior to their closure; of these, how many have been assessed as needing day care services; how many have been offered alternative facilities; of these, how many have been unable to avail themselves of the alternative facilities; and for what reasons. [1774]

Mr. Moss: The information requested is as follows:

Loanda House

Twelve elderly people attended Loanda house before it closed. All were assessed as needing day care services and offered alternative services. Two of the 12 have been unable to avail themselves of the offer due to failing health.

Millview (Bessbrook)

Eighteen elderly people attended Millview prior to its closure. Eight were assessed as needing day care services and offered alternative services in Newry. Five refused the offer due to the extra travel involved, one accepted the offer and two have not indicated their decision as yet.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in receipt of disability living allowance have had their awards terminated following an examining medical practitioner's report in each of the past 24 months. [1775]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Alec Wylie. I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Gerry Keenan to Mr. Seamus Mallon, dated 1 November 1996:

Your recent Parliamentary Question on Disability Living Allowance has been passed to Mr Wylie, Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency for reply. As Mr Wylie is on leave, I am replying on his behalf.

You asked how many people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance have had their awards terminated following an Examining Medical Practitioner's (EMP) report in each of the past 24 months. Specific records are not maintained on the actual number of claims which were terminated where an Examining Medical Practitioner's report had been requested. However I can supply information on the number of claims disallowed on review or at renewal stage where an Examining Medical Practitioner's report was considered to be the main evidence on which the decision was based and this is illustrated in the attached table.

I hope this explains the position to you and I would be happy to provide you with any further information you require.

Number of disability living allowance claims disallowed based on an EMP report

Month	Number of EMP visits	Number of claims disallowed on review	Number of claims disallowed at renewal stage	Total disallowed
October 1994	1,804	120	32	152
November 1994	2,177	177	59	236
December 1994	1,481	66	41	107
January 1995	1,890	161	65	226
February 1995	1,894	168	75	243
March 1995	2,024	139	54	193
April 1995	1,581	68	36	104
May 1995	1,655	108	48	156
June 1995	1,598	128	65	193
July 1995	1,079	86	42	128
August 1995	1,551	95	41	136
September 1995	1,831	140	61	201
October 1995	1,861	152	83	235
November 1995	1,616	119	66	185
December 1995	1,161	58	41	99
January 1996	1,397	146	48	194
February 1996	1,089	106	43	149
March 1996	972	77	43	120
April 1996	998	77	25	102
May 1996	1,186	68	26	94
June 1996	953	58	27	85
July 1996	723	66	23	89
August 1996	910	85	29	114
September 1996	793	55	32	87
Total	34,260	2,523	1,105	3,628

Records only indicate the number of disallowances where an EMP report was considered to be the main evidence on which the decision was based. Other evidence such as GP reports etc. could have been held also.

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many appeals against disability living allowance decisions have been heard in each of the past 24 months; and of these how many were (i) allowed, (ii) disallowed and (iii) deferred. [1776]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Alex Wylie. I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Gerry Keenan to Mr. Seamus Mallon, dated 1 November 1996:

Your recent Parliamentary Question on Disability Living Allowance has been passed to the Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency, Mr. Wylie for reply. As he is on leave, I am replying on his behalf.

You asked how many appeals against Disability Living Allowance decisions have been heard in each of the past 24 months; and of these how many were allowed, disallowed or deferred. The information is set out on the attached table. I should point out that the decisions of the Appeal Tribunal are not normally notified to Disability Living Allowance Branch in the month that they are heard. Therefore the figures in column one of the table refer to the month in which the decision was received in the Branch and this is how our statistics are maintained.

I hope this explains the position to you and I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

Disability living allowance appeal decisions in the past 24 months

Month decisions notified to DLA Branch	*Number of tribunal decisions*	*Number disallowed*	*Number allowed*	*Number adjourned*
November 1994	174	97	70	7
December 1994	198	114	84	—
January 1995	247	153	82	12
February 1995	178	102	63	13
March 1995	232	121	94	17
April 1995	243	136	94	13
May 1995	251	136	89	26
June 1995	190	109	69	12
July 1995	227	133	82	12
August 1995	139	87	42	10
September 1995	389	259	124	6
October 1995	257	164	83	10
November 1995	389	252	132	5
December 1995	249	156	88	5
January 1996	345	227	108	10
February 1996	411	258	149	4
March 1996	307	192	104	11
April 1996	279	166	105	8
May 1996	221	136	81	4
June 1996	221	132	77	12
July 1996	214	114	89	11
August 1996	238	170	63	5
September 1996	260	184	69	7
October 1996	176	115	55	6
Total	6,035	3,713	2,096	226

Prisoners (Visitors)

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what financial assistance is available for visits to prisoners by their immediate relatives in respect of (i) travel, (ii) accommodation, (iii) subsistence and (iv) other costs; and if he will give the rates for that assistance where the prison is situated in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* England or Wales. [1777]

Sir John Wheeler: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Northern Ireland Prison Service under its chief executive, Mr. Alan Shannon. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Alan Shannon to Mr. Seamus Mallon, dated 6 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to the Parliamentary Question which you tabled about the availability of financial assistance for visits to prisoners by their immediate relatives, where the prison is situated in Scotland or England and Wales.

Close relatives of prisoners, who qualify for assistance under Social Security regulations, receive the return fare to the prison by the cheapest route for 2 visits every 4 weeks. Payments are made on behalf of the Northern Ireland Prison Service by the Social Security Agency through the claimant's local Social Security Office by means of a giro cheque and travel warrant. Travel is normally by bus, train and ferry; in exceptional circumstances the cost of travel by taxi or air may be met.

In addition to meet the cost of travel, where overnight accommodation and main meals are necessary, the following rates apply:

Bed and breakfast accommodation

£15.00 per night (adult rate)

£10.00 per night (child rate)

Accommodation only

£12.40 per night (adult rate)

£7.40 per night (child rate)

Main meals

£2.60 per meal (adult and child rate)

I hope this is helpful.

Partnership Database

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received in relation to the use of the Northern Ireland partnership database by a support group of the Ulster Unionist party. [1779]

Mr. Ancram: I have not received any representation from a support group of the Ulster Unionist party regarding the use of the Northern Ireland partnership database.

HEALTH

Maternity Care

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money was paid to general practitioners through payments for ensuring the provision of maternity care for the years 1992–93, 1993–94 and 1994–95 by (i) trust, (ii) region and (iii) health authority; and if he will make a statement. [132]

Mr. Malone: Details of the amounts paid by the former family health services authorities to general practitioners for providing maternity medical services in 1992–93, 1993–94 and 1994–95 will be placed in the Library.

Information is not held centrally concerning payments made to general practitioners by NHS trusts or by the former regional health authorities for the provision of maternity care.

Nurses

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses *(a)* entered the profession as students, *(b)* completed their training and *(c)* have left the profession or ceased to practice in each year since 1990. [1111]

Mr. Horam: The information is not centrally available.

Organophosphate Dips

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what liaison there is between his Department, the Department of Defence and the Ministry of Agriculture on the subject of organophosphate dips and their use; and if he will make a statement. [1860]

Mr. Horam: The Government are advised on the safety, quality and efficacy of veterinary medicines by the independent Veterinary Products Committee and the licensing authority, which includes Department of Health Ministers. The continued use of organophosphate sheep dips is kept under review by the VPC and officials of the Department of Health are in regular contact with officials of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate on this matter. My officials are also in regular contact with officials of the Ministry of Defence which has an interest.

In addition, the Baroness Cumberlege, Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health, has had a series of meetings with my hon. Friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Rural GPs (Recruitment)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what initiatives are currently being undertaken to assist the recruitment of general practitioners to rural medical practices; and if he will make a statement. [1741]

Mr. Malone: We are not aware of any particular recruitment difficulties in rural areas. However, there are a number of fees and allowances available to general practitioners in rural areas.

NHS Trusts (VAT)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of restrictions placed by Customs and Excise on *(a)* the ability of NHS bodies to recover VAT retrospectively on contracted-out services on the budgets of NHS trusts and *(b)* the use of external services within the NHS; and what assessment he has made of the losses that will be incurred in respect of these restrictions by NHS trusts in England and Wales. [2325]

Mr. Horam: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise have extended the deadline for national health service bodies to submit retrospective claims for value added tax refunds on contracted out services. There should be no effect on the use of external services. It is not feasible to assess whether any VAT will remain unrecovered.

Body Mass Index Data

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the longitudinal body mass index data for *(a)* adolescents and *(b)* adults by sex in each BMI category for age groups (i) 15, (ii) 18, (iii) 35, (iv) 40 to 59, (v) 45 to 69, (vi) 55 and (vii) 55 to 75 years in each of the last five years. [2189]

Mr. Horam: Data are not available in the form requested. Available data are given in the attached tables.

Annual cross-sectional body mass index data from the health survey for England are shown in table 1. BMI data from the dietary and nutritional survey of British adults are shown in table 2. The most recent body mass index data available on younger school children, collected in 1983, combines both 14 and 15-year-olds. This is also shown in table 2.

Table 1: BMI by age data from the Health Survey for England, 1991–94

Age group	*Sex*	*Year*			
		1991	*1991 and 1992*	*1993*	*1994*
16–24	Male	22.8	23.2	23.4	23.5
	Female	23.1	23.0	23.5	23.5
25–34	Male	24.9	25.0	25.4	25.3
	Female	24.2	24.4	24.6	24.8
35–44	Male	26.3	26.2	26.4	26.4
	Female	25.1	25.0	25.6	25.7
45–54	Male	26.7	26.7	26.8	26.8
	Female	26.9	26.7	26.6	26.3
55–64	Male	26.9	27.0	27.0	27.0
	Female	27.3	27.2	27.2	27.5
65–74	Male	26.4	26.8	26.7	27.0
	Female	26.3	26.5	27.0	27.3
75+	Male	25.7	25.7	25.7	26.5
	Female	25.9	25.8	26.1	25.7

Table 2: Body mass index, by age

Age (years)	*Sex*	*Mean BMI*	*Study*	*Year of fieldwork*
14–15	Male	19.9	The Diets of British School children Department of Health (1989)	1983
	Female	20.7		
16–24	Male	22.9	The Dietary and Nutritional Survey of British Adults Gregory et al (1990)	1986
	Female	22.9		
25–34	Male	24.6		
	Female	23.9		
35–49	Male	25.9		
	Female	24.8		
50–64	Male	25.9		
	Female	26.2		

Walsgrave Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to respond to the private finance initiative proposals relating to the Walsgrave Hospitals NHS trust. [2276]

Mr. Horam: Walsgrave Hospitals national health service trust is currently negotiating the proposed private finance initiative scheme with its preferred bidder. A full business case is being prepared by the trust and a decision will be taken on the scheme when this is submitted.

NHS Pensions (Practice Nurses)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to include practice nurses in the NHS pension scheme; and if he will make a statement. [2042]

Mr. Malone: Opening up the national health service pension scheme to general practitioner practice staff is under consideration.

Maintenance Work

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current backlog of maintenance work in the NHS. [2794]

Mr. Horam: The current backlog maintenance estimate for the national health service for 1995–96 is £2.41 billion, which compares with £2.32 billion for 1994–95. This figure includes estimated costs for maintenance on all properties in the NHS due to be replaced, not used for patient care, awaiting planned preventative maintenance and awaiting disposal. They also include an element for meeting statutory and safety standards.

Spongiform Encephalopathies

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish his plans for research concerning BSE. [188]

Mr. Horam: A strategy for the centrally directed programme of research into the human health aspects of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, which the Secretary of State announced on 25 March, will be published shortly.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what potential methods of treatment are being *(a)* planned and *(b)* evaluated in respect of human equivalents to BSE. [189]

Mr. Horam: We need to improve our understanding of the nature of the agent which causes spongiform encephalopathies before we are able to investigate possible methods of treatment. This will be a high priority in our centrally directed programme of research.

Medical Research Council

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations he has had with the MRC in the last 12 months over its future priorities for medical research; and if he will make a statement. [1399]

Mr. Malone: The Department's Chief Medical Officer and Director of Research and Development are members of the Medical Research Council. In addition, officials from the Department have served on a number of MRC committees and met with MRC officials on a number of occasions in the past 12 months as part of the terms of the concordat which exists between the Health Departments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the MRC. A wide range of future priorities for medical and health services research have been covered in these discussions.

Neurodegenerative Diseases

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will consult the Alzheimer's Disease Society over his Department's future plans for promoting of research into Alzheimer's disease; and if he will make a statement. [1397]

Mr. Burns: The policy research programme supports policy and operational strategy in the Department. We aim to take into account the views of a wide range of interested groups, such as the Alzheimer's Disease Society, in determining future research specifically into Alzheimer's disease under the programme.

Mr. Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish details of research and development projects in the NHS focusing on Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases. [1400]

Mr. Burns: The Department runs two separate research programmes: the policy research programme and the national health service research and development programme. The latest available information on research being carried out under the policy research programme is contained in "The Centrally Commissioned Research Programme: Commissions in 1994–95", copies of which are placed in the Library.

The NHS research and development programme consists of a number of national programmes and regional research activity. The mental health programme includes a project examining the development of screening tests for dementia and depression in ethnic elders; it also includes a project which is examining dementia information in order to develop a model to establish the number of people in a given population needing specific dementia services. Information is not available centrally on all the research projects being undertaken as part of the regional programme. The projects on which information is available centrally include a study of the patterns and consequences of semantic memory impairment in Alzheimer's disease; a community based control study of dementias; a study of neuronal structure in ageing and

Alzheimer's based dementia; and cognitive decline, dementia and ageing in people with Down's syndrome: study of the risk factors and care needs.

Eye Tests

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what response he will be making to the call by the Royal National Institute for the Blind for the restoration of free eye tests to people over 60 years old and a public awareness campaign on the importance of regular testing for others; and if he will make a statement. [1401]

Mr. Malone: We have already informed the Royal National Institute for the Blind that we would be happy to co-operate with it in a campaign to promote the benefits of regular sight tests. We are not planning to extend the criteria for free national health service sight tests. Existing provisions for people on low incomes or at risk of eye diseases to receive free sight tests, where necessary through an optometrist making a home visit, are responsive to the needs of older people.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the current policy for accepting patients from Powys at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital. [1766]

Mr. Horam: The treatment of patients from Powys at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital national health service trust is a local contracting issue between the trust, Dyfed-Powys health authority and general practitioner fundholders.

SCOTLAND

Construction Industry (Timber)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to promote the greater use of timber in the construction industry; and if he will make a statement. [1758]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given today by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment.

Forestry

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for increased financial provision in respect of proposals to increase the forest cover in the United Kingdom; what percentage of this provision is planned to be spent before May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [1850]

Mr. Kynoch: We have made provision for the payment of £40 million in woodland grants to the private sector in Britain in the current financial year. This will increase to £42 million next year. Forestry in Northern Ireland is a matter for my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Departmental Achievements

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total amount of time involved on the part of civil servants within his Department in preparing and issuing his letter of 24 October, listing departmental achievements; and if he will make a statement. [1951]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Preparing and issuing the letter of 24 October was part of the normal duties of a number of civil servants, and the time spent by them on it cannot be separately identified. The achievements it outlined are the result of 17 years' hard work.

Prison Officers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many prison officers in post on or before 30 September 1987 took early retirement on 24 March 1995 in accordance with Scottish Prison Service staff circular no. 58/94; and under what rules and on what basis retirement benefits provided by the compensation schemes were calculated, awarded and put into payment to the prison officers when they retired under the terms of the circular. [1614]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by the Scottish Prison Service. I have asked its chief executive, Mr. E. W. Frizzell, to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from E. W. Frizzell to Mr. Alex Salmond, dated 6 November 1996:

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton has asked me to reply to your question about the number of prison officers who took early retirement in March 1995, and under what rules.

The early retirement scheme was introduced to assist the restructuring of the Scottish Prison Service which required the generation of vacancies at all grades over the following few years. The Scheme was announced to the field under Staff Circular No. 58/94 and applications were sought from staff who would be aged 50 or over at 1 January 1995, but who had not reached their minimum retirement age.

The number of prison officers in post on or before 30 September 1987 who took early retirement on 24 March 1995 was 142. The compulsory early retirement benefits which accompanied these exits were awarded and paid under the Rules of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme.

Salmon Farming

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he is taking to protect and promote the Scottish and United Kingdom salmon farming industry; and if he will make a statement. [528]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: Salmon farming is important to the highlands and islands of Scotland and the Government are committed to supporting the industry. To this end, I have been working closely with the Scottish industry, the European Commission, and the Governments of Norway and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that every route to a more stable farmed salmon market is fully explored.

Given the history of disruption in this sector, I encouraged the industry to put its anti-dumping and subsidy complaints to the European Commission for investigation, officials having lent technical assistance in their preparation. If there is clear and convincing evidence that the complaints are justified, the industry has been assured of Government backing for firm action to be taken.

I have arranged to meet the new Norwegian Minister on 25 November. I will encourage him to review the position, including the continuation and effectiveness of the Norwegian Government feed quota measures.

Nursery Vouchers

Mrs. Liddell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many nursery places have been made available to four-year-olds in *(a)* public, *(b)* private and *(c)* voluntary sectors in each of the four piloting areas since the start of the voucher pilot scheme; and how many of these are new places. [1830]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* The number of places offered by pre-school centres is not held centrally. On the basis of returns for the first half of the first term, the number of children currently receiving voucher supported pre-school education in each of the pilot areas, broken down by type of provider, is as follows:

Provider	*Argyll and Bute*	*East Renfrewshire*	*Highland*	*North Ayrshire*	*Total*
Local authority	183	621	270	884	1,958
Private and voluntary[1]	184	340	120	664	1,308
Independent schools	0	22	0	0	22
Totals	367	983	390	1,548	[2]3,288

[1] An accurate breakdown between children attending voluntary and private sector centres is not held centrally.
[2] To avoid double counting, these figures excludes those cases (c120) where the same child receives education at more than one centre.

Many new places have been created by the voucher system in the pilots—42 new local authority centres providing pre-school education for 884 voucher-bearing children have been opened, and many of the 21 existing local authority centres have expanded their provision. Moreover, 88 centres in the voluntary and private sectors, providing for over 1,300 voucher-bearing children, have received educational quality accreditation for the first time ever. The evaluation team from Stirling university, when it has reported, any throw additional light on the extent and distribution of expansion directly attributable to the voucher initiative.

Low Impact Development

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what research he has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned of low impact development in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [2344]

Mr. Kynoch: The Scottish Office has not evaluated or commissioned any research specifically on the subject of low impact development in rural areas. However, the Scottish Office provides a range of guidance, advice and support designed to encourage sustainable development in rural areas which benefits local residents.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [2475]

Mr. Kynoch: The Scottish Office is currently consulting on the following proposal for which the deregulation order-making power may be used:

The repeal of the Methylated Spirits (Sale by Retail) (Scotland) Act 1937.

The timing of any reference to the Deregulation Committee will depend on the outcome of consultation.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages or disadvantages of such a repeal. [2470]

Mr. Kynoch: The Scottish Office intends to revoke the Surface Waters (Classification) (Scotland) Regulations 1990 before the end of 1996.

Since the regulations are being revoked, a cost compliance assessment is not required. They are being replaced by the Surface Waters (Abstraction for Drinking Water) (Classification) (Scotland) Regulations 1996, in respect of which a compliance cost assessment is being prepared.

Nurses

Mr. Chisholm: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many nurses *(a)* entered the profession as students, *(b)* completed their training and *(c)* have left the profession or ceased to practice in each year since 1990. [2426]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested in parts *(a)* and *(b)* is shown in the table. The information requested in part *(c)* is not held centrally and would have to be obtained from individual employers both within and outwith the NHS.

Fiscal year	*(a) Number entering training during specified year*	*(b) Number completing training during specified year*
1990–91	2,983	2,641
1991–92	2,230	2,522
1992–93	2,380	2,492
1993–94	2,404	2,356
1994–95	2,196	2,069
1995–96	2,213	1,808

Source:
NBS annual reports 1990–91 to 1992–93.
NBS statistical supplement to annual report 1993–94 to 1995–96.

Value Added Tax

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what will be the impact on local authority contracted-out

services of the restrictions placed by Customs and Excise on the ability of organisations to recover VAT retrospectively; and if he will make a statement. [2621]

Mr. Kynoch: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him yesterday.

Rough Sleepers Initiative

Mr. Chisholm: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Scottish Office research on a rough sleepers initiative will be published; and when he will initiate measures arising from the conclusions of the research. [2474]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The report on this research study, which was commissioned by the Scottish Office and Scottish Homes from the university of Wales to investigate the prevalence of rooflessness, is currently being finalised. The results of the research will be given careful consideration.

Primary Pupils

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what percentage of children aged five, six and seven years were in classes of 31 or more in 1995 and provisionally for 1996 *(a)* per authority and *(b)* in Scotland as a whole. [2476]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: Statistics on class size are collected biennially. The available information, which relates to pupils in P1, P2 and P3 single stage classes and P1/P2 and P2/P3 composite stage classes, as at September 1995, is given below.

P1 to P3 pupils in classes of 31 or more, as at September [1] 1995

Education authority[2]	*Number of pupils*	*Percentage of pupils*
Scotland	31,019	17.7
Borders	254	8.0
Central	1,991	21.2
Dumfries and Galloway	731	17.0
Fife	1,366	11.0
Grampian	2,568	14.6
Highland	409	6.6
Lothian	6,372	25.0
Strathclyde	14,698	17.9
Tayside	2,568	20.3
Orkney	—	—
Shetland	31	4.1
Western Isles	31	6.0

[1] Excludes pupils in P3/P4 composite classes and multi-stage classes.
[2] Includes grant-aided and self-governing schools.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what percentage of primary school children were in classes of 31 or more for each year since 1990 *(a)* per authority and *(b)* in Scotland. [2477]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: Statistics on class size are collected biennially. The available information is given in the table.

Primary pupils in classes of 31 or more, as at September 1991, 1993 and [1] 1995

	As at September					
	1991		*1993*		*1995*	
Education authority[2]	*Number of pupils*	*Percentage of pupils*	*Number of pupils*	*Percentage of pupils*	*Number of pupils*	*Percentage of pupils*
Scotland	72,638	16.5	75,286	17.2	79,655	18.1
Borders	448	5.3	544	6.3	857	9.8
Central	3,954	16.9	3,972	17.1	4,612	19.8
Dumfries and Galloway	2,137	16.8	2,052	16.0	2,016	15.6
Fife	4,944	15.9	5,387	17.3	4,704	15.2
Grampian	6,900	15.6	6,556	14.6	7,138	15.8
Highland	1,503	7.7	1,996	10.4	1,795	9.4
Lothian	11,318	20.1	11,885	20.7	13,909	23.4
Strathclyde	34,697	16.8	35,104	17.4	37,403	18.6
Tayside	6,580	20.3	7,536	23.1	7,032	21.5
Orkney	157	8.7	64	3.5	33	1.8
Shetland	—	—	—	—	31	1.4
Western isles	—	—	190	7.2	125	4.8

[1] Excludes pupils in P3/P4 composite classes and multi-stage classes.
[2] Includes grant aided and self-governing schools.

Health Capital Expenditure

Mr. Chisholm: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland from which budget he took the £30 million of health capital expenditure announced on 9 October 1996. [2479]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The distribution of £30 million to enable NHS trusts in Scotland to carry out a number of capital projects will be funded from the capital budget.

Dounreay Nuclear Plant

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what revisions have taken place to official publications of health and safety reports covering the activities of the Dounreay nuclear plant since 1975; and if he will make a statement. [2364]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* I have been asked to reply.

I am assured by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority that, apart from updating the contents, the only revisions made to Dounreay health and safety reports prior to their formal issue were to remove commercially sensitive data and information that could compromise the security of nuclear materials.

Landed Estates

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he is taking to monitor the market in the sale of landed estates, and if he will make a statement. [530]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The Government do not monitor the market in the sale of landed estates. Information on sales of agricultural land in Scotland over 5 hectares is obtained for statistical purposes to allow estimates to be made of the overall value of land and buildings used for agriculture in Scotland.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organic Food

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what quantity of organic food has been imported into the United Kingdom for each year since 1992; what percentage these imports constitute of the total amount of organic produce sold each year in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [2356]

Mr. Boswell: Specific figures for imports of organic food are not collected. Estimates made several years ago with the co-operation of several large supermarket chains indicated that about three-quarters of organic food on sale in those shops was imported.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for each year since 1994 *(a)* the estimated number of organic farms or holdings in England, *(b)* what administrative procedures are required for the acquisition of money under the organic aid scheme, *(c)* how much money was earmarked for the organic aid scheme and *(d)* what percentage of the money annually earmarked has now been received by farmers for that year; and if he will make a statement. [2327]

Mr. Boswell: (a) The total area on which organic methods were practised in England as at February 1995 was 21,896 hectares. This had increased to 24,543 hectares by the end of December 1995. Currently there are 688 registered organic holdings in England representing an area of 25,993 hectares. Details of the number of organic farms/holdings in England—as opposed to the UK—are not available for earlier years.

(b) To obtain organic aid a farmer must register the land in a conversion with the UK Register of Organic Food Standards, (UKROFS), or a body approved by UKROFS, and undertake to convert to organic agriculture in accordance with the rules of the scheme and UKROFS organic production standards.

(c) At the time of its launch in August 1994, budgetary provision for the organic aid scheme in England was set at £0.8 million for 1994–95 rising to £1.5 million in 1995–96 and 1996–97. Scheme budgets are constantly revised in the light of scheme uptake and provision for 1996–97 is now £455,000.

(d) For 1994–95 and 1995–96, 3.3 per cent. and 17.4 per cent. respectively of the original budgets were actually paid to farmers. For 1996–97, our current forecast show that about 89 per cent. of the revised budget will be paid to farmers by the end of this financial year.

Our research shows that the organic aid available should be sufficient to attract a greater number of applicants, but it is apparent that aid rates are not the only factor which determines whether a farmer will go organic. We believe lack of knowledge is a major reason and I was therefore pleased to launch the organic conversion information service last July. The service provides a telephone helpline and a free advisory visits to would be organic farmers. Interest has been strong and we hope that more farmers will be encouraged to convert as a result of this initiative.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries from which the United Kingdom imports organic food stating for each the *(a)* tonnage and *(b)* relative percentage of overall organic food imports that it constitutes; and if he will make a sttaement. [2351]

Mr. Boswell: Specific figures for imports of organic food are not collected. The UK Register of Organic Food Standards grants authorisations for the sale, as organic, of food from countries outside the European Community. In the past 12 months, authorisations have been granted with respect to the following countries: Chile, two authorisations; Egypt; Ghana; Slovakia; South Africa; Turkey; and USA, four authorisations.

Authorisations are not required for countries of the European Community and for the following countries deemed to operate standards equivalent to those of the EC: Argentina, Australia, Hungary, Israel, Switzerland.

Pesticides (Potatoes)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what problems over the last 12 months have been reported to his Department with regard to the development of resistance in the pests affecting potatoes to the pesticides used; and if he will make a statement regarding the research his Department is commissioning or evaluating to rectify *(a)* these and *(b)* other cases of pests developing a resistance to specific agrochemical applications. [2320]

Mrs. Browning: Recent reports of resistance problems in pest control on potatoes have related to outbreaks of the peach-potato aphid, Myzus persicae. One resistant strain is well known and can be controlled by insecticides containing pirimicarb. A new resistance mechanism emerged in late summer 1996 in aphids established in parts of Lincolnshire.

MAFF has agreed specific work on the monitoring and management of insecticide resistance in Myzus persicae and is conducting a continuing programme of research

projects on identifying and combating pest resistance at a cost of about £1 million per year.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what numbers of sheep consigned for export during *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September were identified using a mark issued by the local divisional veterinary manager. [1984]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 4 November 1996]:* Figures collated from the computerised animal movements—Animo—database indicated that 68,967, 83,628 and 43,405 sheep were certified for export to other EU member states in July, August and September 1996 respectively. The Sheep and Goats (Records, Identification and Movement) Order 1996 lays down rules for the marking and identification of exported sheep. The flockmark part of the identification mark of each animal would have been allocated by the divisional veterinary manager, but the full identification mark would have included an individual animal number which was not.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what surveys have been undertaken, or are to be performed, to identify the incidence of BSE brain disease among cattle overtly healthy at slaughter. [826]

Mrs. Browning: No survey has been carried out to identify the incidence of BSE among overtly healthy cattle at slaughter. Recognisable changes in the central nervous tissue of BSE—infected animals only occur close to the onset of clinical disease, and this would severely limit the efficiency of such a survey using current diagnostic tests, particularly as the majority of cattle killed for human consumption historically, and all so killed currently, are under 30 months of age, while the average age at clinical onset is five years.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the number of confirmed BSE cases in each year since 1993 for *(a)* Northern Ireland, *(b)* the Isle of Man, *(c)* Jersey and *(d)* Guernsey. [821]

Mrs. Browning: As at 21 October 1996, the numbers of confirmed cases in each year since 1993 for *(a)* Northern Ireland, Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey are:

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*[1]1996*
Guernsey	115	69	44	[3]30
Jersey	35	22	10	8
Northern Ireland	487	363	170	74
Isle of Man	111	53	32	[3]10

[1] Data incomplete.

[2] Prior to 1993 all cases were confirmed by laboratory examination. Between 1993 and 1995 only born after banned feedstuffs cases were confirmed by laboratory examination; all other cases were confirmed on the basis of clinical diagnosis. From 1996 all cases are being confirmed on the basis of clinical diagnosis.

[3] First three cases on a holding confirmed by laboratory examination, subsequent cases confirmed on the basis of clinical signs.

Mr. Hinchcliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the age distribution of the dams of those cattle which developed BSE during each year from 1989 to 1996. [846]

Mrs. Browning: It is not possible without disproportionate costs to give the information requested.

Mr. Hinchcliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the continuing employment of the main mathematician working on the subject of BSE epidemiology at the Veterinary Laboratories Agency. [847]

Mrs. Browning: Staff in the epidemiology department at the VLA include epidemiologists, statisticians and computer programmers. All staff employed by the agency are employed under the civil service standard terms and conditions. Scientists at the VLA are at the forefront of research in BSE and I am pleased to acknowledge their achievements and commitment.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list each method of disposal that is *(a)* permitted and *(b)* currently in operation for (i) meat and bonemeal, (ii) tallow and (iii) each other waste product produced from cattle slaughtered under the 30-month scheme. [1453]

Mr. Douglas Hogg *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Commission regulation 716/96 requires that the carcases of cattle purchased under the over-30-month scheme—OTMS— are disposed of by incineration or rendered and destroyed. Meat and bonemeal and tallow produced from rendered OTMS carcases is being stored pending destruction by the best practicable environmental option, for example, incineration or burning for energy recovery at power stations.

The only other waste products from the slaughter of OTMS cattle are blood and gut contents. These can be spread on agricultural land as a fertiliser for the benefit of agriculture or ecological improvement. It is a recovery operation for the purposes of the amended EC framework directive on waste and is controlled under part II of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994. Where blood is not spread on land in this way, it is discharged to foul sewer which is permitted subject to consents issued under the Water Industry Act 1991.

The independent Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, which advises Ministers on bovine spongiform encephalopathy, has considered the current and proposed methods of disposing of cattle waste and concluded that they are safe. Specifically, in relation to the spreading of blood and gut contents on land, it concluded that there was no reason to recommend that this practice should be prohibited or thought to be inadvisable.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to change the formula for financial compensation for BSE cattle introduced on 1 April 1994 in order to encourage the future reporting of such animals. [820]

Mrs. Browning: None. We have no evidence of any under-reporting. As farmers receive the full market value of their animals in compensation, there is no incentive for breaking the law by not reporting BSE suspects.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the dates of birth and slaughter of each offspring succumbing to BSE during the period of the vertical transfer experiment outlined in the *Official Report*, 12 December 1994, columns *523–24*, with further information provided by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee on 1 August; and which animal was in the test or control group. [822]

Mrs. Browning: The cohort study in maternal transmission will be complete in early 1997. The full results of that study are expected to be available by mid-1997 and will provide the information requested.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will provide the monthly figures for suspected and confirmed BSE cases in the United Kingdom during 1996. [823]

Mrs. Browning: As at 29 October 1996, the numbers of suspect cases reported by month, and the confirmations corresponding to those suspects for the UK are as follows:

	Cases reported	*Cases confirmed*[1]
January	1,428	1,114
February	1,276	914
March	1,362	924
April	956	604
May	972	568
June	698	434
July	780	506
August	761	419
September	729	182
October	615	2

[1] These data are incomplete because of the time lapse between report and confirmation.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what experiments are in progress aimed at identifying and quantifying the possible acquisition of BSE via pastures or buildings. [824]

Mrs. Browning: The evidence on within-herd incidence of BSE which rose to a peak of 2.7 per cent. in 1992 and has subsequently declined, indicates that horizontal transmission is not occurring at a significant level. The limits of sensitivity of current assays for infectivity make it difficult to design experiments to address this concern directly, by looking, for example, for infectivity on pasture or surfaces. Any research proposals submitted for funding in this area will be assessed according to their scientific merit.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what experiments have been performed, or are in progress, to test whether BSE infectivity might be transferred from milk or blood of BSE-infected cattle to calves from a BSE-free source; and if he will give details of the results to date. [825]

Mrs. Browning: In experimentally challenged cattle which were fed a large quantity—100 g—of BSE brain from clinical cases, infectivity was only detectable in the distal ileum six months after challenge. Experiments have also been carried out in which tissues taken from animals clinically affected with BSE were injected into susceptible mice. Infectivity is detected if the mice succumb to a BSE-like disease. The only tissues found in this test to have any BSE infectivity in them are the brain, spinal cord and retina of the eye.

No infectivity has been detected in 47 other tissues from clinically affected cattle, including blood and milk using bioassay in mice.

Details of the latest research on milk were given in paragraph 23 and appendix 5 of the November 1995 progress report, a copy of which was placed in the House Library.

Permaculture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimates he has made of the number of farms or holdings operating on permaculture principles; and if he will make a statement. [2346]

Mr. Boswell: No estimate has been made of the number of farms or holdings operating on permaculture principles.

Beef (Emergency Control) Order 1996

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions have been initiated against individuals claimed to be flouting article 2 of the Beef (Emergency Control) Order 1996—statutory instrument 1996/961—and the subsequent amendments. [816]

Mrs. Browning: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Small Beef Producers

Mr. Hardy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what further action he plans to take to secure the continued operation of smaller beef producers; and what estimate he has made of the number of such farmers who still face serious difficulties. [2338]

Mr. Baldry: The effects of the current depressed market for beef cattle will be felt by beef producers in enterprises of all sizes. We have never subscribed to the view, often argued by the Commission and other EU member states, that support for agriculture should be concentrated on small family farms at the expense of larger enterprises. All farms will, however, benefit from the £235 million which is being made available from EU and Exchequer funds to support the incomes of beef producers.

Beef Consumption

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to restrict the availability for human consumption of dried, canned or frozen beef from cattle over 30 months of age and slaughtered before 29 March. [827]

Mrs. Browning: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much beef from animals aged over 30 months has been consumed for personal use since 29 March. [817]

Mrs. Browning: The Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No.2) Regulations 1996, SI 1996 No. 2097, as amended, prohibit the sale for human consumption of any meat derived from bovine animals aged over 30 months and slaughtered on or after 29 March, save for that from countries specified in the regulations where the Government are satisfied we can import beef without risk, and from animals slaughtered for human consumption under the beef assurance scheme. It has, however, been possible for the meat from bovine animals aged over 30 months to be returned for personal consumption by their owners—the so called "private kill" provision. Such meat is not permitted to be sold or made available in circumstances equivalent to retail sale. We have no information on the amount of meat that may have been consumed in this way, but believe that only a small number of animals are involved. We are currently considering proposals for tightening the controls on private kills.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what legislation prevents the use of beef in processed food for human consumption from animals aged over 30 months deposited in intervention cold store before 29 March. [818]

Mrs. Browning: Commission regulation 1757/96 of 10 September authorised the removal from intervention store, with a view to incineration, of all beef held in intervention on 27 March.

Bovines

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the *(a)* average age and *(b)* range of (i) beef and (ii) dairy cattle present in the bovine population in each year between 1984 and 1996. [681]

Mrs. Browning: Statistics on the numbers of cattle are contained in "The Digest of Agricultural Census Statistics". The latest edition, 1995, provides data up to 1995 and is available from the Library of the House. Totals for dairy and beef herds are shown. It is not possible to give an average age for cattle although age categories are shown in the tables. Provisional results for the 1996 agricultural census are available in separate statistical notices for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Gelatine

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what weight of gelatine derived entirely or partly from bovine sources was exported in each month of 1996. [819]

Mrs. Browning: Data on the export of gelatine derived entirely or partly from bovine sources are not separately identifiable. Provisional figures for exports of total gelatine for the first six months of 1996 as recorded in the overseas trade statistics are as follows:

January: 643 tonnes
February: 589 tonnes
March: 525 tonnes
April: 828 tonnes
May: 547 tonnes
June: 492 tonnes.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Business Support (South-West)

23. **Mr. Mark Robinson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what support his Department is giving to businesses located in the south-west. [551]

Mr. Greg Knight: My Department provides a wide range of services for businesses in the south-west, including business links and two regional supply offices. In addition, since April 1995 £12.7 million of regional selective assistance has been offered to companies in the region generating over £84 million worth of investment and 2,655 jobs.

The Government have also promoted a new south-west competitiveness network aimed at improving a considerable number of factors influencing the international competitiveness of business in the region. The new local competitiveness budget will also increase the extent to which key business support services, funded by the Government, are designed and delivered within the region.

Inward Investment

24. **Mr. John Marshall:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about inward investment in the United Kingdom. [552]

Mr. Greg Knight: In 1995–96 my Department's Invest in Britain Bureau recorded 477 decisions to locate in the UK involving over 96,000 associated jobs. The UK is the No. 1 location in the European Union for investment from Japan, the US and Korea. That is an excellent performance and a vote of confidence in the strength of our economy and the skills of our work force.

Renewable Energy Schemes

25. **Mr. Pickthall:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has for changes to subsidies for renewable energy schemes. [553]

Mr. Page: On 2 November 1995, I announced my proposals for a fourth Renewables Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation Order for approximately 400 to 500 MW of new capacity. I expect to make the order in spring next year.

The Government hope that it will be possible to announce proposals for a fifth order in 1997, to come into effect in 1998. However, before that there will be a review of the NFFO process.

Water Industry

26. **Mrs. Helen Jackson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the occasions on which the Monopolies and Mergers Commission has been asked to intervene in the water industry in the last two years. [554]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Four mergers involving water companies have been referred to the MMC in the last two years. During the same period, the Director General of Water Services has made two price control references.

The merger references were:

Lyonnaise des Eaux/Northumbrian Water

General Utilities and SAUR Water Services/Mid Kent Holdings (inquiry still in progress)

Wessex Water/South West Water

Severn Trent/South West Water

The price control references were:

Portsmouth Water plc

South West Water Services Ltd.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he *(a)* has taken and *(b)* intends to take to ensure that SAUR and Société Générale des Eaux comply with the undertakings made in 1991 following the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's review of Mid Kent Water; and what discussions he has had with regulators concerning the difficulties arising from regulating subsidiaries of multinational or conglomerate companies. [2308]

Mr. Taylor: When, in May, my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade referred the proposed acquisition of Mid Kent by General Utilities and SAUR to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, he concluded that it would not be appropriate to exercise his discretion at that stage to bring proceedings against General Utilities in relation to the undertakings given by it in 1991. He noted, however, that those undertakings remained in force. He decided to keep the position under review and, in particular, to consider further the options open to him in respect of the undertakings once he had received the report of the MMC. That remains the position. The MMC must report to the President by 9 December 1996.

It is for those issuing and enforcing licences—normally the sectoral regulator—to consider any specific issues relating to the regulation of subsidiaries. This subject has however arisen in the context of mergers in the electricity and water industries where, on a number of occasions, companies have given assurances to my right hon. Friend that they will agree to appropriate licence amendments in order to address regulatory concerns of the relevant director general.

In relation to telecommunications, where my Department acts as the licensing authority, a number of conditions in licences under the Telecommunications Act 1984 govern relations between the licensee and other parts of its corporate group. We consult with the Director General of Telecommunications on the terms of these, as of other, conditions.

Employment Regeneration

27. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what new steps he intends to take to regenerate employment in former coal mining areas. [555]

Mr. Page: My right hon. Friend the then President of the Board of Trade announced a package of measures totalling £200 million to help areas affected by pit closures. This framework of regeneration measures is now in place in all areas and major projects are under way.

Business Failures

28. **Mrs. Bridget Prentice:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is *(a)* the current monthly rate of business failures and *(b)* the total number of business failures since April 1992. [556]

Mr. John M. Taylor: In the third quarter of 1996 there were, on a seasonally adjusted basis, 1,369 compulsory liquidations, 2,054 creditors' voluntary liquidations and 6,657 bankruptcy orders.

Since the beginning of April 1992 there were, on a seasonally adjusted basis, 31,691 compulsory liquidations, 49,090 creditors' voluntary liquidations and 141,607 bankruptcy orders.

Ceramics Industry

29. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the ceramics industry. [557]

Mr. Greg Knight: The UK ceramics industry has a distinguished history of achievement both at home and overseas and is rightly recognised as a world-wide centre of excellence for materials and technology.

However, a changing world environment and intensified competition pose new challenges which must be overcome if the UK is to improve and maintain its performance. To this end, the Government are working in partnership with the sector via channels such as the tableware strategy group to address specific competitiveness issues crucial in maintaining and building on the success of the industry.

Aerospace Industry

30. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions his Department has held in the last year in respect of research and development in the United Kingdom in the aerospace industry. [559]

Mr. Greg Knight: My Department has held a wide range of discussions in the last year in respect of research and development in the United Kingdom aerospace industry. These discussions include: ministerial meetings with the Society of British Aerospace Companies and individual companies, meetings involving the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and the Technology Foresight Defence and Aerospace Panel, discussions with the Ministry of Defence and Defence Research Agency and discussions with companies about research and development projects under the Department's civil aircraft research and demonstration programme.

Nuclear Safety

31. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he next intends to visit Dounreay to discuss issues relating to nuclear safety. [560]

Mr. Page: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has no plans to visit Dounreay.

Far East

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he next plans to visit the far east to discuss bilateral trade; and if he will make a statement. [546]

Mr. Lang: Members of the Government have been regular visitors to the far east in support of our exporters, and to encourage further trade and investment with this dynamic region. I have visited the region three times this year accompanied by more than 200 British business men. I have no further plans to visit in the immediate future on matters of bilateral trade, although I shall lead the UK Delegation to the Singapore ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation in December.

Balance of Payments

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the President of the Board of Trade in which years since 1979 the UK recorded a surplus in the balance of payments current account. [550]

Mr. Lang: The current account was in surplus in each of the years between 1980 and 1985. In the second quarter of 1996 the current account was in surplus by the largest amount for over nine years.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the average pump price of *(a)* four-star petrol and *(b)* unleaded petrol for each year since 1990. [2663]

Mr. Page: The average annual pump prices of four star and premium unleaded petrol for the years 1990 to 1995, and the first nine months of 1996, including all taxes, are given in the table.

Average UK retail prices of four star and premium unleaded petrol for the years 1990 to 1996 in cash terms, including all taxes, in pence per litre

	Four star petrol	*Premium unleaded petrol*
1990	44.87	42.03
1991	48.48	45.07
1992	50.28	46.07
1993	54.12	49.44
1994	56.87	51.58
1995	59.75	53.77
1996[1]	60.59	55.44

[1] Average for 1996 relates to the period from January to September, inclusive, only.

Environmental Standards

Mr. Bennett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his policy in respect of the Singapore conference on trade and the environment in respect of accommodating environmental good practice within World Trade Organisation rules. [539]

Mr. Greg Knight: The Singapore ministerial meeting in December will be an important first opportunity to take stock of the work of the World Trade Organisation's committee on trade and environment. The Government continue to support the EU's work in this committee—for example, in its efforts to clarify the relationship between multilateral environmental agreements and World Trade Organisation rules. The Government support further work by the committee after the Singapore ministerial conference.

Brazilian Mahogany

Mr. Chris Davies: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate he has made of the volume of Brazilian mahogany to be imported into the United Kingdom over the next 12 months. [2114]

Mr. Lang: The data on which to base such a forecast is not available.

Mr. Davies: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his policy with regard to the import of Brazilian mahogany into the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [2115]

Mr. Lang: The Government consider that it is generally better to promote a policy of sustainable forest management rather than to impose trade bans on imported timber. The convention on international trade in endangered species prohibits commercial trade in 800 animal and plant species and controls it in a further 25,000 cases. Current scientific evidence does not justify a complete ban on imports of Brazilian mahogany. However, at the last CITES conference in November 1994 the UK supported a proposal to add it to appendix II of the convention which would have subjected it to controls. Although this proposal was not agreed, a number of countries where the species occurs announced that they would list Brazilian mahogany in appendix III. Accordingly, with effect from 16 November 1995 those countries have had to issue CITES permits to confirm that export of Brazilian mahogany is not detrimental to the species; other countries where the species occurs have had to issue certificates to confirm that their exports have not originated in countries with the appendix III listing; and permits to import the species into the UK have been required.

Social Chapter and Minimum Wage

Mr. Dunn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what recent representations he has received from the manufacturing sector in respect of the implications of the social chapter and the minimum wage. [525]

Mr. Lang: My colleagues and I continue to receive representations on the social chapter and a national minimum wage during our contacts with industry. The overwhelming view is that the social chapter and a national minimum wage would seriously damage competitiveness and employment.

Business Links

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many companies have been assisted by Business Link. [541]

Mr. Page: The number of different businesses using Business Link nearly doubled between July 1995 and June 1996 from 56,513 different businesses using Business Link at least once in the first quarter from July to September 1995 to 107,159 doing so in the quarter from

April to June 1996. This means that over 8,200 different businesses are now using Business Link each week. The figures for the final quarter are based on returns from 79 Business Link partnerships out of the 81 that were operational in this period.

Business Forms and Surveys

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of business forms and surveys have been abolished over the last 10 years. [2568]

Mr. Page: Figures prior to 1993 could only be produced at disproportionate cost. Since 1 April 1993, DTI and its executive agencies have reduced the number of separate business forms and survey forms by 19 per cent.—expected total for 1996–97. This reduction represents more than 500,000 fewer forms issued.

Coal Stocks

Mr. Hardy: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his estimate of the current level of coal stocks held by the coal and electricity generating industries; and what was the equivalent figure at the same period in *(a)* 1988, *(b)* 1990, *(c)* 1992 and *(d)* 1994. [2339]

Mr. Page: According to information provided to my Department by the coal and electricity generating industries, the level of stocks at the end of August 1996 and at the same period in 1988, 1990, 1992 and 1994 are as follows:

Thousand tonnes

	Coal industry stocks	*Electricity industry stocks*
August 1996	5,125	7,903
August 1994	13,003	19,940
August 1992	13,649	33,202
August 1990	7,983	28,871
August 1988	6,005	26,938

Source:
"Energy Trends."

Fireworks

Mr. Hawksley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action he took to address issues related to fireworks in October. [2625]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I have undertaken a safety awareness campaign, consisting of 5 million safety advice leaflets distributed to the point of sale, as well as thousands of leaflets advising display organisers and retailers about handling fireworks. National television adverts and posters have also been used to reinforce the safety messages, and a safety video has been made available on request to primary schools.

In addition, my Department is undertaking a review of the controls on fireworks.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the cost effects of the millennium date change on the computer systems operated by his Department. [2611]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* My Department commissioned a study earlier this year to assess the effects of the millennium date change on the administrative computer system that it operates. The resulting report estimated that the necessary work would cost approximately £2.7 million. This cost excludes the replacement of non-compliant hardware and software which will be life-expired for other reasons. It also excludes the cost of work undertaken on computer systems operated by next steps agencies, which have their own programmes of work in respect of the millennium date change.

Paper and Pulp

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the President of the Board of trade what quantity of *(a)* paper and *(b)* pulp has been imported into the United Kingdom for each year since 1990; and what percentage these imports constitute of the total amount of paper and pulp used each year in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [2357]

Mr. Page: UK imports of paper and paperboard and pulp, in metric tonnes, are given in the table.

Year	*Paper and paperboard*	*Pulp*
1990	5,698	2,058
1991	5,619	2,160
1992	5,976	2,159
1993	6,078	1,909
1994	6,864	2,054
1995	6,392	2,219

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise.

Information on the quantity of UK manufacturers' sale of paper, paperboard and pulp are commercially confidential. It is therefore not possible to calculate the imports share of UK consumption.

Mr. Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the countries from which the United Kingdom imports *(a)* paper and *(b)* pulp, stating for each the (i) tonnage and (ii) relative percentage of overall paper and pulp imports that it constitutes; and if he will make a statement. [2358]

Mr. Page: The information for 1995 is given in the following table. UK imports fell by 3.5 per cent. from their peak in 1994.

UK imports of paper and paperboard, and pulp: 1995

Country	*Paper and board (MT)*[1]	*Pulp (MT)*	*Per cent. of total*
Sweden	1,440,481	214,645	19.2
Finland	1,408,548	134,699	17.9
Canada	390,004	380,692	9.0
Germany	744,255	16,623	8.8
USA	285,782	459,624	8.7
France	512,179	82,210	6.9
Norway	467,976	113,610	6.8
Netherlands	331,519	55,072	4.5
Brazil	80,081	175,281	3.0
Spain	77,712	111,839	2.2
Portugal	48,690	119,276	2.0
Italy	128,798	2,863	1.5
Belgium-Luxembourg	100,422	16,342	1.4

UK imports of paper and paperboard, and pulp: 1995

Country	Paper and board (MT)[1]	Pulp (MT)	Per cent. of total
Austria	108,421	7,262	1.3
Chile	1,273	110,463	1.3
Russia	49,694	53,269	1.2
South Africa	9,465	84,149	1.1
Irish Republic	48,647	37,735	1.0
Denmark	38,176	113	0.4
Poland	31,727	0	0.4
Rest of the World	87,755	43,664	1.5
World total	6,391,606	2,219,432	100.0

Notes:
[1] Metric tonnes.
Pulp defined as division 25 of the Standard International Trade Classification, Revision 3 (SITC3).
Paper and paperboard defined as heading 641 of SITC3.
Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Custom and Excise.

Royal Observatories

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement of the future of the royal observatories. [651]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The Government accepted the recommendations in the report of the prior options review of the royal observatories which had been endorsed by the council of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. These were that the management of the overseas telescopes and the provision of the instrumentation programme provided by the royal Greenwich observatory and the royal observatory Edinburgh should be subject to competitive tendering by all competent suppliers. PPARC is currently implementing the recommendations of the review with the intention of an invitation to tender being issued this month.

Import and Export Control Act

Ms Quin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many times the Import and Export Control Act 1990 has been used by the Government in each of the past four years; and for what purposes. [1550]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The sole purpose of this Act was to repeal section 9(3) of the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act 1939.

Pure Science

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on United Kingdom policy on pure science. [535]

Mr. Ian Taylor: A prime aim of our policy is to develop the science and engineering base to enhance the skills levels, industrial competitiveness, wealth creation and the quality of life.

The Government will continue to invest in training and basic and strategic research. Allocation of funds is influenced by the foresight process. We are stimulating greater interest by industry in the strength of the science base.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 7 November 1996

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Open Government

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when the Government will respond to the outstanding recommendations contained in the second report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration on open government, HC 84, Session 1995–96. [3055]

Mr. Freeman: The Government have submitted their response to the remaining recommendations of the report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, and the Committee is arranging for the response to be published today.

The Government responded to the majority of the recommendations contained in the Select Committee's report on 28 June 1996. It welcomed many of the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report, and in particular the Committee's endorsement of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" as having been an important and valuable contribution to more open government. The Government's response reaffirmed their commitment to greater openness.

The Government's initial response did not, however, cover seven of the Committee's recommendations which had implications for openness in government beyond the code of practice. The Government wished to await the report of the Public Service Committee on ministerial accountability and responsibility, believing that it would provide a valuable contribution to their consideration of the issues in this area. That report was published on 30 July and the Government's response to it is also being published today.

The Government are grateful to the Select Committee on the PCA for the constructive contribution that it has made to the debate on openness. I am pleased that we have been able to agree to many of the recommendations contained in its report and that much common ground has been established between the Committee and the Government on these important issues.

However, the Government do not accept the Committee's proposal for a Freedom of Information Act. It believes that the non-statutory code of practice has a proven record and should now be given an enhanced role as setting the clear, recognised minimum standard for providing information to Parliament, and in setting out the reasons for withholding information on those occasions when this is necessary. Given this increased importance for the provisions of the code, the Government do not believe that it would now be sensible to seek a fundamental change in its status.

The Government will soon be issuing a revised code of practice and guidance on its interpretation, to reflect the responses to the PCA and Public Service Committees and in the light of the day-to-day operation of the code during the last two and a half years. The ability to amend the code to reflect experience in this way is, in the Government's view, a major advantage of their preferred non-statutory approach.

Ministerial Accountability and Responsibility

Mr. Radice: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the Government's response to the second report of the Select Committee on Public Service of Session 1995–96 on ministerial accountability and responsibility (HC313). [3501]

Mr. Freeman: The Government have submitted their response to the report from the Public Service Committee on ministerial accountability and responsibility, and the Committee is arranging for the response to be published today.

The Government are grateful to the Select Committee for undertaking this investigation which, as envisaged by the President of the Board of Trade in the debate on 26 February, *Official Report*, column *593*, has provided a helpful basis for the Government's consideration of the recommendations on ministerial accountability made by Sir Richard Scott in his report.

The Government reaffirm their commitment to arrangements under which it will remain properly accountable to Parliament. The Government's response to the Committee's report is addressed to this shared democratic objective.

The Government note the Committee's decision to follow what it describes as a pragmatic approach in setting out a "working definition" of ministerial responsibility, reflected in a proposed resolution of the House. The Government agree with many of the principles underlying the working definition, and share the Committee's view that there could be value in the House making explicit how it expects Ministers to discharge their responsibilities to Parliament. The Government will initiative further discussion on a cross-party basis to this end with a view to bringing forward an appropriate motion in due course.

The Government believe that effective scrutiny and accountability are secured by the giving of a full account through a rigorous policy on openness. The Government agree with the Committee on the central importance of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" and it will now proceed, in accordance with the Committee's recommendations, to ensure that throughout Government the code is followed as the clear, recognised minimum standard for providing information to Parliament, and in setting out the reasons for withholding information, on those occasions when this is necessary.

ENVIRONMENT

Chemical Plants (Unauthorised Releases)

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many unauthorised releases from chemical plants have taken place each year since 1970;

how many were classified as serious; how many led to prosecutions; and what was the fine or penalty in each case. [1009]

Mr. Clappison: Chemical processes have been subject to prior authorisation under the integrated pollution control regime since 1990. So far as air is concerned, details of unauthorised releases, prosecutions and other enforcement action taken between April 1991 and March 1996 are contained in the annual reports of Her Majesty's inspectorate of pollution, which was the IPC regulator between those dates. The annual reports are in the House Library.

HM inspectorate of pollution became a part of the Environment Agency on 1 April this year. I understand from the agency that since that date there have been 550 unauthorised releases to air from chemical processes. Few of these had serious implications. I further understand that the agency has to date carried out one prosecution in respect of those releases and that a further one is in hand. Prosecution is only one of a number of enforcement options available to the Environment Agency, which can also issue enforcement or prohibition notices.

Energy Advice Centres

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what representations he has received about the need for continuing financial support from *(a)* the Government and *(b)* the Energy Savings Trust for local energy advice centres funded by the Energy Savings Trust over the last three years. [2254]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: My Department has received approximately 30 representations about the funding of local energy advice centres over the last three years. Of these, 14 covered Government funding and five funding by the Energy Saving Trust. The remaining 11 were concerned with financial support in general.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the local energy advice centres which have been funded via the Energy Savings Trust in the last three years. [2220]

Mr. Jones: The local energy advice centres which have been funded by the Energy Saving Trust in the last three years are:

Aberdeenshire Energy Advice Centre
Belfast Energy Advice Centre
Black Country Energy Advice Centre
Bristol Energy Advice Centre
Cardiff Energy Advice Centre
Croydon Energy Advice Centre
Greenwich Energy Advice Centre
Highland Energy Advice Centre
Islington Energy Advice Centre
Leeds Energy Advice Centre
Leicester Energy Advice Centre
Lewisham Energy Advice Centre
Lothian and Edinburgh Energy Advice Centre
Middlesborough Energy Advice Centre
Northumbria Energy Advice Centre
Orkney Energy Advice Centre
Peterborough Energy Advice Centre
Plymouth Energy Advice Centre
Ryedale Energy Advice Centre
Shetland Energy Advice Centre
Solent Energy Advice Centre
Stockton on Tees Energy Advice Centre
Strathclyde and Central Energy Advice Centre
Swansea Energy Advice Centre
Tayside Energy Advice Centre
Telford Energy Advice Centre
Thames Valley Energy Advice Centre
West Wales Energy Advice Centre
Western Isles Energy Advice Centre
Western Regional Energy Advice Centre
Wirral Energy Advice Centre.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the local energy advice centres which his Department has assessed as currently lack sufficient funding to ensure their continuing operation. [2256]

Mr. Jones: The local energy advice centres are the responsibility of the Energy Saving Trust. I understand that only one local energy advice centre, which failed to meet its targets on 31 August 1996, has ceased to operate.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of *(a)* the effectiveness of the local energy advice centres funded via the Energy Savings Trust in the last three years and *(b)* the need for the continuation of their services. [2255]

Mr. Jones: The Energy Saving Trust has now taken full responsibility for the further continuation and management of LEACs. On 12 July 1996, I approved grants totalling £4.1 million over three years to be paid to the Trust in support of this work.

Previously, market research showed that the LEACs provide an effective and value for money service. In 1994–95, about 57,000 clients visited LEAC offices and as a result of advice received, savings were made of 21,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions and £1.8 million over the same period.

Estuary Management Zones

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how many coastal management zones are now fully integrated and operating successfully; [2596]

(2) how many authorities have published estuary management plans; and if he will publish guidance on their implementation. [2594]

Mr. Clappison: In England, 20 estuary management plans have so far been published as part of the estuaries management initiative promoted by English Nature and further plans are in preparation. Estuaries represent the areas of major pressure on the coast but there are also other initiatives under way with the objectives of managing areas of open coast. On 31 October, the Department of the Environment issued a best practice guide on coastal zone management which will assist in taking forward both types of schemes.

Water Abstraction

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many sites have been identified by English Nature as being at risk from water abstraction; and what proposals he has for the conservation of these sites and for reducing water consumption in the surrounding areas. [22562]

Mr. Clappison: In its report published in September 1996, English Nature reviewed 152 wetland sites of special scientific interest, of which 18 were assessed as being at high risk from water abstraction and 38 were considered to be at medium risk, with a further 23 at high risk and 10 at medium risk if water demands continue to increase. The Environment Agency will be reviewing the report with English Nature, with a view to establishing an agreed list of sites at risk and from that deciding actions which may be needed for alleviation.

Homelessness (Durham)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the number of homeless people in the county of Durham. [2401]

Mr. Clappison: I refer the hon. Member to the supplementary table which accompanies the quarterly information bulletin, entitled "Households found accommodation under the homelessness provisions of the Housing Act 1985: England" for the available information. A copy of the bulletin, the latest of which provides statistics for the second quarter of 1996, is in the Library.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the average level of *(a)* discretionary and *(b)* mandatory disabled facilities grants in each year since 1990. [2462]

Mr. Clappison: The information requested is shown in the table.

Disabled facilities grants: England

	Average final grant payment (£s)	
	Mandatory grants	*Discretionary grants*
1990	1,820	2,860
1991	2,950	3,470
1992	3,740	4,640
1993	4,100	2,740
1994	4,190	2,200
1995	4,180	2,190

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many applications for disabled facilities grants were refused in each year since 1990. [2463]

Mr. Clappison: The Department does not collect regular data on unsuccessful applications for disabled facilities grant. However, recent research for the Department indicates that about 7,000 applications for disabled facilities grants in England were refused in the year 1993–94.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many *(a)* mandatory and *(b)* discretionary disabled facilities grants have been made in each year since 1990 in (i) the west midlands and (ii) the United Kingdom. [2461]

Mr. Clappison: The table shows the available information about the west midlands and about England. Figures about the United Kingdom are not available as the grants system in Scotland differs from that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Disabled facilities grants: Final payments (Number of grants)

	West Midlands		*England*	
	Mandatory grants	*Discretionary grants*	*Mandatory grants*	*Discretionary grants*
1990	40	—	360	10
1991	990	40	10,790	180
1992	1,590	70	15,450	290
1993	1,450	30	16,720	430
1994	2,090	10	20,410	500
1995	2,310	20	22,730	420

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the impact on council tax levels in the south east of England of the abolition of the area cost adjustment. [2564]

Sir Paul Beresford: The abolition of the area cost adjustment was not proposed by the team reviewing the area cost adjustment or by other participants in the discussions this year. I have not estimated the impact on council tax levels in the south-east of England of the abolition of the area cost adjustment. To do so would involve making assumptions about capping limits in the new circumstances and about local authority responses.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what proposals the Department's working party has made for the future of the area cost adjustment; and what assessment he has made of the impact on the Isle of Wight of the abolition of area cost adjustment. [2563]

Sir Paul Beresford: The review of the area cost adjustment recommended a new method for calculating the adjustment, using data from the labour force survey to determine a factor for each local authority in England. Several variations of this approach were included as options in the report of the standard spending assessments sub-group to the Consultative Council on Local Government Finance. No proposals to abolish the area cost adjustment were made by the review team or in the sub-group report. For illustrative purposes, the effect on SSAs for 1996–97 of abolishing the area cost adjustment has been estimated. The SSA for the Isle of Wight would be reduced by £3.4 million, which is 3.5 per cent. of its SSA.

Conservation

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the sites in the Solent and the

lagoons that have been submitted to the European Commission for designation as special areas of conservation. [2565]

Mr. Clappison: A third tranche of candidate special areas of conservation was forwarded to the European Commission on 14 October 1996; I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment on Wednesday 16 October, *Official Report*, column *1073–74*. As indicated in that reply, the Solent and Isle of Wight lagoons was one of the candidate sites. This site includes all or part of the following sites of special scientific interst:

Brading Marshes to St. Helen's Ledges;

Gilkicker Lagoon;

Hurst Castle and Lymington River Estuary;

Langstone Harbour.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1893]

Sir Paul Beresford: The table sets out the number of projects and expenditure incurred in respect of information technology projects undertaken or planned by my Department for the project requested.

Cost bands £ millions	*Projects undertaken and completed since 1992*	*Projects planned for the coming year and/or ongoing*
0–1	21	12
1–2	3	1
2–3	Nil	1
3–4	Nil	Nil
4–5	Nil	Nil
5–6	Nil	Nil
6–7	Nil	1
7–8	Nil	1

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what percentage of mortgage lenders provided standard assessment procedure ratings as part of valuation surveys in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996; and what estimate he has made of the likely percentages in (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998. [2962]

Mr. Clappison: My Department is working with mortgage lenders to encourage the uptake of energy efficiency measures and to promote the wider use of standard assessment procedure ratings via mortgage valuation surveys. A total of 4,000 SAP ratings were issued by the Nationwide building society in 1995 under a joint initiative with the Department; under a similar initiative with the Halifax building society this year, 6,500 SAP ratings were issued. We are not aware of any statistics on or estimates of the percentage of mortgage lenders providing SAP ratings.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the effect upon household energy efficiency measures of providing standard assessment procedure ratings in valuation surveys. [2964]

Mr. Clappison: My Department continues to work with mortgage lenders to encourage the uptake of energy efficiency measures through the provision of standard assessment procedure ratings. In particular, the Department and the Halifax building society are co-operating on a joint project to evaluate the impact of providing SAP ratings as part of the valuation process. The results are expected shortly.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what percentage of property valuation surveys included standard assessment procedure ratings in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996; and what estimate he has made of the likely percentages in (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998. [2963]

Mr. Clappison: My Department is working with mortgage lenders to encourage the uptake of energy efficiency measures and to promote the wider use of standard assessment procedure ratings via mortgage valuation surveys. We are not aware of any statistics collected on this subject.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [2914]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department has recently consulted interested parties on the following proposal for use of the deregulation order-maker power:

Public Health Acts Amendment Act 1907: removal of need for local authority licences for pleasure boats on waters owned or managed by British Waterways or the Environment Agency.

The timing of any reference to the Deregulation Committee will depend on the outcome of our consideration of the responses.

In addition, we have recently laid draft regulations under section 37 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 to remove 16 pieces of redundant health and safety legislation.

Going for Green Initiative

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of the going for green initiative over the last 12 months; and what its targets are for the next 12 months. [2965]

Mr. Clappison: Going for Green Ltd. is a private company limited by guarantee, with the aim of promoting sustainable development to the public and helping to change everyday behaviour in a more sustainable direction. Since becoming a private company on 1 April 1996, Going for Green has secured private sector sponsorship of £360,000 in cash and an estimated £950,000 in benefits in kind. Its programme of work has included national publicity campaigns, the publication of a green code, the establishment of sustainable communities pilot projects, a study of waste minimisation

and the development of ways of measuring the extent to which individuals' lifestyles are sustainable. This work is a fundamental part of the Government's strategy on sustainable development.

Targets for 1997–98 are currently under discussion with the Department in the context of the company's business plan for next year.

Sheffield Development Corporation

Sir Irvine Patnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when Sheffield development corporation will be wound up; and if he will make a statement. [3041]

Mr. Curry: Statutory orders will be laid before Parliament early next year to effect the wind up and dissolution of Sheffield development corporation. Subject to parliamentary approval, the corporation will cease to act from 1 April 1997, except for the purpose of preparing its final accounts and report and winding up its affairs. The corporation will be dissolved on 1 July 1997.

Urban development corporations were set up, with finite lifetimes, to regenerate their designated areas. Since designation on 30 June 1988 Sheffield development corporation has encouraged a grant-aided private sector development and undertaken substantial environmental and infrastructure improvements, which have helped to stimulate new jobs and new life in the city and to realise Sheffield's ambitions for a city airport.

By the end of its lifetime, the corporation expects to have reclaimed 259.2 hectares of land, created 521,100 sq m of commercial floorspace, built or improved 15 m of road, created 17,683 permanent jobs and attracted £695 million of private sector investment. The corporation has transformed the Lower Don valley area and Sheffield will continue to benefit well into the next century.

Environment Agency

Mr. Simon Coombs: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he intends formally to issue the guidance to the Environment Agency required under section 4 of the Environment Act 1995. [3171]

Mr. Gummer: A draft of the guidance which Ministers are required under section 4 of the Environment Act 1995 to give to the Environment Agency on its objectives, including the contribution it is to make towards the achievement of sustainable development, has been laid before the House for the required period of 40 sitting days. Together with my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, I am today formally issuing this guidance to the Environment Agency.

We are also formally issuing to the Environment Agency a management statement which summaries Ministers' aims and objectives for the agency, its duties, powers and responsibilities, and its relationship with Ministers, Government Departments and other bodies.

An explanatory document which restates the principles of sustainable development, provides non-statutory guidance on particular functions and offers a commentary on the agency's duty to take account of likely costs and benefits is also being provided to the agency.

Copies of these documents have been placed in the Library.

Health and Safety

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what legal advice was received prior to the Single European Act 1986 as to the effect of the term "working environment, as regards the health and safety of workers" contained in article 118a; if a copy of the advice will be placed in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [2978]

Sir Paul Beresford: By convention, any such legal advice to Government is treated as confidential and its substance is not normally disclosed.

TRANSPORT

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992 and are planned for the coming year, in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1904]

Mr. Bowis: The Department estimates that it will have undertaken or plans to undertake, a total of 181 information technology projects by the end of the year. In cost bands these are as follows:

£0–£1 million—167, £1–£2 million—3, £2–£3 million—2, £3–£4 million—4, £4–£5 million—3, £11–£12 million—1. £13–£14 million—1.

Some of these will have started in earlier years and some will last several years. So it is not possible to identify the actual costs for a specific year.

Rail Coaches

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the number of unserviceable passenger rail coaches that have been taken out of service in each of the last five years. [2198]

Mr. Watts: The information is no longer held by British Rail and is a matter for the rolling stock leasing companies.

Railway Stations

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many railway stations are planned to be *(a)* opened and *(b)* re-opened in the next two years by the franchise companies. [2040]

Mr. Watts: There are a number of proposed new stations which were the initiative of local authorities in agreement with British Rail train operating companies. These proposals are being continued by the franchisees.

Franchisees have their own longer-term initiatives to open new stations. The LTS rail franchisee, Prism Rail, intends to open a new station at West Ham by the end of 1999. The midland main line franchisee, National Express Group, is undertaking a feasibility study for a new east midlands Parkway station with the aim of completing building and development of the station during 2001.

Accident Reports (Leaks)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will discuss with the chairman of Railtrack the leaking of accident investigation reports before their agreed publication dates. [1874]

Mr. Watts: I deplore the premature and unauthorised release of accident investigation reports, and the use which is made of such leaks. The reports of internal railway joint inquiries are not normally published. This is a matter for the railway parties involved.

Rail Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will direct train operating companies to install and operate automatic train protection on all trains. [1870]

Mr. Watts: No. Automatic train protection would require changes to infrastructure as well as trains. Railtrack and train operators are pursuing a range of alternative measures to reduce risks arising from signals passed at danger, overspeeding the buffer stop collisions. The independent Health and Safety Commission advised that the introduction of ATP. as piloted, on a network-wide basis was not reasonably practicable, and that there were alternative safety investments which would be likely to yield greater effectiveness in terms of lives saved, and better value for money.

Sheffield Supertram

Sir Irvine Patnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what income has been generated by Sheffield Supertram since it became operational; and what steps have been taken to increase this income. [2392]

Mr. Watts: Management of South Yorkshire Supertram is a matter for the South Yorkshire passenger transport executive, which I understand has sought to increase what have hitherto been very disappointing levels of passenger carryings.

Speed Limits

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to encourage the use of 20 mph speed limits in urban areas. [2395]

Mr. Bowis: There are now around 300 20 mph zones in place. These have been very successful in reducing accidents. We have recently ring fenced £1 million of transport supplementary grant for the creation of additional zones in appropriate areas.

VHF Radio Service

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what advice he has issued to commercial and pleasure craft in respect of the phasing out of the VHF radio service. [2569]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of Marine Safety Agency to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from R. M. Bradley to Mr. Barry Field, dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your Question about the advice which has been issued to commercial and pleasure craft in respect of the phasing out of VHF radio services.

There are no plans to phase out the use of Channel 16 in the UK in the foreseeable future. The UK is however keen to promote the voluntary adoption by non-SOLAS vessels of Global Maritime Distress and Safety Systems (GMDSS) principles and the use of automated distress calling. Further information on what is involved is contained in a Marine Safety Agency (MSA) leaflet entitled *GMDSS: Radio of the Next Century* which has been available for some time. The MSA is also active in promoting the positive benefits of GMDSS at boat shows and other similar commercial events around the country.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with commercial fishermen about phasing out VHF radio services. [2574]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of Marine Safety Agency to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from R. M. Bradley to Mr. Barry Field, dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your Question on the discussions that have taken place with commercial fishermen about phasing out VHF radio services.

The fishermen's organisations are aware that the UK is committed to the continued use of Channel 16. HM Coastguard will maintain a listening watch on Channel 16 for as long as necessary after 1 February 1999 and all SOLAS Convention ships in the UK Search and Rescue Area are encouraged to continue to maintain watch on Channel 16 where possible for as long as necessary. Internationally, the UK in conjunction with other European administrations, will seek agreement at the next World Radio Conference in 1997 to Channel 16 remaining a calling frequency for non-SOLAS vessels.

Rail Accidents

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list the occasions when rolling stock operated by private freight companies have been involved in accidents on the west coast main line; [1437]

(2) if he will list those railway accidents occurring on *(a)* the west coast main line, *(b)* the east coast main line and *(c)* London rail routes since privatisation. [1444]

Mr. Watts: The information requested is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Digital Selcall

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) when he expects the new tender for digital selcall to be published; [2570]

(2) what plans he has to re-equip Her Majesty's Coastguard with digital selcall equipment; and when VHF will be phased out; [2572]

(3) how many vessels in the United Kingdom rely on VHF radio for emergency purposes; and what transitional arrangements he intends to introduce for digital selcall; [2575]

(4) what discussions he has had with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution about digital selcall for emergency use. [2573]

Mr. Bowis: I have asked the chief executive of the Coastguard Agency to write to, my hon. friend.

Letter from C. J. Harris to Mr. Barry Field, dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about the introduction of Digital Selcall, how it affects the use of VHF and our consultations with the RNLI on this subject.

The Agency awarded a contract for Digital Selcall, more properly known as VHF Digital Selective Calling (VHF (DSC)), to GEC-Marconi Communications Ltd. on 3 October to supply and fit equipment at 105 sites around the UK coastline. Her Majesty's Coastguard will begin to be equipped with VHF (DSC) from mid-January with the aim of completing in February 1999 to coincide with the start date for full implementation of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS), of which VHF (DSC) forms a part. On 1 February 1999 GMDSS will become a requirement for all SOLAS Convention vessels over 300 Tonnes.

As VHF radio, in particular the VHF Distress Channel 16, is essential for the voice response to VHF (DSC) digital alerts, there are no plans to phase it out.

The total number of UK vessels with VHF licences is over 51,000 of which nearly 48,000 are pleasure vessels. Vessels which do not come under GMDSS legislation are not required to fit VHF (DSC). HM Coastguard is particularly anxious that non-compatibility of distress frequencies should not constitute a risk to the safety of non SOLAS Convention vessels which do not install VHF (DSC) equipment, and Ministers have already given a commitment not only to ensure that HM Coastguard maintains a listening watch on Channel 16 post 1 February 1999, but also that all SOLAS Convention ships in the UK search and rescue area should be encouraged to maintain watch on channel 16 where possible for as long as necessary. In addition to that the Coastguard Agency together with the Marine Safety Agency are presently pushing for agreement by the International Maritime Organisation and the World Radio Conference that channel 16 should continue to be monitored and used as a calling frequency for some time after 1 February 1999.

Although RNLI lifeboats are not subject to SOLAS, the requirements for GMDSS have been discussed at liaison meetings between the Coastguard Agency and the RNLI. I understand that all the RNLI's All Weather Lifeboats will be fitted with both VHF and M/F DSC equipment. The existing distress frequencies distress frequencies will continue to be used as they are at present for distress communications. Communications between RNLI lifeboats and HM Coastguard will not be affected by the introduction of the GMDSS.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

State Opening (Costs)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what was the total cost to the House of the state opening of parliament. [2806]

Sir Raymond Powell: The total cost of the state opening of Parliament on 23 October has not yet been calculated, but some £24,000 has been set aside by the House for this purpose.

Line of Route Visitors

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what plans he has to improve facilities for Line of Route visitors with specific reference to a cafeteria facility, improved toilets and facilities to shelter visitors when queuing in unfavourable weather. [2945]

Sir Raymond Powell: On 12 July 1994, the House approved the first report of Session 1992–93 from the Catering Committee which recommended that the area currently occupied by the Westminster Hall cafeteria should be converted into a visitor centre to include appropriate toilet facilities. This recommendation cannot be implemented until the opening of the new cafeteria in phase 2 of the new parliamentary building. There are no plans to improve the facilities to shelter visitors queuing in unfavourable weather which have been provided within the Sovereign's Entrance since 1990.

Palace of Westminster (Wheelchair Access)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee (1) what plans he has to provide facilities that will allow access to wheelchair-bound hon. Members to all relevant areas of the Palace of Westminster with specific reference to the Chamber of the Commons; [2943]

(2) what plans he has to improve facilities to allow access to wheelchair-bound visitors to the Line of Route, Terrace, dining and Committee rooms; [2944]

(3) what plans he has to provide facilities that will allow access to wheelchair-bound civil servants to all relevant areas of the Commons with specific reference to the Officials' Box in the Chamber. [2946]

Sir Raymond Powell: I refer the hon. Member to the reply which I gave to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) on 8 February 1995, *Official Report*, columns *243–45*, which describes in detail the conclusions of the review by the Accommodation and Works Committee of access to the House for disabled people. Since then, the Parliamentary Works Directorate has implemented the approved improvements. These improvements enable hon. Members and civil servants who are wheelchair users to access relevant areas of the Palace of Westminster, including the Chamber of the Commons and visitors who are wheelchair users to access the Line of Route, the Terrace, and the dining and Committee rooms. There are no plans currently to make the Officials' Box in the Chamber accessible to wheelchair users. In the event that a wheelchair-using civil servant was required to support a Minister, it is envisaged that he or she would be able to do so from the area adjacent to the Officials' Box. However, a handrail has been fixed in the Officials' Box to assist persons with disabilities.

Palace of Westminster (Works)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee, pursuant to his answer of 31 October, *Official Report*, columns *220–21*, what were the *(a)* objectives and *(b)* costs of the work to restore (i) the two fresco paintings off Central Lobby, (ii) the fresco painting in the House of Lords Chamber and (iii) the 35 oil paintings. [2926]

Sir Raymond Powell: The work was to conserve, restore and maintain the value of works of art. The cost to the House was approximately £30,000. The total cost of some £50,000 was shared with the House of Lords on a 60:40 basis.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee, pursuant to his answer of 31 October, *Official Report*, columns *220–21*, what were the *(a)* objectives and *(b)* costs of the work on the second phase of overhaul of the Carriage Gates. [2905]

Sir Raymond Powell: The work on the second phase of the overhaul of the Carriage Gates was necessary to maintain the gate mechanism for security and for stonework and metalwork restoration. The cost to the House was approximately £29,400. The total cost of some £49,000 was shared with the House of Lords on a 60:40 basis.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Work Committee, pursuant to his answer of 31 October, *Official Report*, columns *220–21*, what are the expected final costs of the full parliamentary data and video network cabling at *(a)* Star Chamber Court block, *(b)* Norman Shaw North floors 1 and 2, *(c)* House of Lords west front ground and first floors and *(d)* 1 The Abbey Garden. [2900]

Sir Raymond Powell: The expected final cost of this year's PDVN cabling work is as follows: *(a)* Star Chamber Court block and *(c)* House of Lords west front approximately £1.6 million—shared with the House of Lords on a 60:40 basis, cost to the House £960,000, *(b)* Norman Shaw North floors 1 and 2 (£300,000), and *(d)* 1 The Abbey Garden is administered by the House of Lords, for which I have no responsibility.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee, pursuant to his answer of 31 October, *Official Report*, columns *220–21*, what proportion of the total spending was in areas and facilities used by *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* House of Commons staff, *(c)* visitors, *(d)* disabled visitors and *(e)* disabled hon. Members, civil servants and staff. [2948]

Sir Raymond Powell: Since Members, staff and visitors share many areas of the parliamentary estate, it is not possible separately to identify the costs. During the last three years, considerable progress has been made on improving access to the parliamentary estate for disabled people. Depending upon the nature of an individual's disability, most of the spending in the summer of 1996 has been on facilities potentially available to people with disabilities.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee, pursuant to his answer of 31 October, *Official Report*, columns *220–22*, what were the (i) objectives and (ii) total individual costs of the *(a)* reconstruction of the Members' Cafeteria, *(b)* reconstruction of the Strangers' Cafeteria, *(c)* repair work to the roof of the Lords Chamber, *(d)* repair work to the roof of the Royal Gallery, *(e)* full parliamentary data and video network cabling, *(f)* connection of all hon. Members' offices to colour televisions with clean feed from the Chamber, *(g)* new servery in the Members' Tea Room, *(h)* furniture restoration for the Members' Tea room, *(i)* renovation of the Speaker's outer office, *(j)* redecoration of the Churchill Room, *(k)* the refurbishment of the lavatories in (1) Upper Committee Corridor South, (2) opposite Committee Room 7 and (3) Commons Court block, second floor, and *(l)* refurbishment of the cash machines corridor; and if he will make a statement. [2947]

Sir Raymond Powell: The objectives forecast in-year costs relating to work in the House of Commons are as follows:

Project	*Objective*	*In-year cost to the House* £	*In-year total cost'* £
Reconstruction of: (a) Members' Cafeteria (b) Strangers' Cafeteria	Following a resolution of the House, to meet statutory requirements with regard to health and safety, hygiene, fire, ventilation and other building standards	3 million	3 million
Repair work to (c) the roof of the Lords' Chamber (d) the Royal Gallery	To cure leaks	0.66 million	1.1 million
(e) PDVN cabling'	To implement the resolution of the House to install the PDVN	Palace: 0.96 million Norman Shaw North: 0.30 million	1.6 million 0.3 million
(f) Connection of all hon. Members' offices to colour televisions with clean feed from the Chamber	To implement the resolution of the House	0.145 million	0.145 million
(g) New servery in the Members' Tea Room	To implement the resolution of the House to improve health, safety and hygiene standards	85,000	85,000
(h) Furniture restoration for the Members' Tea Room	To maintain appropriate standards	31,000	31,000
(i) Renovation of the Speakers outer office	To maintain appropriate standards	24,000	24,000
(j) Redecoration of the Churchill Room	To maintain appropriate standards	24,000	24,000

Project	Objective	In-year cost to the House £	In-year total cost[1] £
(k) The refurbishment of the lavatories in:			
(1) Upper Committee Corridor South	To provide adequate capacity as required by Members	16,800	28,000
(2) Opposite Committee Room 7	To conclude last years work on adaptions to provide a lavatory for the disabled	15,000	25,000
(3) Commons Court Block—second floor	To maintain appropriate standards	9,000	15,000
(l) Refurbishment of the cash machines corridor;	To complete the wheelchair access route, improve facilities as requested by Members and maintain appropriate standards	72,000	120,000

[1] The cost of shared projects listed is split between House of Commons and House of Lords in a ratio of 60:40
[2] PDVN cabling was also installed in areas administered by the House of Lords for which I have no responsibility

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Kenya

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on torture and human rights abuses in Kenya; and what is the Government's policy on this matter. [1632]

Dr. Liam Fox: We receive reports from a variety of sources about human rights, including torture, in Kenya. This issue forms part of our ongoing dialogue with the Kenyan authorities. We take every suitable opportunity to remind the Government of Kenya of their obligations and of our concerns on this subject.

Cameroon

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the British Government are making to the Government of Cameroon about the necessity of holding free and fair elections. [2657]

Dr. Liam Fox: Our high commissioner in Yaounde has stressed repeatedly to the Cameroonian Government the importance we attach to free and fair elections in Cameroon. My noble friend Baroness Challker outlined out concerns to the Cameroonian Deputy Foreign Minister during his visit to the United Kingdom in August and expressed our willingness to help Cameroon establish an independent electoral commission.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the process of registering voters in Cameroon. [2656]

Dr. Fox: Registration of voters in Cameroon takes place each year from 1 January to 30 April. This year the period was extended by three months to 31 July. The Ministry for Territorial Administration estimates that 60 to 80 per cent. of those registered for the municipal elections in January have now re-registered which represents between 30 and 40 per cent. of those eligible to vote.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the possibility of free and fair elections being held in Cameroon in 1997. [2655]

Dr. Fox: Cameroon's electoral code provides a framework for free and fair elections. We have made clear to the Cameroonian Government the importance we attach to the establishment of an independent electoral commission and offered to help, if necessary. In conjunction with a number of other donors, we are launching a training programme for 2,000 Cameroonian election observers in preparation for the next year's legislative and presidential elections.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Health and Safety

Mr. Byers: To ask the Attorney-General on what dates legal advice was given as to the effect of the term "working environment, as regards the health and safety of workers" contained in article 118a of the European Community treaty. [2979]

The Attorney-General: By convention, the fact of whether the Law Officers have advised on a given issue is not disclosed, nor is the substance of any advice which may have been given.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average length of time between arrest and conviction for young offenders in 1994–95. [937]

Mr. Streeter: The exact information requested is not available although similar figures are recorded by the magistrates courts time intervals survey. This survey collects information on defendants in indictable, including triable either way, cases against whom proceedings are completed in three sample weeks a year—in February, June and October. The June survey also collects information about proceedings in summary cases. The period which corresponds most closely with that requested is charge to verdict, although it is not possible to separate those defendants who were found guilty from those whose cases were dismissed.

The average time from charge to verdict for defendants whose cases were dealt with by summary proceedings in the youth court, as reported by the surveys in the period

April 1994 to March 1995, was 84 days and 73 days for defendants charged with indictable and summary offences respectively. These figures include only defendants who were charged and not those who were summonsed. In addition, cases where proceedings did not progress as far as a verdict are excluded, for example, where charges were withdrawn.

Child Sex Abuse

Mr. Byers: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to extend the period in which actions can be brought under civil law by victims of child sex abuse. [2980]

Mr. Streeter: The Law Commission has undertaken a comprehensive review of the law of limitation periods with a view to its simplification and rationalisation, and the Government will consider the recommendations made when the Law Commission completes its report. We do not plan to modify the law relating to limitation of actions before then.

Obstetric Intervention Cases

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions in the last five years the Official Solicitor has appeared in cases involving applications for obstetric interventions without the consent of the patient, and *(a)* in how many of these he acted as (i) guardian ad litem and (ii) amicus curiae, *(b)* on how many occasions the application resulted in an order, *(c)* in how many the use of force was explicitly authorised by the court, *(d)* in how many cases the patient was detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 and *(e)* in how many cases the patient was under the age of 18 years. [1844]

Mr. Streeter: The Official Solicitor has appeared in four cases in the last five years involving applications for obstetric interventions—emergency caesarean sections—without the consent of the patient, *(a)* in two cases he has acted as guardian ad litem and two as amicus curiae; *(b)* in each case an order authorising a caesarean section was made; *(c)* in two cases the use of force was explicitly authorised by the court; *(d)* two of the patients were detained under the Mental Health Act 1983; *(e)* none of the patients was under the age of 18 years. In three of the cases an emergency caesarean was performed. In one case a normal vaginal delivery took place.

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what guidance the president of the family division has issued to judges in the family division relating to applications for court orders for obstetric interventions without the consent of the patient. [1845]

Mr. Streeter: No guidance has been issued by the president of the family division on these matters. Every such application is to be considered by the judge concerned according to its merits.

Outstanding Fines

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what amount of fines imposed by magistrates courts is currently outstanding; and what plans he has to allow magistrates courts to charge interest on outstanding fines; [2561]

(2) what is the percentage of fines transferred to magistrates courts by Crown court for collection which are outstanding. [2556]

Mr. Streeter: Separate figures for outstanding fines imposed by the Crown court and magistrates courts are not available. However, from returns made to my Department by magistrates courts I can say that the total outstanding in respect of fines imposed by the Crown court and magistrates courts was about £239 million at the end of the June quarter this year. I have no plans to allow magistrates courts to charge interest on outstanding fines.

Magistrates

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to give magistrates immunity from court action in respect of decisions taken by them in the discharge of their official duties. [2560]

Mr. Streeter: On 23 August 1996, the Lord Chancellor issued a consultation paper on this subject entitled, "Liability of Judicial Officers and others for Costs in Court Proceedings". Responses are requested by 29 November 1996. The matter will then be considered in light of representations made.

Mr. Field: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department against how many magistrates' benches legal action is currently outstanding. [2559]

Mr. Streeter: This information is not kept centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Courts and Legal Services Act

Ms Corston: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he plans to bring into effect section 13 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990, in respect of *(a)* abolition of the £5,000 administration order limit, *(b)* abolition of the requirement for a county court judgment and *(c)* the three-year limitation period; and if he will make a statement. [2369]

Mr. Streeter: The delay in implementing section 13 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 is due to practical problems identified as likely to result from its operation. My Department has been seeking a way forward which avoids these problems, and this work will continue in the context of the changes to civil procedure recommended by Lord Woolf. In the meantime, a number of steps have already been taken to improve the operation of administration orders, including the introduction of guidance to court staff that the debts included in an application for such an order should be considered for composition by the district judge if the applicant cannot pay the outstanding debt within three years.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the rules and regulations he proposes to repeal or amend by means of a reference to the Deregulation Committee before the end of 1996; and if he will make a statement. [1407]

Mr. Hanley: This Department issues very few rules and regulations. We have no current plans to repeal or amend any rules or regulations by the end of 1996.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to support the establishment of an international criminal court at the United Nations; and if he will make a statement. [2982]

Dr. Liam Fox: This Department supports the establishment of an international criminal court to try certain of the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. Our support for the establishment of such a court is dependent, among other things, upon its being a court of last resort in cases where states are unable or unwilling to act. A court should be established only if it is generally accepted by the international community.

Asylum and Immigration Appeals

Mr. David Martin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in appointing a person, under section 10(3AA) of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, to monitor the refusals of entry clearance where there is no right of appeal by virtue of section 10(3A) of the Act. [3602]

Dr. Liam Fox: My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has invited Dame Elizabeth Anson to serve a second three-year term as the independent monitor of entry clearance refusals when her current term expires on 30 November. I am pleased to report that Dame Elizabeth has agreed to do so.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Lord President of the Council how many information technology projects at the Office of the Lord President of the Council have been undertaken since 1992 and are planned for the coming year, in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1902]

Mr. Newton: Actual and planned Privy Council Office expenditure on information technology in the years in question is as follows:

1992: £8,265
1993: £11,057
1994: £66,703
1995: £15,165
1996: £25,355.

These figures comprise the purchase cost of equipments, and the costs of training and maintenance. The equipments concerned are desk-top computers and printers. No specific projects can be separately identified. Figures for the three latest years include expenditure on items for the central drug co-ordination unit.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 7 November. [1093]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been asked to reply.

This morning, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. My right hon. Friend has now departed for Bordeaux to attend the Anglo-French summit.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Simpson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) when papers relating to the World Trade Organisation review in Singapore in December will be placed in the Library; [2319]

(2) when Her Majesty's Government propose to produce a paper for the World Trade Organisation review. [2317]

Mr. Lang: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary and I will shortly lay before Parliament a White Paper setting out the Government's approach to trade policy and its interaction with UK foreign policy.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade who will be representing Her Majesty's Government at the World Trade Organisation review to be held in Singapore in December. [2238]

Mr. Lang: I will lead the UK delegation to the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in December in Singapore.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what preparations have been made by Her Majesty's Government for the World Trade Organisation review to be held in Singapore in December. [2280]

Mr. Lang: The Government have made extensive preparations for the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Singapore on 9 to 13 December, in conjunction with the European Commission and other EU member states and in consultation with UK business, consumer and other interested organisations.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if her Majesty's Government are a signatory to the European policy paper for the World Trade Organisation review in December; and if he will make a statement. [2277]

Mr. Lang: The Government have discussed European policy towards the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in December in Singapore, in the Council of Ministers. The most recent discussion took place on 29 October when the Council agreed conclusions to serve as guidelines for the EU in preparation for the meeting.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary and I will shortly lay before Parliament a White Paper setting out the Government's approach to trade policy and its interaction with UK foreign policy.

Fireworks

Mr. Snape: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received from the Fire Brigades Union about the control and sale of fireworks; and if he will publish his reply. [2274]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I received a considered and detailed response from the Fire Brigades Union covering all the issues set out in my Department's discussion document. I have not responded to each organisation on the comments they submitted, but all the views and suggestions received will be given careful consideration.

Milkmen

Mr. Barry Field: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress is being made in the inquiry by the Office of Fair Trading into the preference by dairy companies for their own milk roundsman as opposed to an independent milkman. [2597]

Mr. John M. Taylor: This is a matter for the Director General of Fair Trading. I understand the hon. Member wrote to the DGFT on 8 August and that the deputy DGFT sent the hon. Member a holding reply on 28 August. In his letter, he informed the hon. Member that officials at the OFT were currently investigating this matter and that he would write to the hon. Member again when the investigating was complete. I understand that this remains the case.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when the requirement on petrol retailers to advertise the price of petrol in litre units rather than gallons was introduced. [2664]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Petrol retailers have been required to display prices by reference to the litre since 1 October 1995, with the option of indicating the gallon-equivalent price alongside the price per litre.

Fossil Fuel Levy

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate he has made of the income to be generated from the fossil fuel levy in each year from 1996 to 2005; and what estimates he has made of the proportion that will be spent in each of those years on *(a)* renewables, *(b)* Magnox, *(c)* British Nuclear Fuels plc, *(d)* administration and *(e)* other. [2666]

Mr. Page: The Director General of Electricity Supply normally calculates the expected income from the fossil fuel levy annually, with the intention that income in each year matches expenditure. In respect of renewables, premium payments to generators under the first and second non-fossil fuel orders currently amount to almost £100 million. These will cease when their contracts finish in 1998. Payments to generators under the third NFFO order will rise as their projects come on stream, as would payments to generators under the fourth NFFO order which we intend to lay in 1997 and the fifth NFFO order in 1998. The future cost is estimated for the UK as a whole as a maximum of £150 million a year, but the actual cost could be substantially less than this if renewables continue to make good progress in converging towards the market price for electricity. The nuclear NFFO contracts will end in March 1998. In respect of Magnox, I estimate that payments in 1996–97 will amount to £680 million—of which £310 million relates to the period before the privatisation of British Energy—and to £123 million in 1997–98. Annual payments to BNFL are likely to amount to £25 million in both 1996–97 and 1997–98. The annual cost of administration of the levy scheme remains fairly constant at £400,000. There is no other expenditure from the levy.

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to make further reductions in the fossil fuel levy. [2667]

Mr. Page: Responsibility for the calculation of the fossil fuel levy rests with the Director General of Electricity Supply. In July this year, the DGES announced that the levy rate would fall from 10 per cent. to 3.7 per cent. from 1 November 1996, and that he anticipated that it should be possible to maintain or reduce the rate from 1 April 1997.

Coal Mining

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many people were employed in full-time equivalent terms in the coal mining industry in *(a)* 1992 and *(b)* 1996. [2665]

Mr. Page: Available information is as follows:

Employees in Great Britain

Mining and agglomeration of hard coal [1]

	Full-time	*Part-time*	*Total*
1991[2]	76,700	700	77,400
1993[2]	32,400	400	32,700
1995[3]	10,400	200	10,600

[1] Standard Industrial Classification 1992.

[2] Sources: Census of Employment September 1991 and September 1993, Office for National Statistics. The census of employment was conducted every two years, so data are not available for even numbered years.

[3] Source: Annual Employment Survey September 1995 (which replaced the biennial census of Employment) Office for National Statistics.

Financial Services Act 1986

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many criminal investigations have been undertaken since 1 January 1995 into alleged breaches of section 47 of the Financial Services Act 1986; and what *(a)* advice, *(b)* information and *(c)* assistance has been given by his officials to these investigations. [2632]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Since 1 January 1995, one criminal investigation into alleged breaches of section 47 of the Financial Services Act 1986 has been undertaken. That investigation is being carried out by investigation officers, who are my officials, under the supervision of lawyers of my Department.

Pennine Commercial Holdings

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the inspectors appointed to investigate the affairs of Pennine Commercial Holdings plc have completed their report; and when it will be published. [3407]

Mr. Lang: The inspectors, Elizabeth Appleby QC and Peter Foss FCA, signed their report on 26 July 1996, thus completing the final stage of a series of inquiries, which commenced in 1983, into a group of six connected companies all of which were subsequently put into liquidation.

By November 1989, the only report outstanding was that into Pennine. Although substantially complete, it remained unsigned until July, pending the outcome of appeals by individuals connected with Pennine against convictions on criminal charges relating to, among other things, the subject matter of the inspectors' inquiries.

While the Department's general practice has been to publish reports by inspectors into public quoted companies, as Pennine formerly was, the Secretary of State has concluded that, in this case, publication is not justified.

Limited Liability Partnerships Law (Jersey)

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action he intends to take in response to the draft limited liability partnerships law in Jersey with particular reference to United Kingdom professional firms moving their nominal registration to Jersey. [3406]

Mr. Lang: I am well aware of the concerns of many within the professions about the possible consequences of the unlimited liability of partners in the modern commercial environment. In a big modern partnership advising on large commercial transactions it may be impossible for partners to know all other partners and their work—yet their personal assets can be put at risk by the actions of their partners. The Government are determined to maintain a competitive and up-to-date legal framework for business in the UK. We are aware of recent developments in partnership law in other jurisdictions such as the United States of America and Jersey, and responses to a recent consultation were strongly in favour of dealing with this issue. The Government therefore intend to bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity to make limited liability partnership available to regulated professions in the UK, subject to appropriate safeguards to protect the interests of those doing business with the limited liability partnership. To keep a level playing field with companies and partnerships registered in the UK, limited liability partnerships registered abroad but operating from a place of business in the UK will be required to file financial information equivalent to that to be required from limited liability partnerships registered in this country. The Government will publish before Easter full and detailed proposals for legislation, for consultation with all interested parties.

Marketed Services (Productivity)

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the United Kingdom's average level of productivity in marketed services; and what are the equivalent levels in other OECD countries. [548]

Mr. Lang: There are no published figures for average levels of productivity in market services in the UK. There is some evidence that our productivity across market services is still roughly a third less than in the US, France and Germany, but, on average, the gap has narrowed since 1979.

Butte Mining

Mr. Byers: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what dates during 1993 and 1994 the then Minister for Corporate Affairs attended meetings to discuss whether disqualification proceedings should be taken against certain directors of Butte Mining arising from their conduct as directors of Butte Mining; and on what date the Minister decided that no proceedings should be brought. [2983]

Mr. Lang: It is not my Department's practice to comment on the affairs of individual companies.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992 and are planned for the coming year, in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1897]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The information requested on IT projects undertaken by my Department since January 1992 is set out. Projects approved by the Department's next step agencies and funded from their budgets are not included. This information provided on projects below £200,000 and on planned projects is limited to that readily available from central records.

	Number approved	*Number planned*
Less than £200,000	141	7
£200,000–£1 million	7	3
£1 million–£2 million	4	1
£2 million–£3 million	2	2
£3 million–£4 million	1	0
£4 million–£5 million	2	0
£5 million–£6 million	1	0
£6 million–£7 million	0	0
£7 million–£8 million	0	0
£8 million–£9 million	2	0
£9 million–£10 million	0	0
Over £10 million	1	0

Privatised Utilities (Redundancies)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many workers have been made unemployed by the privatised gas, water, electricity and telecoms utilities between April 1992 and April 1996; and what is the estimated cost to public funds. [2974]

Mr. John M. Taylor: This is a commercial matter for the companies concerned. There are long-term benefits to the whole economy from allowing resources, including labour, to move to more productive uses, and to the extent that redundant employees find alternative employment there would be benefits to public funds as well as to the economy.

British Energy

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he last discussed matters with British Energy. [2977]

Mr. Page: Under the UK nuclear site licensing regime, nuclear operators must demonstrate the safety of nuclear installations to the satisfaction of the nuclear industry's independent regulator, the Health and Safety Executive's nuclear installations inspectorate. Therefore, while Ministers might discuss, in general terms, safety issues with nuclear licensees such as British Energy, operational safety at nuclear installations is a matter for licencees in consultation with the regulator.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what guarantees British Energy has given that its proposal to shed jobs over the next three years will not affect safety standards. [2976]

Mr. Page: For British Energy, ensuring safety at its nuclear installations is an absolute prerequisite for its future business success. In announcing its proposals to reduce staff numbers as part of its aim of reducing costs and improving the overall efficiency of the company, British Energy made it clear that these staff reductions will in no way compromise the company's commitment to safety. The nuclear industry's independent regulator, the Health and Safety Executive's nuclear installations inspectorate, is being fully consulted on the proposed changes and will need to be satisfied that the proposals remain consistent with arrangements for the management of safety within British Energy.

Alco-pop

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals he has to ensure that alco-pop drinks are not marketed to under-18s. [1804]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The Government believe that self-regulation is the most effective way to control alcohol advertising. We welcome the responsible approach taken by the Portman Group and its members in drawing up a voluntary code of practice for the packaging, marketing and sale of alcoholic soft drinks in response to concerns about these drinks and their appeal to young people. There is, therefore, no need for action by Government in this area.

Competition Law

Dr. Howells: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proportion of submissions received in 1996 by his Department on proposals for competition law reform were broadly in favour of *(a)* the incorporation of measures similar to article 85 of the treaty of Rome into United Kingdom law and *(b)* the introduction of a prohibition approach to anti-competitive agreements. [2245]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Responses were almost universally in favour of a prohibition approach to anti-competitive agreements following the broad framework of article 85, with a majority preferring that the prohibition set out in article 85(1) should be narrowed in scope along the lines suggested in the consultation document.

Dr. Howells: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress his Department has made since the publication of the Green Paper "Abuse of Market Power" in 1992; and if he will make a statement. [2244]

Mr. Taylor: The Government announced in April 1993 that they intended to strengthen the existing provisions in the Fair Trading Act 1973 and the Competition Act 1980 to deal with abuse of market power A consultation document issued in March 1996, "Tackling Cartels and the Abuse Market Power—a consultation document", set out specific proposals on how the existing framework should be strengthened. Draft clauses which would give effect to the proposals to strengthen the fair trading and competition Acts were published in August 1996 as part of a draft competition Bill.

Dr. Howells: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the advantages of introducing a prohibition approach to United Kingdom competition law. [2248]

Mr. Taylor: The Government believe that their proposals to replace the present Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1977 with a prohibition of anti-competitive agreements will be a more efficient and effective way of dealing with the control of anti-competitive agreements.

On a prohibition of abuse of market, the Government remain of the view that no compelling case has been made in favour of a prohibition-based system for the economy at large. The difficulties of clearly defining abuse risk deterring genuinely competitive behaviour. The Government are, however, happy to promote further public debate on this matter.

Dr. Howells: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many submissions have been received to date following the publication of the consultation paper "Tackling Cartels and the Abuse of Market Power". [2246]

Mr. Taylor: My Department has published two consultation documents under this heading this year, the first a consultation document on the detailed policy options for implementing the Government's proposals, the second a document containing a draft Bill.

In response to the first document, we have received 109 submissions. In response to the second document, we have received 91 submissions to date.

Dr. Howells: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much departmental time was spent in preparation of the consultation paper "Tackling Cartels and the Abuse of Market Power." [2247]

Mr. Taylor: My Department has issued two consultation documents under this heading this year, the first a consultation document on the detailed policy options for implementing the Government's proposals, the second a document containing a draft Bill: 1.4 man years were spent in preparing the first document, 3.2 man years in preparing the second.

Multi-fibre Arrangement

Mr. Rooney: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what discussions took place at the Council of Ministers meeting on 25 October regarding the multi-fibre arrangement; [2987]

(2) what discussions he has had with the World Trade Organisation regarding the operation of the multi-fibre arrangement; [2986]

(3) what representations he has recently received regarding the operation of the multi-fibre arrangement. [2988]

Mr. Lang: My Department has been consulting the British textile and clothing industry, retailers, importers and consumers about the basis on which the European Union should implement stage 2 of the phase-out of the general agreement on tariffs and trade multi-fibre arrangement on 1 January 1998. The General Affairs Council has not yet considered the matter but is likely to take a decision on 25 November. Decisions on this sort by textile importing countries, including the EU, are a matter for them and are not up for negotiation at the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation to be held in Singapore from 9 to 13 December.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each resolution repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each repeal. [1404]

Mr. Page: My Department currently proposes to repeal the following regulations by the end of 1996:

Trade Descriptions (Place of Production) (Marking) Order 1988;

The Rag Flock (Other Filling Materials) Act 1951;

The Rag Flock and Other Filling Materials Regulations 1981;

The Stand for Carry-Cot (Safety) Regulations 1966;

The Gas Catalytic Heaters (Safety) Regulations 1984;

The Asbestos Products (Safety) Regulations 1985;

The Asbestos Products (Safety) (Amendment) Regulations 1987; and

The Quotations Regulations 1989.

My Department currently proposes to repeal and replace the following regulations by the end of 1996:

The Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay (Remedies) Regulations 1993;

The Race Relations (Interest on Awards) Regulations 1994; and

The Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations 1995.

Since the effect in each case will be to reduce rather than increase, compliance costs, a compliance cost assessment is not required. Departments do, however, seek to estimate approximate savings wherever possible. The cost of undertaking a CCA varies from case to case, but it is generally modest. Because part of the cost falls on the businesses consulted, a full CCA would be inappropriate for measures designed to reduce business burdens. If, however, a replacement regulation would increase burdens, a CCA will be produced.

Television Decoders

Mr. Renton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to ensure that his television decoder to be used for digital satellite programmes is also available at fair and reasonable cost for digital terrestrial programmes. [2053]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* Regulations have been in place since 23 August this year, well in advance of any manufacturing agreements for decoders, which deal with the licensing of decoder technology. The regulations—1996/2185—provide that licensing of proprietary technology for conditional access to manufacturers of consumer equipment must be undertaken on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms. Owners of such technology, when licensing one manufacturer, must therefore consider applications for additional licences from other manufacturers—perhaps acting on behalf of other broadcasters operating on other delivery systems—and must grant or refuse such applications on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms. If a manufacturer or broadcaster believes he is being unfairly refused a licence, the regulations allow him to take immediate action in court against the owner of the technology.

Taken together, these will enable manufacturers to supply set-top boxes which either incorporate facilities for terrestrial and satellite reception, or to which such facilities could be added at a fair and reasonable cost, should they see a market for such receivers which is worth pursuing.

The regulations also prohibit the owner of the technology from dissuading a manufacturer from including additional conditional access technology or a common interface in the same decoder. A common interface allows for the attachment of additional conditional access components and other components of the digital decoder—for example, a receiver for another deliver mechanism such as digital terrestrial.

The Government do not intend to impose requirements which will increase the cost of set-top boxes, the equipment which will be used to decode digital television signals, by mandating the inclusion of facilities which consumers may not wish to use. However, the European standards for digital television are designed to assist manufacturers who wish to produce receivers capable of receiving and decoding both satellite and terrestrial signals, or to which additional reception capabilities can be added.

In due course, conditional access systems are likely to be integrated in the television set, the manufacturers of which will seek to provide access to a wide range of broadcasters.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Learning Credits

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce learning credits for 16 to 19-year-old students. [2207]

Mr. Paice: The Government propose to bring together, into a single entitlement to learning expressed in the form of a credit, their existing guarantee of training and the statutory duty of the Further Education Funding Council to secure sufficient and adequate education for young people. All young people would be issued with a learning credit as they complete their compulsory education. Learning credits, which would not be cash based, would build on the best of youth credits arrangements already operated by training and enterprise councils. Careers services, working closely with providers, would have an important role in issuing the credit as part of the information and guidance they provide to all young people.

The Government believe that the learning credits approach, taken together with the work proposed to secure greater convergence of post-16 funding arrangements, would further strengthen the choices young people make and the responsiveness of providers to them. They intend to consult on learning credits in December, with a view to their phased introduction from 1997.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what financial provision is being made to *(a)* the local education authority and *(b)* voluntary organisations in the county of Durham to increase awareness of drug and alcohol-related problems. [2406]

Mrs. Gillan: Under the grants for education support and training programme for 1996–97, £67,450 has been made available to Durham LEA in support of in-service training of teachers whose responsibilities include drug education in schools; and £14,000 in support of training for youth and community workers in raising their awareness of and developing skills for dealing with young people at risk from, or in the early stages of, drug abuse.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school absences of pupils have been related to drug and alcohol abuse in the county of Durham since 1992. [2407]

Mrs. Gillan: This information is not collected centrally. Information on levels of authorised and unauthorised absence is collected annually in respect of all day pupils of compulsory school age, but schools are not required to break their absence totals down by cause of absence.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school children in the county of Durham have received treatment and counselling for alcohol dependency since 1992. [2408]

Mr. Burns: I have been asked to reply.

This information is not available centrally.

Physics Examinations

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of students sitting the A-level examination in physics obtained passes at A, B and C grades *(a)* in 1976 and *(b)* in 1996. [2438]

Mrs. Gillan: The percentage of students obtaining passes at grades A, B and C in GCE A-level physics syllabuses examined in 1976 were 9.5 per cent., 13.3 per cent. and 12.5 per cent. respectively. The corresponding figures for the syllabuses examined in 1996 were 20.6 per cent., 19.1 per cent. and 17.9 per cent.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if she will calculate the number of questions, accounting for what percentage of the marks, a candidate prepared for the 1976 A-level examination in physics could have answered in the 1996 examination; [2435]

(2) if she will calculate the number of questions, accounting for what percentage of marks, a candidate prepared for the 1976 0-level examination in physics could have answered in the 1996 GCSE examination; [2436]

(3) if she will calculate the number of questions, accounting for what percentage of marks, a candidate prepared for the 1996 A-level examination in physics could have answered in the 1976 examination. [2437]

Mrs. Gillan: The examination boards have always offered a range of physics syllabus at GCE A-level, GCE 0-level and, since 1986, GCSE. It is therefore not possible to calculate the precise number of questions common to physics examinations in 1976 and 1996.

European Structural Fund

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how much money has been withheld from the United Kingdom by the European Commission as a result of the Government's decision not to participate in objective 4 of the European structural fund *(a)* as a percentage of the total United Kingdom allocation and *(b)* in pounds sterling for the period 1994 to 1996; [2403]

(2) what sum has been withheld from *(a)* the west midlands region and *(b)* the city of Birmingham by the European Commission as a result of the Government's decision not to participate in objective 4 of the European structural funds (i) as a percentage of the total United Kingdom allocation and (ii) in pounds sterling for the period 1994 to 1996. [2405]

Mr. Paice: Some 3,377 million ecu are available for spending in Great Britain under objectives 3 and 4 of the structural funds between 1994 and 1999. The objective 3 plan for 1994 to 1996 period, which was agreed with the European Commission, provided for 1,501 million of that money to be spent in the UK. The remaining 1,876 million ecu are available for spending in Great Britain under objectives 3 and 4 of the structural funds between 1997 and 1999. The plans for spending that money are currently being negotiated.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what sums her Department estimates will be withheld from the United Kingdom European Commission as a result of the Government's decision not to participate in objective 4 of the European structural fund *(a)* as a percentage of the total United Kingdom by the allocation and *(b)* in pounds sterling for 1997 to 1999. [2404]

Mr. Paice: There is no reason to believe that any sums will be withheld by the European Commission for 1997 to 1999. Officials are currently negotiating plans with the Commission for the combined budget for objective 3 and 4 between 1997 and 1999.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what factors underlay her Department's decision not to participate in objective 4 of the European structural fund, and what plans she has to review her policy. [2398]

Mr. Paice: We preferred to spend the joint budget for objective 3 and 4 on help for unemployed people. Officials are currently negotiating the use of the budget for 1997 to 1999 with the European Commission.

Medical Pay Awards

Mr. Chris Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to make an announcement on the alignment of academic medical pay awards this year with medical pay awards generally within the NHS; and if she will make a statement. [2662]

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend holds to the view that academic medical pay awards should generally be aligned with NHS medical pay awards, settled following the Doctors and Dentists Remuneration Review Body recommendations, but it is for university and college employers to set pay levels.

Barnsley and Doncaster Training and Education Council

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps her Department is taking to encourage partnerships between Barnsley and Doncaster TEC and the local employment service. [2677]

Mr. Paice: Barnsley and Doncaster TEC has in place a joint statement of arrangement with the two local Employment Service district offices in its area, for liaison and co-operation. This results in regular meetings between the TEC, Employment Service district managers and lead suppliers to discuss and take forward operational matters.

The statement of arrangement has been strengthened this year by the addition of specific targets for training for work referrals and starts; and arrangements for joint monitoring of performance.

Testing

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment *(a)* she and *(b)* bodies receiving public funds, have made of the impact of the joint requirements of the national curriculum and key stage testing on the ability of school staff and heads to order the manner of individual and corporate learning most likely to attain the objectives set out by The national forum for values. [2694]

Mrs. Gillan: None. Such assessment would be premature, given that the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority has only just started consulting on the recommendations of its national forum for values in Education and the Community.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992 and are planned for the coming year, in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1905]

Mr. Robin Squire: The number of information technology projects undertaken since 1992 is:

Cost band	*Financial Years*					
	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*Total*
£0–£1 million	68	43	61	71	81	324
£1–£2 million	—	—	—	1	1	2
£2–£3 million	1	—	1	—	—	2
£3–£4 million	1	1	—	—	—	2
£4–£11 million	—	—	—	—	—	—
£11–£12 million	1	—	—	—	—	1

The project numbers for 1996–97 include those planned and started. Further projects will be added for the coming year after the annual round of consultations with customers.

Sponsor Governors

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the functions and purpose of proposed sponsor governors for county and controlled schools; under what circumstances she would expect to use her proposed powers of direction; and what financial arrangements she would expect to be agreed prior to her decision to make a directive. [2693]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Department proposes to enable county, voluntary-controlled and special agreement secondary schools have to have sponsor governors. This will help such schools strengthen their links with the business world and enable sponsors to take part in governance to the mutual benefit of school and sponsor. Similar arrangements exist for grant-maintained and voluntary-aided schools. We would expect a direction to be made only after a request by the governing body of a school designated as a specialist school to change its instrument of government to include sponsor governors. No financial arrangements would need to be agreed prior to a decision to make a directive.

Competitive Admissions

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment who will be responsible for *(a)* deciding on the criteria of tests used, *(b)* conducting the tests or examinations and *(c)* establishing

arrangements for external adjudicators for a maintained school which has received approval to obtain its annual entry by means of a competitive admissions policy.[2695]

Mr. Robin Squire: The admission arrangements of a selective or partially selective school are, and will continue to be, the responsibility of the relevant school admission authority: the local education authority in the case of a county or controlled school and the governing body in the case of a voluntary-aided, special agreement or grant-maintained school.

Education Bill

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will send a copy of the Education Bill to each primary and secondary maintained school head teacher in England and Wales, together with a letter requesting them to report in respect of *(a)* each clause, *(b)* each group of clauses and *(c)* related schedules, (i) any problems they foresee in their implementation and (ii) any likely consequential effects. [2696]

Mr. Forth: No. Many of the proposals in the Bill have already been the subject of widespread consultation and we doubt whether head teachers would welcome such a request.

Disabled Pupils

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimates she has made of the resources available to each local education authority to provide *(a)* extra facilities, *(b)* extra teachers and *(c)* extra funds, over those allocated under local management of schools formulae, to be devoted to meeting the special behavioural and scholastic needs of pupils in mainstream (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools, not being schools already wholly devoted to the needs of pupils with innate disabilities. [2697]

Mr. Robin Squire: It is for the LEAs to decide how to allocate the resources at their disposal, for which Government provision is made in the light of the full range of LEAs' responsibilities.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment from what source she expects the Funding Agency for Schools to obtain the costs of establishing a new grant–maintained school under powers granted to it. [2698]

Mr. Robin Squire: The capital costs that fall to the Funding Agency for Schools when it establishes a new grant–maintained school would have to be met from the capital resources available to the agency. The recoupment of recurrent costs from the local education authority in which a new GM school is situated will be considered case by case.

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 4 November, *Official Report*, column *376*, if borrowing by grant-maintained schools to expand their capacity by up to 50 per cent. by means of commercial borrowing or the private finance initiative, will be taken into account in their grant formula as distinct from the formulae used for schools of their category expanding their capacity. [2985]

Mr. Squire: It is for the Funding Agency for Schools to decide how the sums available for GM schools' capital are distributed among individual schools in the light of the priorities for GM capital spending.

Pupil Selection

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 4 November, *Official Report*, column *379*, concerning the selection of pupils for secondary schools by aptitude or ability, what studies she has evaluated in respect of the indications of general academic ability at the age of 16 years which can be predicted by tests at the age of 11 years; who are the admissions authorities determining which tests are to be applied; and how many persons will be responsible for making these decisions. [2984]

Mr. Robin Squire: Research on value added in education consistently shows that prior attainment is the best single predictor of subsequent academic performance. Local education authorities and schools often compare the attainment of pupils entering secondary education with achievements at age 16, for management and other purposes. It is for the relevant school admission authority to decide if tests of aptitude or ability should form part of the admissions process.

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 4 November, *Official Report*, columns *379-80*, concerning the proposed duty of grant-maintained and non-grant-maintained secondary schools to consider annually the introduction of selective entry, what estimate she has made of the percentage of parents of primary school children who prefer selective admission arrangements for secondary schools; and what sample polls she has conducted concerning such preferences. [2993]

Mr. Squire: A survey carried out for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, published on 22 January 1996, found that half those parents surveyed favoured selective education. Existing selective schools are popular with parents and many are significantly oversubscribed.

Secondary Schools

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her oral statement of 29 October, *Official Report*, column 471, concerning the successful co-existence of selective and comprehensive secondary schools, if she will list those local education authorities in whose areas such co-existence exists without prejudicing the standard of education of secondary school pupils. [2994]

Mr. Robin Squire: My right hon. Friend was referring to comments made by the hon. Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) about educational standards in areas with both wholly selective and non-selective schools. In the majority of such areas the proportion of children receiving five or more GCSE grades A* to C is higher than the national average.

Minority Languages

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice is issued by her Department to examination boards on the range of minority languages to be offered at A-level. [2989]

Mrs. Gillan: None.

Selective Education

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will take steps to ascertain the views of parents of children under the age of 11 years on proposals to introduce a system of selective education within the areas of those local education authorities where no such system currently exists in the maintained sector of secondary education. [2992]

Mr. Robin Squire: Governing bodies are best placed to assess local parental demand for the introduction or extension of selection in their schools. The Education Bill proposes that they should be required to consider the issue annually.

Bengali

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations she has received regarding the availability of Bengali as an A-level subject. [2991]

Mrs. Gillan: My right hon. Friend has received letters about the availability of Bengali as an A-level subject from the hon. Members for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) and for Bath (Mr. Foster).

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which examination boards currently offer Bengali as an A-level subject. [2990]

Mrs. Gillan: The Northern examination and assessment board currently offers Bengali at GCE A-level.

Personal Services

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many jobs in the personal services industry, with special reference to male escort agencies, are classed as vacancies at jobcentres; and if she will break down the information by region; [2915]

(2) into what classification the Employment Service places jobs in the personal services industry, with special reference to jobs in male escort agencies and editing adult magazines; [2916]

(3) what guidelines are issued to jobcentre staff in respect of training advice on personal safety to female jobseekers who have been recommended to apply for jobs in the personal services industry, with special reference to work for escort agencies and adult magazines; [2918]

(4) if a jobseeker is entitled to refuse to attend an interview for work in the personal services industry without putting their benefit at risk. [2917]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. E. G. Fogden to Mrs. Helen Jackson dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to write to you direct about your questions of 4 November concerning vacancies in the personal services industry advertised in Jobcentres. This falls within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

The information you requested on the number of jobs in the personal services industry which are classed as vacancies is not available and the Employment Service does not collect specific information on the number of vacancies with male escort agencies.

The Employment Service does not classify vacancies as being in the personal services industry. All vacancies are classed according to the occupation.

All Jobcentres have guidance which gives points to check when considering the suitability of vacancies to ensure jobseekers are not put at risk. Jobcentres seek as much information as possible about the job, its location, whether the duties or hours are different from those normally expected for the type of job and whether the arrangements for interview are outside normal working hours and away from the work premises. For vacancies in the personal services sector special regard is paid to these factors.

In addition there is a leaflet available to jobseekers in all Jobcentres titled "Be Alert" which describes the steps to take to ensure personal safety when seeking work from an employer.

Guidance issued to Jobcentres state that if they are notified of vacancies which require models, offer employment in sauna baths, massage parlours, escort and kissogram agencies, or other personal/telephone services special regard should be paid to the reputation of the employer. Details are sought of establishment and conditions of training and employment, whether the hours of work or the location or interview arrangements give cause for concern and whether there is any indication of a lack of professional standards. Jobcentres are advised that where any concerns arise around the above issues that such vacancies should be treated with caution and in any cases of doubt they should refuse to handle the vacancies.

The Jobseeker's Act provides that jobseekers may be sanctioned for refusing or failing to apply for, or refusing or failing to accept a job notified to them by an officer of the Employment Service. Guidance to people in local offices emphasises that any vacancies offered to the jobseeker must be those which they are table to undertake. It would not be in either the jobseeker's or the employer's interests to submit jobseekers to vacancies for which they were unsuitable.

Jobseekers are told at the time they are made aware of a suitable vacancy that refusal or failure to apply for the job, or subsequent non-acceptance of the job offered, may result in loss of Jobseeker's Allowance. This ensures that the jobseeker can make their decision in the full knowledge of the consequences.

If the jobseeker subsequently refuses to apply for, or accept, a suitable job the case will be sent to an independent adjudication officer to determine whether the jobseeker had good cause for their refusal. The adjudication officer will examine the suitability of the job offered and the jobseekers reasons for refusal. In addition where the jobseeker refused the vacancy due to any sincerely held religious or conscientious objection this would constitute good cause.

I hope this is helpful in clarifying the position.

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many (i) head teachers, (ii) deputy head teachers and (iii) teachers took early retirement on the grounds of ill health *(a)* in total and *(b)* in each local education authority in the financial year 1995–96; and if she will make a statement. [2970]

Mrs. Gillan: The following table shows the numbers of teachers in service at 31 March 1995 who were awarded ill-health retirement in the financial year 1995–96. The table covers the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special education sector in England.

Ill-health retirements in financial year 1995–96 (provisional)

	Heads	Deputies	Classroom teachers
Corporation of London	0	0	0
Camden	0	*	18
Greenwich	*	0	16
Hackney	*	*	9
Hammersmith and Fulham	*	0	16
Islington	*	*	5
Kensington and Chelsea	*	0	8
Lambeth	0	0	16
Lewisham	*	0	10
Southwark	*	0	13
Tower Hamlets	0	0	8
Wandsworth	0	*	11
Westminster	*	*	7
Barking and Dagenham	*	*	6
Barnet	*	0	18
Bexley	*	*	8
Brent	0	*	10
Bromley	7	0	12
[illegible]ydon	*	0	17
[illegible]g	0	*	11
Enfield	*	0	16
Haringey	6	*	7
Harrow	0	*	13
Havering	*	*	17
Hillingdon	0	*	9
Hounslow	*	*	20
Kingston upon Thames	*	*	12
Merton	*	*	*
Newham	0	0	11
Redbridge	*	0	7
Richmond upon Thames	*	0	8
Sutton	0	*	13
Waltham Forest	*	*	16
Birmingham	6	9	93
Coventry	0	*	25
Dudley	*	*	23
Sandwell	*	*	20
Solihull	0	*	12
Walsall	*	*	30
Wolverhampton	0	*	19
Knowsley	*	0	12
Liverpool	*	*	40
St. Helens	*	*	11
Sefton	*	*	24
Wirral	*	*	26
Bolton	*	*	19
Bury	*	*	17
Manchester	*	*	34
Oldham	*	*	18
Rochdale	5	*	26
Salford	0	*	21
Stockport	*	*	32
Tameside	*	*	21
Trafford	*	*	23
Wigan	*	5	22
Barnsley	0	5	16
Doncaster	*	*	24
Rotherham	*	*	14
Sheffield	6	*	31
Bradford	7	5	37
Calderdale	*	*	20
Kirklees	*	*	38
Leeds	*	6	70
Wakefield	5	*	40
Gateshead	*	*	26
Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	18
North Tyneside	*	*	9
South Tyneside	*	*	13
Sunderland	*	*	32
Avon	12	7	55
Bedfordshire	*	5	34
Berkshire	*	*	54
Buckinghamshire	5	*	41
Cambridgeshire	*	5	35
Cheshire	12	7	72
Cleveland	5	11	70
Cornwall	12	7	35

Ill-health retirements in financial year 1995–96 (provisional)

	Heads	Deputies	Classroom teachers
Cumbria	5	9	33
Derbyshire	14	9	46
Devon	17	9	74
Dorset	6	0	47
Durham	6	11	82
East Sussex	8	*	37
Essex	9	14	107
Gloucestershire	5	*	32
Hampshire	11	12	123
Hereford and Worcester	12	8	58
Hertfordshire	*	*	71
Humberside	5	13	85
Isle of Wight	*	0	15
Kent	26	9	128
Lancashire	24	19	167
Leicestershire	6	5	68
Lincolnshire	9	*	40
Norfolk	16	11	57
North Yorkshire	7	5	37
Northamptonshire	6	5	67
Northumberland	5	*	25
Nottinghamshire	13	8	75
Oxfordshire	*	*	43
Shropshire	7	*	27
Somerset	15	6	48
Staffordshire	8	11	113
Suffolk	8	*	49
Surrey	7	5	50
Warwickshire	5	*	37
West Sussex	8	*	25
Wiltshire	5	*	38
England	479	374	3,627

In order to avoid sensitive information about individuals being identified, numbers less than five are shown as asterisks.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when she proposes to make regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in respect of the questions procedure. [3499]

Mrs. Gillan: We have today laid regulations under section 56 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. These regulations will provide someone, the complainant, who believes he or she may have been discriminated against under the Act's employment provisions with a questionnaire to ask questions of the person believed to have discriminated, the respondent. The regulations also provide for a form with which the respondent can reply. These forms will be included in a booklet together with guidance on how to complete them. The booklet will be available free of charge from jobcentres, citizens advice bureaux and the DDA information line and can be provided in Braille and audio cassette format. The procedure will assist the complainant in deciding whether or not to start proceedings and, if proceedings are started, in formulating and presenting a case in the most effective manner.

International Labour Conference

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has for publishing the White Paper on the instruments adopted at the 82nd session of the International Labour Conference 1995. [3500]

Mr. Paice: My right hon. Friend has today published the White Paper entitled "International Labour Conference" which gives details of the instruments

adopted at the 82nd session of the International Labour Conference 1995 and sets out the Government's intentions in relation to these new instruments.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992 and are planned for the coming year, in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1903]

Mr. Sproat: The Department of National Heritage has undertaken 23 information technology projects since 1992 and seven are planned for 1996–97. All these projects fall into the cost band £0 to £1,000,000.

British Museum

Sir Patrick Cormack: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what additional resources she plans to make available to the British museum to compensate for the sum paid by the British library as a contribution to the running costs of the Bloomsbury site. [2805]

Mr. Sproat: The Government have already provided some additional resources to the British museum. In November 1993, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke), announced that the Government would provide the British museum with an additional £1 million per annum from 1996–97 onwards, in recognition of the consequences of the departure of the British library from Bloomsbury.

The Government are considering the museum's case for funding most carefully. Grant in aid allocations will be announced immediately after the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statement.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what regulations her Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if she proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages or disadvantages of each repeal. [2912]

Mr. Sproat: The Department of National Heritage does not plan any repeals before the end of 1996. When regulations are identified for repeal, the effect is to reduce rather than increase compliance costs. Therefore, although we seek to identify approximate savings where possible, a compliance cost assessment is not required. Because part of the cost falls on the businesses consulted, a full CCA is not appropriate either for measures designed to reduce business burdens.

HEALTH

Homelessness

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the primary care projects in England to help homeless people funded by his Department. [1033]

Mr. Burns: The Department has funded 35 primary health care projects in England to help homeless people to access the health care services that they need. These projects are listed in the following table. Main funding for the 35 schemes finished by 31 March 1996 but the Department still monitors the schemes and continues to make available non cash-limited funding for general practitioner sessions for 26 projects.

Primary Health Care Projects

Projects that no longer receive cash limited funding but continue to receive non-cash limited funding, for GP sessions only:

Bath
Birmingham
Bradford
Cambridge
Camden and Islington
City and East London
Cricklewood
Durham
Ealing
Hereford and Worcester
Kensington and Chelsea
Kirklees
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham
Leeds
Milton Keynes
Newcastle
Nottingham
Oxford
Peasholme
Peterborough
Preston
Reading
Sheffield
Southampton
Toxteth
Whitechapel

Projects that no longer receive cash limited or non-cash limited funding:

Blackpool
Brighton
Bristol
Croydon
Fazakerley
Gloucester
Hammersmith
Maidstone
Morecambe.

Trust Mergers

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice he gave to Wakefield district health authority in relation to the process of public consultation concerning NHS trust mergers; [1822]

(2) what is the current position in respect of the proposed merger of national health service hospital trusts in the Wakefield district; [1815]

(3) When the decision was taken to transfer the conduct of the Wakefield NHS trust merger consultation from the project team to the district health authority; and what advice was offered by his Department at that time. [1813]

Mr. Horam: Pontefract Hospitals national health service trust and Pinderfields Hospital national health service trust have conducted public consultation on their proposed merger. On 7 October, the NHS executive asked Wakefield health authority to undertake a further period of statutory consultation with Pontefract and District community health council, Wakefield community health council, and staff interests at both the trusts on proposals contained in the document "An Application for National Health Service Trust Status".

This further period of statutory consultation will end on 17 February 1997.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on the aborted initial consultation process about the merger of NHS trusts in the Wakefield district. [1814]

Mr. Horam: All responses to the consultation undertaken by the project team acting for Pontefract Hospitals national health service trust and Pinderfields Hospital national health service trust will be passed to the NHS executive for consideration, together with responses to the further statutory consultation.

Community Health Councils

Mr. Chris Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost of the consultants appointed to undertake a review of the role and function of community health councils. [2660]

Mr. Horam: Insight management consultants were commissioned by the national health service executive to consider a resource allocation system and performance management framework for community health councils. The cost of this work will be approximately £80,000.

Medication

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the average *(a)* number of types and *(b)* quantity of preparations taken by people in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years broken down by *(a)* gender and *(b)* age bands of 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [2883]

Mr. Malone: No estimate has been made.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

Mr. Deva: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will announce changes in membership of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority; and if he will make a statement on the outcome of the quinquennial review of the authority. [3433]

Mr. Horam: I am pleased to announce that the following have been appointed members of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority for three years from today:

Dr. Gulum Bahadur, clinical biochemist at the University College and Middlesex school of medicine;

Dr. Ruth Chambers, general practitioner and senior lecturer at the centre for primary health care, University of Keele; and fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners;

Professor Christine Gosden, professor of medical genetics, University of Liverpool, at Liverpool women's hospital;

Professor Stuart Lewis, professor of psychology applied to medicine in the School of Clinical Medicine at Queen's university, Belfast.

There is one further vacancy and I expect to announce an appointment shortly to bring the number of members up to 21, including the chairman.

In all, 15 members of the authority completed their terms this year. Ten members have been re-appointed, for terms varying between one and three years in order to avoid a large number of members completing their period of tenure at the same time:

	Term
Diana Lady Brittan (deputy chairman)	1 year
Ms Liz Forgan	2 years
Most Reverend Richard Holloway	1 year
Professor Martin Johnson	3 years
Mr. Richard Jones	2 years 3 months
Dr. Brian Lieberman	3 years
Ms Angela Mays	1 year
Dr. Anne McLaren	2 years
Julia Lady Tugendhat	3 years
Mr. John Williams	2 years 3 months

These appointments were all made in accordance with guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments following the first report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life—the Nolan report Cm 2850-1, May 1995.

The members have been selected on the basis of their experience and personal qualities. They have been chosen so as to ensure that the authority is informed by views and experience across a wide range of relevant disciplines.

I am very grateful to Professor Robert Berry, Ms Joan Harbison, Professor Stephen Hillier, and Ms Penelope Keith who are retiring, having served with the authority since its inception in 1990.

In common with all executive non-departmental public bodies, the HFEA is subject to a review every five years. The first such review of the HFEA, carried out by Mr. M. G. Lillywhite, has been completed. I have placed a copy of the report to United Kingdom Health Ministers in the Library.

The review concluded that the case for an independent statutory body in the field of human fertilisation and embryology remains valid and that there is no other body which might perform the function of the HFEA more effectively. Mr. Lillywhite made 12 recommendations, which we have accepted and for which the HFEA has agreed an implementation plan. In particular, the authority's management statement, which I placed in the Library, announced in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford (Mr. Duncan Smith) on 24 July 1996 at column *524*, provides for the production of annual business plans and corporate plan. We shall also be holding the authority to account in future through an annual accountability review.

We are very grateful to Mr. Lillywhite for his thorough report. I reaffirm my appreciation of the work undertaken by the HFEA in line with its responsibilities under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990.

Alco-pop Drinks

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultation he has had with the President of the Board of Trade on the regulation of the advertising of alco-pop drinks to ensure that it is not directed at people aged under 18 years. [1802]

Mr. Burns: Although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not directly consulted with my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on this issue, the Government share the concern that has been expressed about the potential appeal of these drinks to young people. We very much welcome the industry's efforts to self-regulate through the Portman Group's code of practice for the packaging, marketing and sale of such drinks. However, the Government will continue to monitor the industry's response closely. The industry must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the public that it can regulate itself effectively.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research has been carried out to ascertain whether there is a relationship between under-age drinking and alco-pop drinks. [1801]

Mr. Burns: We are aware of several recent surveys which have been reported in the national press. The Health Education Authority will also be publishing before the end of the year some research they have commissioned on young people and alcohol.

The Department of Health regularly researches teenage drinking behaviour by adding questions to the biennial survey of smoking among 11 to 15-year-olds. Results of the 1996 survey should be available by Easter 1997.

Alcohol (Young People)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has carried out since 1990 into the relationship between alcohol and depression amongst young people. [1788]

Mr. Burns: As our report, "Sensible Drinking", 1995, recognised, only extremely heavy drinking—in excess of 80g—10 units—a day—over long periods of time is likely to cause conditions such as clinical depression. There is no evidence from the most recent survey of adolescent drinking, the Office of Population Censuses and Survey's "Teenage Drinking in 1994", which looked at alcohol consumption of 11 to 15-year-olds, that any of them were drinking alcohol at levels likely to lead in the short term to psychiatric disorders.

Alcohol-related Illness

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many alcohol-related deaths there have been *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in the west midlands and *(c)* in Coventry in each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change from the previous year in each case; [1781]

(2) how many young people experienced alcohol-related problems *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change from the previous year in each case; [1786]

(3) what research has been carried out to determine how much alcohol-related illnesses and accidents costs the NHS each year. [1790]

Mr. Burns: There is no accepted definition of the term "alcohol-related".

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to assist general practitioners in detecting and treating patients suffering from alcohol-related illness. [1782]

Mr. Burns: We are currently considering what support we might give to purchasers of treatment and care for people with alcohol misuse problems. This would include general practitioners involved in the purchasing and planning of such services. We aim to produce, by next summer, guidance equivalent to the guidance we issued this year to purchasers of services for drug misusers.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase awareness among school children of alcohol-related problems. [1787]

Mr. Burns: Later in the year, the Health Education Authority will be launching a campaign targeted at young people with a particular focus on the short term risks of intoxication. This follows up recommendations in our report "Sensible Drinking", 1995. However, the national curriculum already requires that pupils are taught about alcohol, including the effects of misuse on health.

Alcohol Support Groups

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding alcohol support groups *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands, have received in each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change from the previous year in each case. [1783]

Mr. Burns: This information is not available centrally. Purchasing alcohol services is primarily the responsibility of local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the funding of alcohol support *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands for the coming year. [1784]

Mr. Burns: Purchasing alcohol services is primarily the responsibility of local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. It is for them to agree funding in the light of local priorities.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much public money was provided in *(a)* Holland, *(b)* France, *(c)* Germany and *(d)* Belgium to alcohol support groups in the most recent year for which statistics are available. [1785]

Mr. Burns: Comparable information is not collated centrally.

All but three of the projects costing over £1,000,000 are projects controlled by the NHS Executive.

Free Spectacles

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received in the last six months regarding the provision of free NHS spectacles for younger children; and what plans he has to improve the availability and range of such spectacles. [2700]

Mr. Malone: All children under 16 are entitled to national health service spectacle vouchers which their parents can use to buy a pair of spectacles outright or, alternatively, top-up to buy a more expensive pair. In the last six months I have received representations from two parents who elected to top-up the value of the voucher when buying their children spectacles.

Alcohol Abuse and Unemployment

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has carried out into the relationship between unemployment and alcohol abuse. [1810]

Mr. Burns: None.

Alcohol Dependency

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have received treatment for alcohol dependency *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year. [1800]

Mr. Burns: The information available is given in the table.

Finished consultant episodes with a primary diagnosis of "alcohol dependency syndrome" in NHS hospitals in England and West Midlands, 1989–90 to 1994–95

	England		West Midlands	
Financial year	*Number (thousands)*	*Percentage change from previous year*	*Number (thousands)*	*Percentage change from previous year*
1989–90	20.7	—	2.2	—
1990–91	21.0	1	2.2	–2
1991–92	18.4	–13	2.2	1
1992–93	19.7	7	2.2	0
1993–94	20.1	2	2.5	14
1994–95	20.7	3	2.5	–3

Notes:
1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Figures are based on code 303 of the 9th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, alcohol dependency syndrome.
3. Figures refer to area of treatment.

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics, Department of Health.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many under-18s have received treatment for alcohol dependency *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year. [1803]

Mr. Burns: The information available is given in the table.

Finished consultant episodes amongst under-18s with a primary diagnosis of "alcohol dependency syndrome" in NHS hospitals in England and West Midlands, 1989–90 to 1994–95

Financial year	*England*	*West Midlands*
1989–90	53	10
1990–91	80	5
1991–92	50	8
1992–93	82	3
1993–94	74	4
1994–95	98	2

Notes:

1. Figures are based on code 303 of the 9th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, alcohol dependency syndrome.

2. Figures refer to area of treatment.

3. The numbers involved are small and year-on-year percentage changes have not been shown, because they are not considered to be meaningful.

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics, Department of Health.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1906]

Mr. Horam: The number of information technology projects undertaken since 1992 by the Department is:

	Number
£0 to £1,000,000	184
£1,000,000 to £2,000,000	7
£2,000,000 to £3,000,000	2
£3,000,000 to £4,000,000	2
£4,000,000 to £5,000,000	3
£6,000,000 to £7,000,000	1
£8,000,000 to £9,000,000	1
£10,000,000 to £11,000,000	1
£11,000,000 to £12,000,000	1
£16,000,000 to £17,000,000	2
£19,000,000 to £20,000,000	1
£29,000,000 to £30,000,000	1

The number of new projects planned for the coming year is:

	Number
£0 to £1,000,000	33

All but three of the projects costing over £1 million are projects controlled by the NHS management executive.

Diabetics

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to issue free needles to diabetics; [2180]

(2) what is the cost to the NHS of providing a free needle for use by a diabetic; [2176]

(3) what criteria are used to determine those diabetics who are entitled to receive free needles. [2177]

Mr. Malone: People with diabetes mellitis who need to inject insulin can get free national health service prescriptions from their general practitioner. NHS prescriptions can currently be written both for glass insulin syringes and for the separate needles which fit them; also for disposable insulin syringes with attached needles. The cost to the NHS of a needle for the glass syringe which is intended for multiple use is 28p, and of a needle intended for single use is 2.2p. The cost of a disposable syringe with attached needle varies between 11.5p and 11.9p, depending on the size of the syringe.

We are considering the case for making the needles to fit insulin injection pens available on GP prescription under the NHS.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many diabetics there are *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands; how many there were in each year since 1990; how many require injections of insulin; and if he will express the figures to show the percentage change on the previous year; [2173]

(2) what was the cost to the NHS of treating diabetic patients in each year since 1990 *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands; and if he will express the figures (i) in real terms and (ii) to show the percentage change on the previous year; [2174]

(3) what percentage of diabetics received free needles in each year since 1990 *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands; and if he will express the figures to show the percentage change on the previous year. [2175]

Mr. Malone: This information is not available centrally.

On-duty Car Signs

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the provision of on-duty car signs to non-GP health professionals in the NHS; what plans he has to widen the provisions of such signs; and if he will make a statement. [2701]

Mr. Horam: I have received a limited amount of correspondence on this subject. It is for NHS trusts to develop workable resolutions to meet any local need, for example through dialogue with the police and local authority.

Mentally Disordered Offenders

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to give additional financial assistance to health authorities in respect of their responsibility for mentally disordered offenders. [2702]

Mr. Burns: We recognise that mentally disordered offenders have specialised and complex needs, and that in certain areas there is greater pressure on mental health services to provide for their care and treatment. Current funding of mental health services already recognises, through the capitation formulae, the needs of this group of patients within the spectrum of care and allows individual health authorities to set their priorities for mental health expenditure based on the assessed needs of their local population.

TREASURY

Labour Statistics

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he last reviewed the way in which unemployment statistics are calculated; and if he will publish papers submitted to that review, together with its conclusions, in the Library; [831]

(2) what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the unemployed claimant count as a measure of the scale of unemployment; [829]

(3) what plans he has to undertake a new survey measure of unemployment to supplement the claimant count; and if he will make a statement. [830]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 28 October 1996]:* I refer to the answer which the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave on 24 October to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Banks), *Official Report*, columns *5-6*.

In August 1995, the director of the Office for National Statistics commissioned a technical study from Dr. David Steel, senior lecturer in the department of applied statistics at the university of Wollongong, Australia. This study looked into options for producing monthly statistics from a labour force survey including unemployment figures based on the internationally standard International Labour Organisation definition. Following public consultation on the results of this study, the director of the ONS has decided that there is insufficient demand to justify the monthly publication of LFS data within the agency's budget. I respect that decision.

A report on the consultation exercise will be given in the November 1996 edition of "Labour Market Trends." The latter will be published on 7 November and a copy will be held in the Library. A full set of the responses received during consultation will be available from ONS on application.

The former Select Committee on Employment investigated the validity of the current measures of unemployment in the course of its 1995-96 Session. The Government's response was sent to the successor committee, the Education and Employment Select Committee on 24 October. I understand that the latter will be placed in the Library by the Committee in due course. In his evidence to that Committee, the director of the ONS made it clear that he was satisfied that the claimant count is an accurate measure of those people claiming unemployment-related benefits and that it is particularly useful as a short-term indicator of turning points in the labour market.

Mr. McCartney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people, by region and gender, are undertaking *(a)* youth training and *(b)* training for work; and how many people, in each case, appear in the unemployed claimant count statistics. [1144]

Mrs. Knight: The information falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Ian McCartney, dated 7 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the number of people undertaking Youth Training and Training for Work and whether they are included in the claimant unemployment statistics.

The table below gives the latest readily available official figures. The figures relate to training starts and have been compiled from information provided by the Department for Education and Employment and the Scottish Office. It should be noted that a person can start on the same programme more than once - such cases will be counted in the figures as separate starts.

More highly summarised information giving totals for England & Wales and for Scotland is published in the ONS monthly *Labour Market Statistics First Release*. The latter is available in the House of Commons Library.

Training starts for financial year 1995–96 by gender and region (000s)

	Youth training		*Training for work*	
Government office region	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
South East	16.5	15.3	12.5	6.2
London	14.5	12.6	19.3	12.4
Eastern	12.1	10.2	10.5	5.2
South West	12.8	10.5	13.4	5.4
West Midlands	13.9	12.9	17.3	7.6
East Midlands	13.1	12.0	11.9	4.7
Yorkshire and Humberside	16.0	14.0	19.2	7.3
Merseyside	6.7	6.0	10.7	4.2
North West	19.1	16.1	17.3	7.5
North East	10.4	8.9	14.5	5.1
England	135.1	118.5	146.7	65.7
Wales	9.6	7.8	8.5	3.6
Scotland	23.2	14.5	23.8	5.7

Participants on long-term work-related Government supported training programmes, such as Youth Training and Training for Work, are not included in the claimant count or in the ILO measure of unemployment from the Labour Force Survey and never have been. People on these schemes are either contributing directly to the production of goods and services, or are receiving training in the work place. Accordingly, they are treated as employed, which is consistent with the guidelines of the International Labour Office on the treatment of trainees.

Mr. Hain: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the proportion of employed men in full-time work for each year since 1979. [1668]

Mrs. Knight *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The information falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Peter Hain, dated 7 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the proportion of men in full-time work since 1979.

Information on the number of men in full-time employment is available only on a consistent annual basis from Spring 1984 and is published in *Labour Force Survey Historical Supplement 1984–1996*. Information showing the total number of men in employment is published in Table 1b and information showing the number of men in full-time employment in Table 2a. A copy of the publication is available in the House of Commons Library.

Bank of England

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what preparations his Department has made for granting operational independence to the Bank of England; and if he will make a statement. [803]

Mrs. Knight *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* No such preparations have been made.

Population Statistics

Mr. William Powell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the total United Kingdom population lives in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [2131]

Mrs. Knight: The information falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. William Powell, dated 7 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the proportion of the total United Kingdom population who live in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The figures requested are shown below. They are for the mid-year 1995 and are the most recent available. The latest estimates are regularly published in Table 6 of the ONS *Population Trends* quarterly journal.

Resident population estimates mid-1995

Country	*Thousands*	*Percentage*
England	48,930.4	83.4
Wales	2,916.8	5.0
Scotland	5,136.6	8.8
Northern Ireland	1,649.0	2.8
United Kingdom	58,605.8	100.0

Taxation

Mr. William Powell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of total United Kingdom tax is raised in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [2127]

Mr. Jack: Information on total tax revenue by country is not available. Information on income tax is available by region in "Inland Revenue Statistics", published by the Inland Revenue statistics and economics office. Figures for 1994–95, the latest year available, are in the table.

Proportion of total UK income tax by country

	As a percentage of total
England	86.5
Scotland	8.0
Wales	3.5
Northern Ireland	2.0

Value Added Tax

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlay his decisions *(a)* to allow taxpayers three years to reclaim wrongly paid VAT and *(b)* to allow Customs and Excise to reclaim errors for six years. [2578]

Mr. Oppenheim: The Government have become increasingly concerned at the large amounts of revenue at risk in taxation boundary disputes and it is not in the public interest that the Exchequer remains open to large retrospective claims, in some cases back to the introduction of VAT in 1973. The proposed three-year limit will introduce more certainty and achieves a reasonable balance between the rights of individual taxpayers and taxpayers at large. It is proportionate in effect because, at the time the transactions in question took place, both businesses and their customers will normally have worked on the assumption that tax was due.

There are no proposals to change the six-year limit Customs currently has under its powers to assess for underpaid VAT. A six-year period for assessment is necessary to recover tax underpaid through one-sided error or carelessness and to deter non-compliance with the rules by business.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what action Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has taken in respect of the new rules on the limitation of VAT claims announced on 18 July; and if he will make a statement; [2680]

(2) what discussions he has had with the European Commission concerning the legality of the Government's recently announced changes to the rules for reclaiming VAT; and if he will make a statement. [2682]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* Following the announcement on 18 July by the then Paymaster General that, subject to parliamentary approval as part of the Budget process, a three-year time limit on refunds of overpaid VAT, and other indirect taxes, was to be introduced immediately, Customs and Excise has deferred payments of refunds which are more than three years old.

Customs and Excise officials recently met representatives of the European Commission to discuss the proposals for limiting refunds of overpaid VAT and other indirect taxes. The Commission noted the United Kingdom's position.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total amount due for repayment in respect of VAT incorrectly paid to Her Majesty's Customs and Excise with respect to company cars on the basis of *(a)* a three-year limit on reclaims, *(b)* a six-year limit on reclaims and *(c)* payment made only in respect of claims already made; and if he will make a statement. [2681]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* The High Court found in the appeals of Royscot Leasing Ltd. and Royscot Industrial Leasing Ltd., Allied Domecq plc and T. C. Harrison Group Ltd. that the relevant UK law restricting VAT input tax recovery on company cars is permitted by the EC sixth VAT directive, contrary to the appellants' contentions. No VAT has therefore been incorrectly paid to Her Majesty's Customs and Excise with respect to company cars.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many women, and what percentage of the female population, were diagnosed with breast cancer in each of the last six years. [1295]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The information falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 7 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question asking how many women, and what percentage of the female population, were diagnosed with breast cancer in each of the last six years.

The information for England for the latest six years for which data are available is given in the table below.

Year	*Number*	*Percentage*
1988	24,975	0.11
1989	25,838	0.11
1990	26,994	0.11
1991	28,032	0.11
1992	28,324	0.11
1993	27,502	0.11

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many women in the west midlands were diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995. [1241]

Mrs. Knight *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* The information falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 7 November 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question asking how many women in the West Midlands were diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995.

The provisional number of registrations of breast cancer in the West Midlands in 1993 (the latest year for which data are currently available) is 3,199.

Financial Advisers

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding the proposal by the Personal Investment Authority to abolish the requirement for financial advisers to disclose *(a)* whether they are tied or independent and *(b)* to what extent they are paid by commission. [2630]

Mrs. Angela Knight: No representations have been received.

Endowment Mortgages

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received since 1 January 1995, regarding alleged mis-selling of endowment mortgages; what *(a)* investigations and *(b)* studies he has commissioned on the subject; and what discussions he has had on this issue with the Securities and Investments Board. [2631]

Mrs Angela Knight: The Treasury has on a number of occasions received representations about concerns that mortgage advice may be unduly influenced by the commissions available, including suggestion from the Consumers Association for further regulation. New disclosure rules introduced in January 1995 have the effect that commissions on endowment policies must be disclosed to potential clients. The Treasury has not commissioned any investigations or studies on the subject. Discussions with the Securities and Investments Board take place from time to time at ministerial and official level on all issues of regulatory concern.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

7. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current total of asylum seekers being held in custody. [920]

Miss Widdecombe: On 1 October 1996, a total of 864 persons who had sought asylum at some stage were detained.

Arrest Procedures

14. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will meet his European counterparts to discuss arrest procedures in the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [928]

Mr. Howard: I meet regularly with my counterparts in the European Union and discuss a range of justice and home affairs issues. We have not discussed arrest procedures but my hon. Friend is no doubt aware of the memorandum of understanding agreed last week between Her Majesty's Customs and Excise and the United Road Transport Union which is aimed at minimising the risks run by lorry drivers who ferry sealed loads across international borders.

Police Forces (Guns)

15. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue new guidelines to police forces on the use of guns. [930]

Miss Widdecombe: My right hon. and learned Friend has no plans to do this.

Prisoners (Terrorist Offences)

16. **Mr. Madden:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners convicted of terrorist offences have been *(a)* released from prison in the United Kingdom, *(b)* transferred to prisons in Northern Ireland and *(c)* repatriated to the Republic of Ireland to complete sentences, since August 1994. [931]

Miss Widdecombe: Since 1 September 1994, three prisoners convicted of Irish terrorist-related offences have been released from prisons in England and Wales: 16 have been transferred from England and Wales to prisons in Northern Ireland either on a permanent or temporary basis, and two prisoners have been repatriated to the Republic of Ireland to complete their sentences.

Voting (Homeless People)

18. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with homeless organisations to enable homeless people to vote. [934]

Mr. Sackville: Officials met representatives of various organisations working with the homeless as part of the review of electoral law and practice which the Government set up after the last general election.

Victim Support Services

19. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the development of victim support services in England and Wales. [935]

Mr. Maclean: The new victim's charter, published in June 1996, establishes the continuing commitment of all the criminal justice agencies to improve their services to victims of crime. For example, last year the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board paid out £180 million to victims, making it by far the most generous such scheme anywhere in the world. And the Home Office grant to Victim Support since 1990–91 alone has risen 147 per cent. from £4.735 million to £11.682 million. This has enabled Victim Support to achieve nationwide coverage by establishing 365 local schemes and branches to support the victims of crime throughout England and Wales and to establish a witness support service at all 77 Crown court centres in the country. Victim Support's paid staff of over 800 and its 12,000 volunteers offer support to over one and a quarter million victims of crime a year.

Prison Ombudsman

20. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the recent annual report by the prisons ombudsman. [936]

Miss Widdecombe: The prisons ombudsman's annual report for 1995 was laid before Parliament on 23 October. It describes the important contribution which the prisons ombudsman has made in investigating complaints about the Prison Service.

Child Care Workers (Vetting)

22. **Ms Janet Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve the system of vetting those working with children. [939]

23. **Ms Corston:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve the system of vetting those working with children. [940]

Mr. Maclean: The Police Bill makes provision for criminal record checks giving details of convictions and cautions recorded centrally to be available for all who have regular contact with children whether as employees, trainees or volunteers. Where access is both regular and unsupervised, additional information will be provided from local police records including details of convictions for minor offences and relevant non-conviction information.

Hand Guns

24. **Mr. Hall:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many .22 repeating hand guns are legally held in the United Kingdom. [941]

Miss Widdecombe: Exact figures are not available centrally. The total number of .22 handguns, both repeating and single shot, which are legally held by private individuals on firearm certificate in Great Britain is in the order of 40,000 and others are legally owned by firearms dealers.

Knives (Advertising)

25. **Mr. Stott:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to ban the advertising of knives in ways which appear to incite or condone violence. [942]

Mr. Maclean: It is already an offence for a person to incite another to commit an offence. The content of advertisements is regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority under a code of advertising practice which states that advertisements should not contain anything which might condone or encourage violent or anti-social behaviour.

Open Prisons

26. **Mr. French:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy on open prisons. [943]

Miss Widdecombe: Open prisons are a valuable part of the prison estate. They provide low security places at relatively low cost for prisoners who have been assessed as presenting minimal risk to the public. Open prison regimes are based on a full working week and provide an important means of preparing prisoners for their return to society.

Probation and After-care Service

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for the future of the probation and after-care service. [938]

Mr. Sackville: I refer the hon. Member to the three-year plan for the probation service 1996–99 which has been placed in the Library, and which sets out my priorities and expectations for the work of area probation services.

Firearms Offences

Mr. Marlow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each of the last five years the number of offences involving firearms indicating whether the weapons were *(a)* legally or *(b)* illegally held. [1665]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 1 November 1996]:* Information as to whethe. the firearms used in notifiable offences recorded by the police are legally held is not at present collected centrally in England and Wales.

However, a special exercise has recently been conducted to find out whether the guns used in offences of homicide were licensed or not.

This covered the years 1992 to 1994, and out of a total of 196 homicides, information was available in 152 cases to show that 22 cases—14 per cent.—involved the use of a firearm legally held by the suspect.

Correspondence

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the letter of the hon. Member for Nottingham, North of 17 October on sale of drugs by Nottingham bouncers. [403]

Mr. Maclean: A reply will be sent shortly.

Detainees (Birmingham Prison)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were detained in Birmingham prison under Immigration Act powers in *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September; and what were the nationalities of those detained. [1039]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the number of people detained in Birmingham prison, under Immigration Act powers, in July, August and September; and what were the nationalities of those detained.

The requested information is given in the attached table.

Population of Immigration Act detainees[1] in Birmingham prison on 31 July, 31 August and 30 September 1996 by nationality[2]

Nationality	Number
31 July 1996	
Algeria	3
China	2
India	20
Jamaica	3
Nigeria	3
Pakistan	2
Others	6
Total	39
31 August 1996	
Algeria	4
India	12
Morocco	2
Nigeria	2
Pakistan	3
Others	7
Total	30
30 September 1996	
Algeria	3
India	11
Israel	4
Nigeria	4
Pakistan	3
Others	5
Total	30

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] Nationalities with only one prisoner are included in "other".

Young Offenders Institute, Colchester

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the first offenders to be admitted to the new young offenders institute at Colchester. [1481]

Miss Widdecombe: I expect the first young offenders to be admitted to Colchester young offender institution as soon as the outstanding issues are resolved.

Juvenile Offenders

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many juveniles aged 15 and 16 years have been remanded *(a)* in adult prisons and *(b)* in total in each of the last five years; and what has been the average period of their detention. [2314]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the number of juveniles aged 15 and 16 years who have been remanded (a) in adult prisons and (b) in total in each of the last five years; and what has been the average period of their detention.

The information on the number of remand receptions for untried juvenile prisoners is given in the attached tables, along with the estimated average periods in custody for all juvenile untried prisoners.

Information on the average period spent by juveniles in adult prisons is not separately available.

Receptions of 15 and 16 year old untried prisoners into Prison Service establishments in England and Wales, 1991–95

Year	Age 15	Age 16
Adult prisons		
1991	43	91
1992	7	16
1993	2	16
1994	36	53
1995	80	136
All establishments		
1991	384	684
1992	354	666
1993	429	840
1994	613	1,044
1995	604	1,182

Average time held in custody for untried prisoners aged under 17 in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales, 1991–1995

Year	Untried
1991	16
1992	19
1993	25
1994	32
1995	28

The average days in custody are estimated from the population held on 30 June each year and the total number of initial receptions in the year. The estimate is subject to some uncertainty due to the small numbers held.

Project Quantum

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what consultation has taken place with representatives of administrative, secretarial and executive staff in the Prison Service about Project Quantum; [2119]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect on Prison Service jobs of the implementation of Project Quantum; [2120]

(3) what assessment he has made of the impact of Project Quantum on the maintenance and improvement of standards of security and control in the Prison Service. [2122]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for these matters has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Ms Lynne Jones, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about the Quantum Project. You asked what assessment has been made of the effects on Prison Service jobs and on the maintenance and improvement of standards of security and control and what consultation has taken place with representatives of administrative, secretarial and executive staff.

An assessment of the effect on Prison Service jobs of the implementation of Quantum is not possible at present as the final scope of the project has yet to be decided. That decision is likely to be made following a study by suppliers during the second quarter of 1997.

As a minimum, Project Quantum suppliers will be expected to meet the Prison Service key performance indicators for standards of security and control. They will also be encouraged to improve upon them.

During the month of September, 40 consultation sessions took place with representatives from administrative, secretarial, and executive staff in the Prison Service. These will continue throughout the term of the Quantum project. Consultation meetings have also been held with the trades unions.

Prison Service (Redundancies)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy on the implementation of redundancies in the Prison Service. [2121]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Tilt to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply to your recent Question about policy on the implementation of redundancies in the Prison Service.

As an Executive Agency of the Home Office, the Prison Service must follow Home Office-wide procedures. Redundancy cannot be considered unless posts are being lost, work reduced or changed significantly. It would not be right to use public money for redundancy unless the right conditions existed.

Before a redundancy scheme is introduced, a 90 day period of consultation with the Prison Service Trade Unions is instigated. Good communications with staff and Trade Unions is considered fundamental to the success of a redundancy programme, and staff are kept informed throughout the exercise using the normal channels of communication.

The current redundancy scheme, the Voluntary Early Retirement and Severance scheme (VERSE), was introduced o meet the budget cuts that the Service is required to achieve. Under VERSE the aim is to achieve the required post reductions through voluntary redundancies.

Almost 4000 applications have been received for voluntary early retirement and severance and it is expected that around 1300 staff will be able to leave under VERSE.

Child Prostitution

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce new measures to combat child prostitution. [2580]

Mr. Maclean: We have no plans to do so. We believe that the present law is adequate to deter and punish those who exploit child prostitutes. We will continue to encourage all the agencies concerned to give a high priority to action to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

Burglary Statistics

Mr. John Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been burgled on more than three occasions since 1990. [2446]

Mr. Maclean: Information is not available to answer the question as posed.

The British crime survey, which is conducted by the Home Office, provides information on the extent of repeat burglary victimisation:

(a) During 1995, 0.2 per cent. of households in England and Wales had an actual or attempted burglary on more than three occasions.

(b) In the five years 1991 to 1995 inclusive, 7.2 per cent. of households in England and Wales had an actual or attempted burglary two or more times.

Warrington Bombing

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in reviewing the conviction of John Kinsella and in obtaining a statement from Padraic MacFloinn in relation to Kinsella's knowledge about the Warfington bombing. [1092]

Mr. Kirkhope: We expect to receive very shortly from the police a report into certain matters raised in the representations made on Mr. Kinsella's behalf. This will include a statement which, I understand, was taken last week from Mr. MacFhloinn. As soon as that material has been received, we shall consider in the context of the evidence as a whole, whether grounds have emerged on which it would be right to refer Mr. Kinsella's conviction to the Court of Appeal.

Philip Lawrence

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his proposals for an award to commemorate the life and work of Philip Lawrence. [1094]

Mr. Maclean: The Philip Lawrence memorial will recognise outstanding achievements of good citizenship by young people. Details about the award will be announced as soon as possible.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the relationship between alcohol abuse and domestic violence. [1806]

Mr. Maclean: The 1996 British crime survey found that 32 per cent. of assailants in cases of domestic violence were said by their victims to be under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault. Home Office research study 107, "Domestic Violence", considered the interaction between alcohol abuse and domestic violence, with a review of the available literature. The research evidence suggests that excessive alcohol consumption is not a cause of domestic violence but a condition that co-exists with it.

Alcohol-related Offences

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many alcohol-related juvenile offences were committed *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year; [1808]

(2) what was the cost of alcohol-related crimes *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year; [1807]

(3) how many offences of under-age drinking were recorded *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year; [1809]

(4) how many recorded offences of under-age drinking were recorded *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands in each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change from the previous year. [1789]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many alcohol-related crimes and violent crimes were committed *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in the west midlands and *(c)* in Coventry in each year since 1990; and what was the percentage change in each year. [1805]

Mr. Maclean: Figures available on violent crime for the west midlands and nationally are given in the table. Figures for Coventry, and those for alcohol-related crimes generally, are not collected centrally.

Offences of violent crime (violences against the person, sexual offences and robbery) recorded by the police

Year	West Midlands		England and Wales	
	Offences	Percentage change	Offences	Percentage change
1990	14,861	—	249,904	—
1991	16,288	+10	265,085	+6
1992	18,228	+12	284,199	+7
1993	18,462	+1	294,231	+4
1994	18,789	+2	310,332	+5
1995	17,738	–6	310,936	0

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1896]

Mr. Howard: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Offenders

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many women *(a)* have been sent to prison, *(b)* have been placed on probation and *(c)* have been ordered to carry out community service (i) nationally and (ii) in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will list the figures as the annual percentage change; [2178]

(2) how many juvenile offenders *(a)* received custodial sentences and *(b)* were placed on probation (i) nationally and (ii) in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will express the figures to show the percentage change on the previous year; [2171]

(3) how many offenders have been *(a)* placed on probation, *(b)* received custodial sentences and *(c)* were ordered to carry out community service (i) nationally and (ii) in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will express the figures (1) in real terms and (2) to show the percentage change on the previous year. [2168]

Mr. Maclean: Information for 1990 to 1995, which is provisional, is given in the tables.

Table A: Number of females sentenced to immediate custody, probation and community service in the West Midlands police force area and England and Wales for all offences 1990–1995[1]

Area/Disposal	Number sentenced					
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	[1]1995
West Midlands						
Immediate custody[2]	127	100	114	127	136	164
Probation[3]	647	525	473	458	599	577
Community service[4]	138	102	125	144	220	235
England and Wales						
Immediate custody[2]	2,216	2,354	2,328	2,520	3,149	3,768
Probation[3]	9,606	8,709	7,873	7,665	9,646	9,839
Community service[4]	2,108	2,210	2,569	3,532	4,340	4,739

Area/Disposal	Percentage change				
	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95[1]
West Midlands					
Immediate custody[2]	–21	+14	+11	+7	+21
Probation[3]	–19	–10	–3	+31	–4
Community service[4]	–26	+23	+15	+53	–7
England and Wales					
Immediate custody[2]	+6	–1	+8	+25	+20
Probation[3]	–9	–10	–3	+26	+2
Community service[4]	+5	+16	+37	+23	+9

[1] Provisional.

[2] Includes detention in a young offender institution, unsuspended imprisonment and partly suspended imprisonment (before 1 October 1992).

[3] Includes probation and supervision orders.

[4] Includes community service orders and combination orders (from 1 October 1992).

1. Although there is a known shortfall, in 1995, for the total number sentenced, this did not affect those sentenced to immediate custody, probation or community service.

Table B: Number of persons aged 10 to under 18 sentenced to immediate custody, probation and community service in the West Midlands police force area and England and Wales for all offences 1990–1995[1]

	Number sentenced					
Area/Disposal	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*[1]
West Midlands						
Immediate custody[2]	438	349	337	339	336	431
Probation[3]	758	725	694	725	903	974
England and Wales						
Immediate custody[2]	4,495	4,390	4,003	3,884	4,316	5,063
Probation[3]	11,092	10,471	9,133	9,110	11,145	12,298

	Percentage change				
Area/Disposal	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*[1]
West Midlands					
Immediate custody[2]	–20	–3	+1	–1	+28
Probation[3]	–4	–4	+4	+25	+8
England and Wales					
Immediate custody[2]	–2	–9	–3	+11	+17
Probation[3]	–6	–13	–0	+22	+10

[1] Provisional.
[2] Detention in young offender institution.
[3] Includes probation and supervision Orders.

Number of offenders sentenced to immediate custody, probation and community service in the West Midlands police force area and England and Wales for all offences 1990–1995[1]

	Number sentenced					
Area/Disposal	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*[1]
West Midlands						
Immediate custody[2]	4,401	3,994	3,898	3,779	4,328	4,791
Probation[3]	3,453	3,434	3,115	3,561	3,887	3,709
Community service[4]	2,459	2,471	2,725	3,378	3,642	3,764
England and Wales						
Immediate custody[2]	57,613	61,249	57,988	58,399	69,185	79,137
Probation[3]	54,354	53767	49,881	51,099	59,725	59,541
Community service[4]	38,597	42,495	45,381	56,901	61,868	62,896

	Percentage change				
Area/disposal	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*[1]
West Midlands					
Immediate custody[2]	–9	–2	–3	+15	+11
Probation[3]	–1	–9	+14	+9	–5
Community service[4]	–0	+10	+23	+8	+3
England and Wales					
Immediate custody[2]	+6	–5	+1	+18	+14
Probation[3]	–1	–7	+2	+17	+0
Community service[4]	+10	+7	+25	+9	+2

[1] Provisional.

[2] Includes detention in a young offender institution, unsuspended imprisonment and partly suspended imprisonment (before 1 October 1992).

[3] Includes probation and supervision orders.

[4] Includes community service orders and combination orders (from 1 October 1992).

Although there is a known shortfall, in 1995, for the total number sentenced, this did not affect those sentenced to immediate custody, probation or community service.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many juvenile offenders there were *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will express the figures to show the percentage change on the previous year; [2170]

(2) how many women were convicted of crimes *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will express the figures to show the percentage change on the previous year. [2169]

Mr. Maclean: Information for 1990 to 1995, which is provisional, is given in the tables.

Table A: Number of persons aged 10 to under 18 found guilty or cautioned for all offences in the West Midlands police force area and England and Wales 1990 to 1995[1]

	Number found guilty or cautioned					
Area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*[1]
West Midlands	13,409	12,916	13,004	11,464	12,149	10,990
England and Wales	211,512	196,415	196,923	176,938	186,716	188,425

	Percentage change				
Area	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*[1]
West Midlands	–4	+1	–12	+6	–10
England and Wales	–7	+0	–10	+6	+1

[1] Provisional.

Table B: Number of females found guilty for all offences in the West Midlands police force area and England and Wales 1990 to 1995[1]

	Number found guilty					
Area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*[1]
West Midlands	12,998	12,912	14,977	14,308	16,270	12,089[1]
England and Wales	229,356	235,988	258,990	251,062	251,046	217,983[2]

	Percentage change				
Area	*1990-91*	*1991-92*	*1992-93*	*1993-94*	*1994-95*[1]
West Midlands	- 1	+ 16	- 4	+ 14	- 26[2]
England and Wales	+ 3	+ 10	- 3	- 0	- 13[2]

[1] Provisional.
[2] In 1995 there is a known shortfall for the total number of female offenders convicted (estimated at 39,800 for England and Wales).

Paedophile Crime

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives he has taken to reduce the incidence of paedophile crimes; and if he will make a statement. [925]

Mr. Howard: The Government are determined to do all they can to deter people from sexually abusing children, and to detect and punish severely those who do. To this end, we have already enacted the Sexual Offences (Conspiracy and Incitement) Act 1996; and we have recently announced a number of other legislative proposals which I hope will have the support of the whole House.

Prison Statistics

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total prison population *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the west midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will list the figures as an annual percentage change. [2179]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me in the absence of the Director General from the Office, to reply to your recent Question asking, what is the total prison population (a) nationally and (b) in the West Midlands for each year since 1990; and if he will list the figures as an annual percentage change.

Information on the average prison population in England and Wales and for Birmingham prison is given in the attached table. Information for Scotland and Northern Ireland is available from the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively.

Average prison population[1] *England and Wales and Birmingham prison, 1990–1996*

Date	*Average prison population in England and Wales*	*Annual percentage change*	*Average population in Birmingham prison*	*Annual percentage change*
1990	45,636	—	974	—
1991	45,897	+0.6	968	–0.6
1992	45,817	–0.2	915	–5.5
1993	44,566	–2.7	803	–12.2
1994	48,794	+9.5	767	–4.5
1995	51,047	+4.6	862	+12.4

[1] Includes prisoners held in police cells. This information is published in "Prison statistics, England and Wales". Cm 3355.

Prison Sentencing Policy

Mr. John Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the prison sentencing policy; and if he will make a statement. [929]

Mr. Maclean: I receive many representations about all aspects of sentencing policy.

Crossbows Act 1987

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions and convictions there were under the Crossbows Act 1987 between 1990 and the last year for which figures are available. [2804]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested cannot be identified separately from other summary offences.

Firearms

Mr. Marlow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 5 November *Official Report*, column *432*, on the use of firearms in notifiable offences, how many and what proportion of firearms used in the homicides for which information is available were of categories *(a)* to be banned and *(b)* not to be banned in the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. [2966]

Miss Widdecombe: Of the 155 homicides involving firearms in England and Wales committed during the period 1992 to 1994 where the calibre of the weapon was known, 64, 41 per cent., involved handguns of a calibre exceeding .22 inches, the calibre to be prohibited by the Firearms (Amendment) Bill.

Of the remainder, 91, 59 per cent., involved firearms that will not be prohibited.

Child Sex Tourism

Mr. Pope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation to tackle the problem of child sex tourism. [932]

Mr. Maclean: The Sexual Offences (Conspiracy and Incitement) Act 1996, which came into force on 1 October, makes it an offence in the United Kingdom to conspire or incite others to commit sexual offences against children in other countries.

I announced in the summer, in the light of a general review of extra-territorial jurisdiction, that the Government had decided that United Kingdom courts should be given jurisdiction over acts of child abuse committed abroad by Britons or British residents.

Provisions to this effect will be included in the Government's proposed Bill on the registration of sex offenders.

Motorists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of motorists stopped by the police for exceeding the 30 mph speed limit were subsequently charged with an offence in each of the last five years. [2059]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* The information is not collected in the form requested.

During 1995, 689,100 speeding offences were dealt with by official police action. The Home Office Statistical Bulletin, "Motoring Offences, England and Wales 1995" issued on 29 October 1996 gives further details on the type of action taken, and penalties received for offences of speeding. Copies are available in the Library.

Prisoners (Visitors)

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what financial assistance is available for visits to prisoners by their immediate relatives, in respect of (i) travel, (ii) accommodation, (iii) subsistence and (iv) other costs; and if he will give the rates for that assistance where the prison is situated in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* Scotland; [1773]

(2) what financial assistance is available for visits to prisoners by their immediate relatives in respect of (i) travel, (ii) accommodation, (iii) subsistence and (iv) other costs; and if he will give the rates for that assistance where the prison is situated in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* England or Wales. [1778]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* Responsibility for these matters has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Seamus Mallon, dated 7 November 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me in the absence of the Director General from the office to reply to your recent Questions about financial assistance for visits to prisoners by their immediate relatives.

For relatives who qualify under the assisted prison visit scheme and who reside in England, Scotland or Wales and visit prisons in those countries, or Northern Ireland, the full cost of travel by public transport or community bus (if no more expensive than public transport) is reimbursed. For claimants who travel by car, the journey is paid at 10 pence per mile.

Where an overnight stay is deemed necessary a contribution is made towards the cost. For prisons in the London area the rate per night is £21 for adults and £11.30 for children between the ages of three and fourteen. For all areas outside London the rates are £15 and £7.50 respectively. All applicants and their children aged over three years receive a contribution of £2.55 towards the cost of food when the total time away from home is between five and ten hours. The rate for over ten hours away from home is £5.10.

Other unavoidable expenses such as taxi fares to remote prisons where there is no public transport, toll fees and childminding fees are met.

The Northern Ireland Office is responsible for administering payment to residents of Northern Ireland who visit any prison in the United Kingdom.

DEFENCE

Army Vehicle Depot

Mr. Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what use of the private finance initiative is being made in the development of the new Army vehicle depot at Ashchurch; [2226]

(2) what will be the cost of the move of the Army vehicle depot to Ashchurch; [2223]

(3) what *(a)* technical facilities and *(b)* specialist management is available at the Army vehicle depot at Ashchurch to deal with vehicles previously maintained at Ludgershall; [2242]

(4) when he expects the Army vehicle depot at Ludgershall to close; [2225]

(5) what plans he has to prevent traffic disruption as a result of the movement of Army vehicles from Ashchurch to Salisbury plain for training purposes; [2222]

(6) how many civilian technicians qualified to maintain the armaments of armoured vehicles are employed in the Army vehicle depot at Ashchurch; [2221]

(7) how many employees have agreed to move from the Army vehicle depot at Ludgershall to Ashchurch. [2217]

Mr. Soames: These are matters for the chief executive of the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Brigadier K. J. W. Goad to Mr. Paul Murphy, dated 7 November 1996:

I am replying to the recent questions you tabled to the Secretary of State for Defence as these matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Army Base Supply and Distribution Agency. For ease of reply I have combined my comments to your questions, in the order you posed them, within this one letter.

First, you asked about the use being made of the PFI in the development of the new Army vehicle deport at Ashchurch.

The Base Vehicle Depot (BVD) at Ashchurch has been an Army depot since 1939. As part of the Defence Cost Studies, Army vehicle storage is being rationalised on a single site at Ashchurch. The operation of the vehicle storage facility at Ashchurch is currently being subject to competition with Industry under the CFQ initiative. The necessary refurbishment of the site will be subjected to PFI.

Secondly, you asked about the cost of the move of the Army vehicle deport to Ashchurch.

A recent review of the Investment Appraisal which supported the move from two vehicle depots to one confirmed significant savings in public expenditure. The cost to date of moving the vehicles previously stored at BVD Ludgershall to Ashchurch, which included ancillary equipment, is approximately £200,000. Twenty one vehicles only await transportation at BVD Ludgershall which will incur minimal additional cost.

Thirdly, you asked what technical facilities and specialist management are available at the Army Vehicle Depot at Ashchurch to deal with vehicles previously maintained at Ludgershall.

The specific facilities for 'A' vehicles to be offered by Vehicle Depot Ashchurch are as follows:

(a) A fuelling and de-fuelling facility.

(b) Wash down facility.

(c) Anti freeze facility.

(d) Overhead servicing facilities and associated oils and lubricants dispensing/collection systems.

(e) Appropriate security systems.

Two senior managers at Ashchurch already have extensive armoured vehicle experience. The remaining civilian managers have familiarised themselves with armoured vehicles over the past year and this training continues. Additionally the military staff in two vehicle troops at Ashchurch have a high degree of 'A' vehicle experience.

Fourthly, you asked when the Base Vehicle Depot at Ludgershall will close.

Following a review of the Investment Appraisal which formed the basis for the decision, Minister (AF) announced that the Base Vehicle Depot at Ludgershall will close by the end of March 1997.

Fifthly, you asked about plans to prevent traffic disruption as a result of the movement of Army vehicles from Ashchurch to Salisbury Plain for training purposes.

There will be no significant increase in numbers of vehicles travelling from Ashchurch to Salisbury Plain for training when BVD Ludgershall closes. Few vehicles are ever issued on loan simply for training. Vehicles are usually issued to Army units. 'A' vehicles issued to units in the north of the UK will no longer transit the route from Salisbury Plain, thus reducing such vehicle movements and the potential for traffic disruption. Other classes of vehicles issued to units within the Salisbury Plain, thus reducing such vehicle movements and the potential for traffic disruption. Other classes of vehicles issued to units within the Salisbury Plain area have, for many years, been despatched from Ashchurch; this will not change.

Sixthly, you asked how many civilian technicians qualified to maintain the armaments of armoured vehicles are employed in the Army vehicle depot at Ashchurch.

The one qualified Gun Fitter at Ludgershall did not wish to move to Ashchurch. The recruitment of suitable qualified civilian technical staff at Ashchurch is ongoing.

Finally, you asked how many employees have agreed to move from the Army vehicle depot at Ludgershall to Ashchurch.

One civilian craftsman from the workshop at Ludgershall has moved to Ashchurch.

I hope that I have answered your questions fully. Agreed by and signed on behalf of CE ABSDA in his absence on duty.

Unexploded Bombs (South Yorkshire)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports his Department has *(a)* received and *(b)* assessed in respect of unexploded bombs in South Yorkshire; how many unexploded bombs are estimated to exist in each of the four metropolitan borough councils in South Yorkshire; how many bombs are officially listed; what is the estimated risk associated with these; what contact his Department has had with planners, surveyors and their representative groups in this matter; what action he plans to take; and what consultation he has had with other ministerial Departments on this subject. [2679]

Mr. Soames: My Department has no record of unexploded bombs in South Yorkshire. This does not mean that no unexploded ordnance exists in the area, only that the original Home Office wartime and post-war civil defence documents on which our data are based make no mention of any. Local county or city council public record offices may provide a better source of information in this case.

For further information on the issue of unexploded bombs, I refer the hon. Member to the letter I wrote to the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 24 October. A copy is available in the Library of the House.

Maintenance Work

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current backlog of maintenance work in his Department. [2800]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1915]

Mr. Arbutnot: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed, and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages or disadvantages of each repeal. [2911]

Mr. Soames: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to him yesterday, *Official Report*, column *519*.

SCOTLAND

Tuberculosis

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how many registered homeless have died from tuberculosis in Scotland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1556]

(2) how many cases of tuberculosis among the registered homeless have been diagnosed in Scotland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1576]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Information is not available in the form requested but existing data suggest that the numbers of cases of tuberculosis among the homeless are not high. Nevertheless, the expert working party, which I have set up to review the arrangements for the control, surveillance and treatment of tuberculosis in Scotland is considering the special needs of the homeless and will make recommendations accordingly.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how many people have died from tuberculosis in Scotland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement; [1560]

(2) how many cases of tuberculosis have been diagnosed in Scotland in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1581]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information is as follows:

	Number of deaths[1] from tuberculosis	*Number of tuberculosis cases notified*
1986	53	756
1987	42	560
1988	48	528
1989	56	533
1990	39	583
1991	56	563
1992	46	559
1993	58	554
1994	49	546
1995	39	478

[1] Information provided by the General Register Office (Scotland).

These figures cover all forms of tuberculosis, respiratory and non-respiratory. Existing arrangements for the control, surveillance and treatment of tuberculosis are currently being reviewed by a Scottish Office working party, whose report is expected shortly.

National Health Service (VAT)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact of restrictions placed by Customs and Excise on *(a)* the ability of the NHS bodies to recover value added tax retrospectively on contracted-out services on the budgets of NHS trusts and *(b)* the use of external services within the NHS; and what assessment he has made of the losses which will be incurred in respect of these restrictions by NHS trusts in Scotland. [2341]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: HM Customs and Excise has extended the deadline for NHS bodies to submit retrospective claims for VAT refunds on contracted out services. There should be no effect on the use of external services. It is not feasible to assess whether any VAT will remain unrecovered.

Permaculture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of how many farms or holdings are operating on permaculture principles; and if he will make a statement. [2354]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: No estimate has been made of the number of farms or holdings operating on permaculture principles.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to encourage permaculture within the national parks in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [2360]

Mr. Kynoch: There are no national parks in Scotland.

Organic Farming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each year since 1994 *(a)* what forms of financial aid are available exclusively for organic farmers in Scotland, *(b)* what administration procedures were required for its acquisition, *(c)* how much money was ear-marked and *(d)* what percentage of the money annually ear-marked was received by farmers for that year; and if he will make a statement. [2362]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: Financial aid is provided through the organic aid scheme. It provides assistance to farmers and crofters who wish to convert to organic standards. The scheme requires participants to register with a United Kingdom register of organic food standards approved sector body; remain registered for the five-year duration of the scheme; and follow a conversion plan agreed by the approved sector body. Scheme provision and expenditure are set out in the following table:

	Organic aid scheme (£ million)
1994–95	
Provision	—
Expenditure	—
1995–96	
Provision	.07
Expenditure	0.5 (71 per cent.)
1996–97	
Provision	.17
Expenditure	Not yet available

Hypothermia

Mr. Robin Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many deaths from hypothermia occurred in Scotland in each month in the four years up to June 1996. [2380]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The information requested is given in the table.

Deaths where hypothermia[1] was mentioned on the death certificate, Scotland January 1992 to June 1996

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996[2]
Total	117	141	136	123	64
January	12	19	28	22	22
February	23	14	23	22	19
March	12	9	13	16	6
April	9	12	12	15	6
May	4	7	8	6	6
June	4	5	5	5	5
July	3	6	3	3	—
August	1	2	4	1	—
September	2	8	3	5	—
October	14	7	8	1	—
November	10	19	8	8	—
December	23	33	21	19	—

[1] World Health Organisation International Classification of Diseases (Ninth Revision) codes E901 (primary cause), 778.3, 780.8, 780.9, E901 (secondary cause).
[2] Provisional.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1918]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: An analysis of capital costs of IT projects undertaken by the Scottish Office since 1992 and approved for 1997–98 is as follows:

Expenditure band	Number of projects
£0 to £1 million	60
£1 million to £2 million	9
£2 million to £3 million	3
£3 million to £4 million	0
£4 million to £5 million	1
£5 million to £6 million	0
£6 million to £7 million	0
£7 million to £8 million	1

Dunblane

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) when the Bishopbriggs social work department contacted the parent whom Lord Cullen cited in his report, page 51, paragraphs 5.22, as having made complaints about Thomas Hamilton's relationship with her son; and for what reasons that contact was not made by telephone on the date of receipt by the social work department of the letter providing details of that complaint; [3017]

(2) when the Bishopbriggs social work department received the letter cited in his report by Lord Cullen, page 51, paragraph 5.22, relating to complaints about Thomas Hamilton in connection with the Bishopbriggs boys club; and what factors accounted for the delay between the date of receipt of that letter and the related telephone call made by the social work department on 12 March. [3016]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: At the relevant time, the Bishopbriggs area office was the responsibility of the social work department of Strathclyde regional council. Following local government reorganisation, it transferred to East Dunbartonshire council, and I have asked the director of social work to write to the hon. Member.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total cost of *(a)* setting up the community charge and *(b)* setting up the council tax in Scotland. [1529]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 31 October 1996]:* Costs incurred by local authorities in setting up the community charge and the council tax, which were reimbursed by the Scottish Office development department through grant schemes and capital allocations, are set out in table 1. Known costs for administering local taxation collection are shown in table 2.

Table 1

£ thousand

	1987–88	1988–89	1989–90	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96
Capital allocation for introduction of community charge	6,000	15,000	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Community charge grant	—	—	—	—	437,000	16,000	9,000	7,445	3,780
Community charge transitional relief	—	—	—	24,000	2,000	—	—	—	—
Community charge reduction scheme	—	—	—	—	140,000	107,000	3,050	86	—
Community charge rebilling grant	—	—	—	—	4,000	—	—	—	—
Council tax transitional relief	—	—	—	—	—	—	17,000	3,137	216
Council tax valuation grant	—	—	—	—	1,000	7,000	1,600	—	—

Source:
[1] Scottish Office Development Report.
[2] Scottish Office Outturn figures (Branch files).

Tab

£ thousand

	1989–90	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
Community charge registration	9,645	11,709	14,048	11,342	—	—	—	—
Council tax valuation	—	—	—	4,908	13,798	14,236	9,999	10,243
Community charge collection	10,426	25,817	25,618	29,595	—	—	—	—
Local tax collection	—	—	—	8,903	40,338	28,722	26,621	30,630
Council tax preparation costs	—	—	—	[1]7,523	—	—	—	—

Figures obtained from information returned to The Scottish Office by local authorities.
(1989–90 to 1994–95 are Final Outturns.
1995–96 are Provisional Outturns.
1996–97 are Budget Estimates).
[1] Is a budget estimate as final outturn figures were not collected.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the desirability of providing financial aid and incentives to encourage rural local authorities to set up specific local exchange trading schemes to help farmers during the BSE crisis; and if he will make a statement. [2313]

Mr. Boswell: Although we recognise that many farmers may be suffering cash flow problems as a result of the current state of markets for cattle, farming unions have made no representations to us to suggest that local exchange trade schemes would be of use to them. If they were to do so, we would suggest that those currently engaged in auctioneering and valuation in the farming sector would be better placed than rural local authorities to set up such schemes.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the change in the level of beef imports to the United Kingdom since the onset of the BSE crisis. [2452]

Mr. Boswell: Imports of beef[1] as recorded in the overseas trade statistics are given. Imports will fluctuate for many reasons, and it is not possible to identify separately a change linked specifically to the introduction of the BSE measures.

	000s tonnes			£ millions		
Month	1994	1995	1996	1994	1995	1996
January	14	15	16	32	34	38
February	15	15	13	29	35	31
March	18	20	14	39	43	34
April	19	17	20	40	42	43
May	18	24	20	39	54	44
June	24	28	20	49	68	44
July	19	26	—	45	62	—
August	20	22	—	44	55	—
September	19	26	—	41	69	—
October	19	24	—	36	60	—
November	18	19	—	39	44	—
December	16	17	—	37	39	—
Total	221	254	103	472	607	235

All data are provisional.
[1] Beef includes the following; bovine carcase meat, bovine offal and preparations of bovine meat and bovine offal.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage and total amount of BSE eradication and compensation scheme expenditure has been received by *(a)* farmers, *(b)* slaughterers, *(c)* renderers and *(d)* other recipients; and if he will make a statement. [2159]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the estimated cost of BSE measures for each financial year from 1996–97 to 1998–99 on 24 July 1996, *Official Report*, column *532*.

Between April and the end of October 1996, the total expenditure on BSE eradication and compensation schemes broken down by recipient was as follows:

	£ Million	(Per cent.)
(a) Farmers	477.3	(68)
(b) Slaughterers[1]	96.8	(14)
(c) Renderers	77.5	(11)
(d) Other recipients	48.2	(7)
	699.8	

[1] Expenditure between April and the end of October on the calf processing scheme amounted to £24.5 million. Of this, we estimate that £19.6 million will have been passed on to farmers by the slaughterers.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the research funding for BSE, project by project, for each of the past eight years. [682]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* The total amount spent on research and development by the Government during 1988–89 to 1991–1992 financial years was £16.4 million, of which around £5 million was spent on MAFF-related transmissible spongiform encephalopathy research.

A table listing the MAFF research projects undertaken on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, including BSE, which have been held on computer record since 1992 has been placed in the Library. This table includes all the projects which were current in 1992 and every programme we have introduced since then.

Prior to 1992, MAFF research project records were not computerised and details of projects which began and ended before that year are not readily available.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the total expenditure to date on the BSE eradication and compensation schemes; and if he will make a statement. [2164]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the estimated cost of BSE measures for each financial year from 1996–97 to 1998–99 on 24 July 1996, *Official Report*, column *532*.

The total expenditure in the United Kingdom between April and the end of October 1996 on BSE eradication and compensation was £699.8 million.

This includes expenditure under the over-30-month slaughter scheme, the calf processing scheme, the additional EU compensation package—the beef special premium scheme and suckler calf processing scheme—top-up, beef marketing payment scheme, the beef stocks transfer scheme, the animal feed recall scheme, aid to renderers, emergency aid to the slaughtering sector.

Retail Beef Prices

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the change in retail beef prices over the period since 20 March. [2577]

Mrs. Browning: The index for the retail price of beef, as measured through the retail prices index is given.

	Index (January 1987=100)
February	137.7
March	138.2
April	134.8
May	133.4
June	134.5
July	132.1
August	136.9
September	134.5

Source:

First Release: Retail prices index, (monthly series), Office for National Statistics.

Beef Sales

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the average monthly volume of British beef sold in the 12 months to 20 March; and what has been the monthly average for the period since then. [2581]

Mr. Boswell: The average monthly volume of UK home fed production of beef and veal between April 1995 and March 1996 was 80,400 tonnes. The average monthly volume of UK home-fed production of beef and veal from April 1996 to September 1996 was 49,500 tonnes.

Home-fed production is expressed in carcase weight equivalent, and is defined as the slaughterings of British cattle within the UK for human consumption plus live exports of British cattle. It therefore includes beef sold for export and beef sold into intervention.

From 20 March 1996 home-fed production figures have excluded animals entering the over-30-month scheme and the calf processing aid scheme as the meat is not destined for human consumption.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1917]

Mr. Boswell: In response to the above question, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food have undertaken 722 information technology projects since 1992 to 1996 inclusive, and 145 are planned for 1997, subject to available funds.

On a financial year basis, all IT projects have fallen within the cost band £0 to £1,000,000 with the exception of certain major projects which are necessarily developed and implemented in "phases" across a number of years, such as those relating to common agricultural policy reform. If aggregated to the end of 1997, these projects would fall within two bands:

£1,000,000–£10,000,000: BSE systems, Establishment of Meat Hygiene Service;

Greater than £10,000,000: CAP Reform, Resource Management Strategy, Farm Survey System and MAFF's corporate office system.

Fishing

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what rights exist for EU countries to fish in waters controlled by non-EU countries; which countries enjoy such rights; and what sums have been paid to Governments by the EU in order to facilitate these concessions. [2487]

Mr. Baldry: Details of the fisheries agreements between the European Community and non-EU countries, other than those on the west coast of Africa, are shown in the following table. For details of agreements with west African countries, I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 28 October 1996, *Official Report*, column *52*.

EU fisheries agreements with countries other than on the west coast of Africa

Country	*Fishing opportunities*	*Main EU beneficiaries*	*Annual Cost of agreement*
Argentina	*Quotas:* Hubbsi hake—120,000 tonnes, Patagonian grenadier—50,000 tonnes, Illex squid—30,000 tonnes, Patagonian rockcod/rough head grenadier—50,000 tonnes	Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Greece, Germany, Netherlands and United Kingdom	41,500,000 ECU
Estonia	*Quotas:* Cod—530 tonnes, Herring—10,500 tonnes, Salmon—4,500 fish, Sprat—22,500 tonnes	Denmark, Germany, Finland and Sweden	810,000 ECU
Farore Islands	*Quotas:* Cod, haddock—500 tonnes, Saithe—2,500 tonnes, Redfish—7,000 tonnes, Blue ling, ling—3,600 tonnes, Blue whiting—25,000 tonnes, Flatfish—1,000 tonnes, Mackerel—4,910 tonnes, Others—760 tonnes	Germany, France, United Kingdom, Denmark and Netherlands	Reciprocal exchange of quotas
Greenland	*Quotas:* Cod—31,000 tonnes, Redfish—52,320 tonnes, G. Halibut—7,050 tonnes, Prawns—4,525 tonnes, Halibut—400 tonnes, Catfish—2,000 tonnes, B. Whiting—30,000 tonnes, Capelin—63,150 tonnes, Grenadier—9,000 tonnes, P.cod—2,000 tonnes	Germany, United Kingdom, Denmark and France	38,7000,000 ECU
Iceland	*Quotas:* Refish—3,000 tonnes	Germany, and United Kingdom	Reciprocal exchange of quotas
Latvia	*Quotas:* Cod—1,420 tonnes, Herring—3,500 tonnes, Salmon—6,500 fish, Sprat—19,500 tonnes	Denmark, Germany, Finland and Sweden	496,100 ECU
Lithuania	*Quotas:* Cod—2,125 tonnes, Herring—3,000 tonnes, Salmon—4,500 fish, Sprat—12,500 tonnes, Flatfish—25 tonnes	Denmark, Germany, Finland and Sweden	839,300 ECU
Madagascar	*Quota:* 9,000 tonnes of tuna.*Licences* for 42 freezer tuna vessels and 16 surface longliners	Spain and France	725,000 ECU
Mauritius	*Quota:* 6,000 tonnes of tuna.*Licences* for 20 ocean-going tuna seiners and 100 GRT[1] per month of vessels fishing by line.	Spain and France	485,000 ECU
Norway	*North of 62oN—Quotas:* Cod—30,050 tonnes, Haddock—3,500 tonnes, Saithe—7,000 tonnes, Redfish—3,500 tonnes, Greenland halibut—100 tonnes, Blue whiting—1,000 tonnes, Others—450 tonnes, Mackerel—10,100 tonnes.	United Kingdom, Germany, France, Denmark, Spain Portugal and Ireland	Reciprocal exchange of quotas
	South of 62oN—Quotas: Norway pout—50,000 tonnes, Sandeel—150,000 tonnes, Shrimp—1,230 tonnes, Others—11,000 tonnes, Whitefish—2,560 tonnes, Herring—840 tonnes, Mackerel—240 tonnes, Industrial species—800 tonnes.	Denmark, Sweden and United Kingdom	Reciprocal exchange of quotas
Poland	*Quotas:* Herring—1,000 tonnes, Salmon—1,350 fish, Sprat—15,000 tonnes, Flatfish—50 tonnes.	Sweden	Reciprocal exchange of quotas
Republic of Comoros	*Quota:* 4,500 tonnes of tuna*Licences* for 37 ocean-going freezer tuna vessels.	Spain and France	36,000 ECU
Seychelles	*Quota:* 46,000 tonnes of tuna.*Licences* for 42 ocean-going freezer tuna seiners and 15 surface longliners.	Spain and France	3,300,000 ECU

[1] Gross registered tonnes

Sandeels

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what response he has made to the recommendations from Joint Nature Conservation Committee that sandeel fisheries be restricted in the Wee Bankie, Marr bank and Scalp bank of the North sea. [2636]

Mr. Baldry: In responding to a Ministry consultation letter on technical conservation measures, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee suggested, among other things, that sandeel fisheries be restricted in an area off the east coast of Scotland. The Ministry replied, explaining the initiatives taken by the Government over the past few months on industrial fisheries. Subsequent to the JNCC letter, a major international research project has been announced to study the impact of industrial sandeel fisheries on predator species off the east coast of Scotland. The Scottish Office marine laboratory is participating in this study.

Religious Slaughtering Methods

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* sheep, *(b)* calves, *(c)* adult cattle and *(d)* chickens were slaughtered by a method approved for religious reasons in (i) 1993, (ii) 1994 and (iii) 1995. [2688]

Mrs. Browning: This question could be answered only at disproportionate cost.

Live Animal Transport

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons his instructions to his appointed local veterinary inspectors do not require them to be present at the loading of ovine animals for export. [2689]

Mrs. Browning: The instructions to veterinary inspectors reflect the requirements of EU legislation. Sheep consigned to another member state must be inspected within the 48-hour period prior to loading. Additionally, inspections must be carried out to check compliance with EU rules, and the spot checks carried out in fulfilment of this include supervised loadings.

Cattle Cull

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to pay Richard Haddock of Collaton Barton farm, Kingswear, for the 50 cattle which were culled in early October; and what factors underlie the delay in this payment. [2910]

Mr. Baldry: Payment for cattle slaughtered under the over-30-month scheme typically takes 35 to 42 days. The procedure is as follows:

> Claims for payment are submitted weekly in arrears by collection centres acting on the producer's behalf. The Intervention Board makes payment to collection centres within 14 days of receipt of a fully documented claim. Collection centres are required to pay producers within 14 days of receipt of payment by the Intervention Board.

Providing, therefore, Mr. Haddock submitted properly completed documentation with his animals, he can expect to be paid shortly.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Airport

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the amount spent on *(a)* accountants, *(b)* consultants, *(c)* lawyers and *(d)* other professionals in relation to the privatisation of Belfast airport. [1867]

Mr. Moss: The Department spent a total of £3.426 million on privatisation costs. It is not the practice to disclose the remuneration for individual consultancies.

Timber (Construction Use)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to promote the greater use of timber in the construction industry; and if he will make a statement. [1760]

Mr. Moss: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given today by my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what administrative action he has taken to assist the introduction of the nursery education voucher programme. [1689]

Mr. Ancram: Action has been taken on a number of fronts as follows:

1. A consultation document on the proposed operation of the nursery voucher scheme in Northern Ireland was issued in April 1996.
2. The Department of Education has been involved in the tendering process to select the company to administer the voucher scheme nationally. Discussions are taking place with education and library boards about funding mechanisms, and arrangements are being made for the inspection and registration of providers. General publicity about the scheme is planned for early 1997.
3. The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has prepared a pre-school curriculum for Northern Ireland.
4. An Order in Council to provide the powers necessary to implement the voucher scheme is expected to be laid before Parliament during November.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the per capita expenditure on the administration of the nursery education voucher programme. [1690]

Mr. Ancram: The estimated per capita expenditure on the administration of the nursery education voucher programme in Northern Ireland is £9.17.

General National Vocational Qualifications

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the number, percentage and type of schools involved in the development of GNVQ programmes in secondary education in Northern Ireland and the range of subject areas involved. [1691]

Mr. Ancram: The number and percentage of schools involved in the delivery of full GNVQs in Northern Ireland were as follows:

1992–93: 6 (2.5 per cent.)

1993–94: 65 (28 per cent.)

1994–95: 86 (36.6 per cent.)

1995–96: Not available

1996–97: Not available.

The number of schools involved in piloting part 1 GNVQ were:

1995–96: 9 (3.9 per cent.)

1996–97: 15 (6.4 per cent.)

The range of subject areas offered for full GNVQs are:

Art and Design[1]

Built Environment

Business[2]

Health and Social Care[2]

Hospitality and Catering

Information Technology[1]

Leisure and Tourism[1]

Manufacturing Science[2]

[1] Also offered as part I from September 1995.
[2] Also offered as part I from September 1996.

Education Expenditure

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the capital expenditure on *(a)* nursery, *(b)* primary, *(c)* secondary and *(d)* further education in each of the past five years. [1692]

Mr. Ancram: Capital expenditure by education and library boards on controlled schools and further education colleges, and grants paid by the Department of Education on approved capital expenditure incurred by voluntary and grant-maintained integrated schools for each of the financial years 1990–91 to 1994–95 is set out in the following table.

£ million

Year	Nursery schools	Primary schools	Secondary schools (including grammar)	Further education colleges
1990–91	0.426	11.263	41.317	7.598
1991–92	0.428	11.106	44.043	5.553
1992–93	0.475	15.160	45.754	8.524
1993–94	0.788	16.797	42.786	7.393
1994–95	0.855	18.442	43.548	7.956

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what projects have been committed under the private finance initiative to date; and what projects are under consideration. [1693]

Sir John Wheeler: Projects committed under the private finance initiative to date include a contract energy services scheme at Holywell hospital, car parking facilities at the Royal group of hospitals, and leasing of medical and other equipment. Details of PFI projects currently under consideration are given in the table:

	Project
Bangor and Kinnegar sewerage treatment works	Design, build, finance and operate
Hydro-electric project	Hydro Electric Scheme
Westlink urban motorway	Design, build, finance and operate
Motorway emergency telephone system	Replace and operate system
Strangford ferry	Replace ferry
Holywood road, social security office	Government office accommodation
Hydebank	Government Office Accommodation
Driver and Vehicle Testing Agencies vehicle testing project	Vehicle testing and IT
Land Registry IT system	Computerisation
Planning Service IT system	Computerisation
Antrim bus station library	Bus station library
Ulsterbus/ Citybus	Bus replacement
Northern Ireland Railways	Class 80 R stock replacement
Ulster folk and transport museum	Visitor centre
North-West institute of further and higher education	Add. Teaching Accom.
Belfast institute of further and higher education	Add. Teaching Accom.
St. Genevieve's High school	New accommodation
Drumglass high school	New accommodation
Wellington college	Refurbishment
Balmoral high school	Refurbishment
Ulster hospital	Extension/ Refurbishment
Downe hospital	New block/ Refurbishment
Belfast city hospital	New renal dialysis facs
Belfast city hospital	Car park facilities/site
Causeway hospital	Contract energy services
Daisy hill hospital	Renal dialysis facilities.
Craigavon area hospital	Contract energy services

The Department of Education is also undertaking a market sounding study of its schools estate in order to assess the wider potential for PFI in respect of over 100 high-priority schools projects.

Education and Training Targets

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the national targets for education and training for the year 2000; and what has been the Northern Ireland achievement against those targets in each of the past five years. [1694]

Mr. Ancram: The following national targets for education and training for the year 2000 apply in Northern Ireland:

Foundation Learning

(1) By age 19, 85 per cent. of young people to achieve five GCSEs at grade C or above, an intermediate GNVQ or an NVQ level 2.

(2) By age 19, 75 per cent. of young people to achieve level 2 competence in communication, numeracy and information technology; and 35 per cent. to achieve level 3 competence in these skills by age 21.

(3) By age 21, 60 per cent. of young people to achieve two A-levels, and advanced GNVQ or an NVQ level 3.

Lifetime Learning

(1) 60 per cent. of the work force to be qualified to NVQ level 3 advanced GNVQ or two A-level standard.

(2) 30 per cent. of the work force to have a vocational, professional, management or academic qualification at NVQ level 4 or above.

(3) 70 per cent. of all organisations employing 200 or more employees, and 35 per cent. of those employing 50 or more, to be recognised as investors in people.

The information available about progress in Northern Ireland towards those targets is as follows:

Foundation targets

Percentage

	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Foundation target 1	56.4	63.2	64.5	n/a
Foundation target 3	41.0	43.0	42.5	n/a

n/a = not available.

Lifetime targets[1]

Percentage

	1993	*1994*	*1995*
Lifetime target 1	34	36	37
Lifetime target 2	20	21	21
Lifetime target 3			
percentage of organisations with 200 or more employees recognised as investors		0	1
percentage of organisations with 50 or more employees recognised as investors		0.5	1

Note:
There is currently no measure for foundation target 2.
Source:
[1] Labour Force Survey (Spring).

Free School Meals

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* grammar school and *(b)* secondary school pupils are entitled to free school meals [1799]

Mr. Ancram: The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals in *(a)* grammar schools was 9.6 per cent. and *(b)* in secondary schools was 35.3 per cent.

Reading Recovery Programmes

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the use of reading recovery programmes in Northern Ireland and his assessment of their effectiveness. [1791]

Mr. Ancram: Training for teachers in the reading recovery approach is available in four board areas, and will be in the fifth from September 1977.

The Queen's university of Belfast school of education is carrying out an evaluation of the effectiveness of reading recovery in two board areas, and the findings of the evaluation are expected shortly.

Education (Attainment Levels)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what analysis he has made of *(a)* the impact of the earlier age of starting school in Northern Ireland upon attainment levels in Northern Ireland education; and *(b)* the impact of month of birth in the transfer test. [1793]

Mr. Ancram: *(a)* The earlier school starting date came into operation in 1989; the first cohort will not leave school until the summer of 2002. No analysis of the impact of the earlier starting age has been carried out, but there is a substantial body of evidence supporting the view that early years education makes a positive impact on educational attainment in the longer term.

(b) There is a known correlation between age and test performance. To allow for the difference in age between the oldest and youngest children taking the tests, an allowance is made for younger pupils. This is calculated for each child in accordance with the day of his/her birth. The younger the child, the larger the allowance will be. There is a well-established practice in relation to the tests. No analysis of the process as such has been undertaken.

School Inspections

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about how frequently *(a)* primary school, *(b)* secondary school, *(c)* grammar school and *(d)* further education colleges are inspected. [1795]

Mr. Ancram: All grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland are inspected at least once every five years.

There is a general—full—inspection of each college of further education every eight years and an inspection of a key aspect of provision in each college at least once every four years.

Nursery Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of four-year-olds who are not in school receive nursery education; and what percentage of three-year-olds receive nursery education. [1797]

Mr. Ancram: Compulsory school age in Northern Ireland begins at four, so if a pupil is four on or before 1 July, they begin primary school the following September. 31 per cent. of three-year-olds received nursery education in 1995–96.

Private Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of 12-year-olds in Northern Ireland receive private education. [1798]

Mr. Ancram: Information on pupils receiving private education is not available, but 0.3 per cent. of 12-year-olds in Northern Ireland are educated in independent schools.

School Staff

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many staff, fulfilling what functions and at what cost, are employed in the Department of Education in direct funding and contact with schools. [1792]

Mr. Ancram: The Department of Education employs 25.4[1] staff in both direct funding and contact with schools, at a cost of £484,331 per annum—current rates. Collectively, these staff perform the following functions:

Advising voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools on procedures and requirements relating to school meals provision and processing grant claims in respect of expenditure incurred by these schools in providing this service.

Policy/resourcing/payment of grants/guidance on all financial and audit matters relating to the voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated school sectors.

Planning and approval of capital schemes and the payment of appropriate grants in relation to voluntary grammar, grant-maintained integrated and maintained schools.

[1] full-time equivalent

Grammar Schools

Mr. Worthignton: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the availability of grammar school places for those from the (i) Protestant and (ii) Catholic traditions in each of the education and library boards; and in which areas there is relative under provision. [1794]

Mr. Ancram: While it should be noted that many grammar schools are attended by both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils, the distribution of grammar school places between schools under Roman Catholic management—denominational schools—and others—non-denominational schools—in each board area in the 1995–96 school year, the most recent statistics available, is as follows:

Grammar school places

	Denominational	*Non-denominational*
Belfast	5,894	10,126
Western	7,382	3,896
North Eastern	3,830	9,824
South Eastern	2,872	7,264
Southern	7,352	3,605
Total	27,330	34,715

There is evidence of a relative shortfall of grammar school places in Londonderry, Belfast, Newry, Banbridge, Bangor and Carrickfergus. Steps are being taken to address any underprovision, subject to the availability of capital resources.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of 11-year-olds in Northern Ireland attend grammar schools. [2491]

Mr. Ancram: In 1995–96, the percentage of 11-year-olds attending grammar schools in Northern Ireland was 34 per cent.

Raising School Standards Initiative

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the (i) progress and (ii) evaluation of the raising school standards initiative. [1796]

Mr. Ancram: The raising schools standards initiative was launched in 1995 with the aim of improving standards in schools with particular problems of educational and social disadvantage.

All schools in the programme are working to approved action plans and receiving the necessary financial and professional support to ensure delivery.

The schools have been inspected during 1995–96 and will be inspected again in 1997–98. The findings will contribute to an evaluation of the approach. In addition, the institute of education, university of London, is undertaking a research project within participating schools which assesses progress using the "value added" approach. This report is expected in December 1998 and will contribute to the final evaluation which will be available in 1999.

Mobile Classrooms

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the trend in the number of temporary mobile classrooms in use in Northern Ireland. [2032]

Mr. Ancram: Detailed information to establish a trend in the number of mobile classrooms in the schools estate is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Class Sizes

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* five, *(b)* six and *(c)* seven-year-old children are being taught in classes over 30 in size; and how many such classes there are. [2033]

Mr. Ancram: This information is not collected in the form requested.

Education Administration Costs

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his policy in respect of the level of costs of educational administration in Northern Ireland; and what assessment he has made of the level of these costs relative to those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. [2031]

Mr. Ancram: The Government believe that the costs of educational administration in Northern Ireland should be reduced through annual efficiency savings, through the restructuring of the education and library boards—which I announced earlier this year—and through the development, where practicable, of regionalised services.

The different local government structures in the United Kingdom do not permit direct comparisons with the costs of educational administration elsewhere.

Homework Centres

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what evaluation has taken place of the 12 homework centres in Northern Ireland referred to in his answer of 13 March, *Official Report*, column *644*; what conclusions he has reached in respect of future projects; and what proposals he has for expansion of the projects. [2063]

Mr. Ancram: Eight homework centres, funded through the making Belfast work programme, have been evaluated by the education and training inspectorate. This evaluation concluded that the most successful centres share the following characteristics:

- a location which is readily accessible by the pupils that the homework centre is intended to serve;
- they are based within schools, have access to the wider facilities and resources of the school, and involve activities to develop pupils that extend beyond the completion of homework set by the school; and
- evidence of commitment and active support by the principal of the school at which the centre is based and principals of other main participating schools.

The future expansion of homework centres is subject to availability of resources and competing priorities.

Students

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of higher education students with homes in Northern Ireland go to Great Britain or Irish institutions to study; and what percentage return for employment in Northern Ireland on completion of their studies. [2064]

Mr. Ancram: In 1994–95 32 per cent. of Northern Ireland domiciled full-time undergraduate new entrants to higher education went to institutions in Great Britain and 7 per cent. to institutions in the Republic of Ireland; 19 per cent. of Northern Ireland domiciled full-time undergraduates who graduated from Great Britain higher education institutions in 1994–95 returned to Northern Ireland to take up employment.

No information is available on the destinations of Northern Ireland domiciled graduates from Republic of Ireland institutions.

Education Budget

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list in *(a)* cash and *(b)* constant price terms the resources that have gone into education in each year since 1979, and the percentage of the departmental budget which has been devoted to education in each year. [2065]

Mr. Ancram: The information is set out in the table:

Year	Education cash £m	Expenditure[1] 1996–97 prices £m	Education as percentage of (a) NI expenditure[2]	Education as percentage of (b) NI managed block[3]
1979–80	388	1,017	15.9	20.5
1980–81	458	1,014	15.8	20.6
1981–82	499	1,008	15.5	20.7
1982–83	534	1,007	15.3	20.8
1983–84	556	1,002	14.6	20.3
1984–85	580	995	14.1	19.7
1985–86	602	979	14.1	20.2
1986–87	695	1,097	15.4	22.4
1987–88	750	1,124	15.5	22.3
1988–89	812	1,141	15.9	20.7
1989–90	898	1,179	16.6	21.8
1990–91	1,004	1,221	18.2	24.5
1991–92	1,124	1,284	18.7	25.5
1992–93	1,203	1,319	18.3	25.3
1993–94	1,248	1,330	17.6	24.9
1994–95	1,295	1,356	17.5	25.1
1995–96	1,350	1,380	17.3	25.0
1996–97 planned	1,395	1,395	17.4	25.5

[1] Includes youth training programme expenditure prior to 1992–93, when responsibility for this activity transferred to the Department of Economic Development.

[2] NI expenditure is the total expenditure within the Secretary of State's responsibility within the control total. It includes NIO expenditure, and for the years prior to 1988–89, cyclical social security benefits.

[3] Includes expenditure by the NIO and NI Departments, excluding national agricultural and fisheries support, and most social security benefits expenditure.

Local Management of Schools

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the percentage of education and library boards' budgets which must be delegated to schools; and what plans he has to change it. [2066]

Mr. Ancram: The LMS arrangements in Northern Ireland do not provide for fixed levels of delegation, but list specific areas of expenditure which boards either must delegate or may delegate to schools. Under these arrangements, education and library boards presently delegate to individual schools 86 per cent. of the funds capable of delegation. The boards retain resources to cover centrally funded services, such as landlord maintenance, curriculum advisory and support services, home-to-school transport, and educational welfare and psychology services. Levels of delegation are reviewed annually.

Colleges

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his target date for the implementation of his proposals for the incorporation of colleges. [2489]

Mr. Ancram: For planning purposes, the target date for the incorporation of colleges is 1 August 1997.

School Assessments

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he has made in incorporating a value added element into the assessment of schools. [2490]

Mr. Ancram: It will not be possible for value added to be determined until the assessment outcomes for a cohort of pupils at consecutive key stages can be compared. Assessment of pupils' attainments at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3 became a statutory requirement from 1 September 1996; it will be a further three years before the best means of establishing value added measures can be determined.

University Places (Costs)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the per capita cost of a full-time university place excluding student support in *(a)* real and *(b)* constant price terms in each of the past 10 years. [2492]

Mr. Ancram: The recurrent cost per full-time equivalent student, excluding student support, at universities in Northern Ireland has been as follows:

	(a) Cash price (£)	(b) Constant 1993–94 prices (£)
1986–87	4,290	6,345
1987–88	4,501	6,320
1988–89	4,553	5,966
1989–90	4,929	6,064
1990–91	5,187	5,908
1991–92	5,275	5,653
1992–93	5,232	5,392
1993–94	5,185	5,185
1994–95	5,059	4,958

Source:
Universities statistical record data (1996–87 to 1993–94); HESA data (1994–95).

School Transport

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on school transport; what savings he expects to make in a full financial year as a result of policy changes; from which school sectors; and what impact he assesses this will have on enrolment. [2493]

Mr. Ancram: From the beginning of the 1997–98 school year, assistance will be provided only to pupils who are unable to gain a place in a suitable school or institution of further education within statutory walking distance of their home. Statutory walking distance is defined as two miles for primary school pupils and three miles for other pupils.

It is estimated that savings of some £3.4 million per annum in total will be achieved when the policy is fully implemented.

The estimated savings in each sector are:

	£ million
Primary	0.5
Secondary/Grammar	2.5
Further education	0.4

The policy change is not expected to affect overall enrolment figures, although variations to enrolments at individual schools are expected. The extent of these will be determined by whatever choices parents make for their children in response to the new transport arrangements.

Fireworks

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what powers exist for *(a)* Customs and Excise and *(b)* other authorities to prevent the importation of illegal fireworks through ports into Northern Ireland. [2495]

Sir John Wheeler: Where Customs and Excise officials know that cargoes include fireworks, they check for compliance with the British standard and routinely advise the Health and Safety Executive and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. If, however, random searches at ports reveal fireworks which have not been listed as such, officials detain them and notify the RUC.

Fireworks coming into ports in Northern Ireland must comply with the Explosives Act 1875, as amended, and they must be authorised and appear on the "List of Authorised Explosives" issued by the Health and Safety Executive. They must also be classified in accordance with the Classification and Labelling of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1991 and it is an offence under the Health and Safety at Work Order 1978 not to comply with these regulations.

The Placing on the Market and Supervision of Transfers of Explosives (Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 give an inspector appointed under article 21 of the Health and Safety at Work Order 1978 the power to seize and detain, in accordance with section 74 of the Explosives Act 1875, fireworks which he has reasonable cause to believe will be unlawfully acquired, used or dealt in.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received from the RUC about its powers to deal with fireworks in Northern Ireland. [2496]

Sir John Wheeler: When consulted on the draft Explosives (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 the Chief Constable indicated that he would wish to have various, additional powers to enter, stop, search and seize in relation to offences committed under the new regulations.

The Secretary of State gave this request the most careful consideration, but was not persuaded that such additional powers, which Parliament has reserved solely for the prevention and detection of serious and violent crime, were wholly appropriate to offences committed under the fireworks legislation.

Teacher Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to what extent teacher education falls within the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council; and if he will make a statement. [2497]

Mr. Ancram: Provision for teacher education in Northern Ireland is not included under the remit of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council.

Education and Library Boards

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what expenditure will be incurred in respect of his proposals for reducing the number of education and library boards *(a)* before parliamentary approval has been given and *(b)* before the proposals are carried out. [2498]

Mr. Ancram: Expenditure requirements for the restructuring of the education and library boards in the next financial year have yet to be determined. Expenditure in the current financial year is not expected to be significant.

Orange Parade

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) when he was informed by the Chief Constable of the decisions to (i) prevent and (ii) allow the Orange parade which marched down Garvaghy road on 11 July; [1767]

(2) what consultations he had with the Chief Constable of the RUC regarding the decision to prevent the passage of an Orange parade along Garvaghy road, and what subsequent consultation he had with the Chief Constable prior to the decision to permit the passage of the parade; [1768]

(3) if he will publish the directions issued by the Chief Constable in relation to the Orange parade at Garvaghy road, Portadown between 6 and 11 July. [1770]

Sir John Wheeler *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the statement made in the House by my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State on 15 July *Official Report*, columns 787–90, which set out the events surrounding the parade at Drumcree, and to the Chief Constable's BBC interview of the previous day referred to in that statement, a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consideration he gave to making an order under article 5 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 in respect of circumstances on the Garvaghy road between 6 and 11 July; what advice he sought on this matter; and on what basis a decision was made not to issue any such order. [1769]

Sir John Wheeler *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State did not make an order under article 5 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 because the Chief Constable did not advise him to do so.

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations were made to him during the period 6 to 11 July regarding unwillingness of members of the RUC to enforce the directions of the Chief Constable made on 6 July. [1771]

Sir John Wheeler *[holding answer 6 November 1996]:* None.

Beach Safety

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps his Department is taking to ensure the safety of people on beaches along the North Down littoral from the wash of passenger ferries. [2459]

Mr. Bowis: I have been asked to reply.

I have asked the chief executive of the Marine Safety Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from R. M. Bradley to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your Question about wash from passenger ferries and what is being done to ensure the safety of people on North Down beaches.

An Extraordinary Meeting of the Belfast Lough District Safety Committee Working Group will take place on 13 November 1996 to discuss wash from ferries. The meeting is to be chaired by the Marine Safety Agency's Regional Chief Surveyor and will be attended by representatives from all interested parties including the ferry operators. North Down Borough Council and the police.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Reduced Earnings Allowance

Mr. Hain: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people were transferred from reduced earnings allowance to retirement allowance between 1 April and 1 October in each Benefits Agency region. [2683]

Mr. Roger Evans: The administration or reduced earnings allowance, payable under the Industrial Injuries scheme, is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Peter Hain, dated 6 November 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people were transferred from Reduced Earning Allowance (REA) to Retirement Allowance (RA) between 1st April and 1st October in each Benefits Agency (BA) region.

The information is not available in the format requested. Statistics are collated by BA Area Directorates, not on a regional basis.

In order to assess those people who might be transferred to Retirement Allowance under amending legislation {Social Security (Industrial Injuries and Diseases)(Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 1996} which came into force on 24 March 1996, the Benefits Agency identified all Reduced Earnings Allowance recipients over pensionable age as at 24 March 1996. From 24 March to 30 September 1996, 21,299 have had their entitlement to REA transferred to RA. This includes REA recipients who attained pension age before and after 24 March 1996.

The information is shown in the attached table.

I hope this reply will be helpful.

Benefits agency area directorate	*Number of REA cases transferred to RA*
East London and Anglia	857
Chilterns	402
London South	2,019
West Country	878
Mercia	2,640
West Midlands	780
Wales	2,109
North West Coast	1,767
Greater Manchester	1,666
Yorkshire	2,002
Tyne Tees	4,398
West of Scotland	507
East of Scotland	1,172
Overseas	102
Total	2,1299

Figures are provisional and subject to amendment.

Budget allocations for Out of Hours Service

Area directorates	*1992–93* £	*1993–94* £	*1994–95* £	*1995–96* £	*1996–97* £
Tyne Tees	48,630	50,037	82,273	87,360	74,539
South Yorkshire and Humberside	42,624	20,963	69,200	73,182	72,385
North and West Yorkshire	40,388	76,468	95,277	104,892	77,523
Glasgow and Paisley	27,088	35,871	101,271	111,251	135,276
North Central and West Scotland	31,860	75,859	159,744	174,392	184,286
East of Scotland	29,081	83,305	179,008	164,201	183,169
East Midlands	30,534	45,016	68,024	71,202	73,350
Midlands South West	30,710	30,633	52,066	46,796	48,491
West Mercia	35,514	32,202	52,074	45,627	33,265
Wales	35,180	37,505	57,600	57,419	61,434
Merseyside	28,247	74,988	108,472	105,936	119,108
Greater Manchester	28,046	64,894	96,729	75,716	85,402
Lancashire and Cumbria	31,060	55,801	95,039	76,555	83,673
Anglia	18,431	30,463	64,344	56,395	70,705
Chilterns	11,341	24,002	55,407	62,047	64,644
South London and West Sussex	15,122	9,008	14,122	30,396	33,524
West Country	22,132	146,208	205,600	233,070	263,211
East London and Essex	21,866	33,018	42,821	60,332	57,462
South East	13,644	17,281	37,870	40,453	35,838
Wessex	19,857	43,634	82,655	76,413	76,389
Totals	561,353	987,156	1,719,596	1,753,635	1,833,674

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Benefits Agency Medical Services

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will make it his policy that the practice whereby hospital case notes are currently supplied free of charge by the NHS to the Benefits Agency medical services will continue, should private companies win the contracts currently on offer under the contracting out of the operations of the Benefits Agency medical services; and if he will make a statement; [754]

(2) if he will make it his policy that the practice whereby external medical opinions are currently obtained free of charge under NHS authorisation to the Benefits Agency medical services will continue, should private companies win the contracts currently on offer under the contracting out of the operations of the Benefits Agency medical services. [755]

Mr. Burt: We are currently discussing this issue with officials from the NHS executive. These discussions should be concluded within the next few weeks. Whatever the outcome of these, it is imperative that the provision of these services will not lead to any increase in the expenditure of public funds.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy that, where private contractors be charged for the service whereby external medical opinions are currently obtained free of charge under NHS authorisation to the Benefits Agency medical services, his Department will guarantee that the private companies will not reduce the number of cases for which external medical help is sought; and if he will make a statement. [753]

Mr. Burt: In any case referred to an external medical supplier, the contractor's doctors must be able to supply adequate reasons for the advice being given. If it is not possible for them to advise on the evidence already available then they must seek information from other sources. The Department will not be satisfied with advice which is not fully supported by documentary evidence. This will be stated in the terms of the contracts with any private contractors and will be rigorously monitored by the contract management team. It is not anticipated that the number of requests for further medical evidence will be reduced.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will stipulate in the contracts awarded to companies bidding to undertake the assessment of claims for incapacity benefit currently performed by the Benefits Agency medical services the target number of clients for this benefit to be seen per session by doctors employed by these companies to evaluate the eligibility of claimants; [751]

(2) if he will stipulate in the contracts awarded to companies bidding to undertake the assessment of claims for incapacity benefit currently performed by the Benefits Agency medical services, *(a)* the annual number of cases to be reviewed, *(b)* the annual maximum number of clients that will be deemed eligible for incapacity benefit and *(c)* the total amount of benefit to be authorised. [737]

Mr. Burt: The Benefits Agency has never set targets covering the number of people who should be allowed or disallowed benefit.

Performance indicators and targets for the potential service provider of the medical service have not yet been set: they will be matters for discussion and negotiation prior to contract(s) being awarded.

The set targets will relate to how the service is delivered rather than decisions on entitlement to benefit.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which were the companies involved in *(a)* the partnering exercise and *(b)* the collaborative study into the Benefits Agency medical services before the decision to contract out the Benefits Agency medical services; which were the companies that were later involved in tendering for the subsequent contracts; and if he will make a statement; [746]

(2) which were the firms that were involved in the feasibility study to determine contracting out of the Benefits Agency medical services and which have been shortlisted for the three geographical areas; when he expects the final decision to be *(a)* made and *(b)* announced; and if he will make a statement. [747]

Mr. Burt: A partnering project team was established in September 1994 to look for ways in which the private sector could be involved in the future delivery of a medical service. Advertisements were placed in the national press seeking expressions of interest from suitable companies to undertake a collaborative study with the project team. The companies chosen to take part in the study were BMI, Capita and Serco.

The three companies undertook independent studies of the Benefits Agency medical services, BAMS, organisation. Assessment of their reports concluded that the work of BAMS could be contracted to the private sector.

In June 1996 an advertisement was placed inviting expressions of interest: five companies were subsequently chosen to enter into negotiations with the Department for the provision of a medical service. Those companies are Andersens, BMI, Capita, EDS and Sema.

Some of the information that was made available during the collaborative study is now out of date. Shortlisted contractors who have been invited to enter into negotiations will receive all relevant information to ensure they fully understand the requirements, and to ensure that they are able to develop proposals based on the same information. No advantage will accrue to the companies who participated in the collaborative study.

A final decision and subsequent announcement is anticipated by April 1997.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy that any private company bidding to undertake the medical assessment of claims for incapacity benefit from the Benefits Agency medical services and acquiring confidential data in the course of their assessments will be legally prohibited from (i) using and (ii) disclosing that information for their other commercial interests in *(a)* private health care and *(b)* all other commercial applications; and what measures his Department intends to use to investigate such eventualities. [759]

Mr. Burt: The Department places strong emphasis on customer confidentiality and would demand the same standards from the successful contractor or contractors. The contractor(s) will have a mandatory contractual requirement to conform to the security policy of the Department which is based on Government security policy.

The successful bidder or bidders will be required to ensure that any data or information passed to them by the Department or a third party, or revealed during the course of the contract, is used only for the purpose directly relating to the Departments business and only by the appropriate staff.

Rigorous monitoring systems will be put in place to ensure on-going compliance with the requirements.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if, following his Department's decision to contract out the functions of the Benefits Agency Medical Services, he will give the rationale for his Department's decision to use the negotiated procedure in respect of contracting out the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services, rather than the restrictive procedure for the shortlisted firms. [748]

Mr. Burt: The use of the negotiated procedure is considered to be less adversarial than the restrictive procedure. It provides an opportunity for meaningful two-way dialogue, allowing the necessary flexibility for discussions and negotiations, thus ensuring better informed and higher quality bids.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy that, following his Department's decision to contract out the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services, commercial considerations will not affect the decisions to obtain the consultants' reports that enable doctors to make full and professional assessments of claimants for incapacity benefit. [752]

Mr. Burt: In the majority of cases, a consultant's report is obtained at the request of the customer. On occasions the contractor or contractors will need to obtain a report from a consultant as this will represent the most satisfactory way of establishing the evidence necessary to advise the adjudication officer.

Post contract management arrangements will ensure that the contractor(s) achieve the correct balance between customer care and profits.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will revise *(a)* the target number of clients for incapacity benefit seen per session by doctors of (i) the Benefits Agency medical services and (ii) any private contractors successful in their bid to take over the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services and *(b)* any other aspect of the service; and if he will make a statement. [750]

Mr. Burt: One of the primary objectives in contracting out Benefits Agency medical services is to improve the provision of a medical service to the Department.

The Department will be specifying the outputs in terms of service delivery in a way that is measurable.

Whilst the output will be specified, how the contractor achieves the specification will not, thereby providing the contractor with the maximum flexibility for delivery of the service.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if individual members of the assessment panel responsible for the recommendation for full contracting out of the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services were allowed to put in a bid for the resulting contracts; and if he will make a statement. [749]

Mr. Burt: The medical service to be contracted out to the private sector was advertised in the *Official Journal of the European Community* and *Government Opportunities*.

Following the response to a questionnaire completed by the private sector and individuals working in the Benefits Agency medical services, a full and auditable evaluation of responses was undertaken resulting in five private sector companies being invited to go forward to the next stage of the procurement process.

No individuals included in the assessment panel are involved in the bidding process for this service.

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what efficiency savings his Department estimates will accrue from the decision to contract out the functions of the Benefits Agency medical services. [767]

Mr. Burt: It is not possible at this stage to estimate the precise level of savings. However, experience of similar exercises within the Department has identified that efficiencies will be gained in all cost areas of the contract or contracts.

Benefits Agency (Emergency Services)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each of the last five years and for each Benefits Agency office the cost of operating the out-of-hours service. [1431]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Hinchliffe, dated 6 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will list for each of the last five years and for each Benefits Agency office the cost of operating the out-of-hours service.

The information is not available in the format requested. The total budgets allocated for the operation of the Out of Hours Service for each of the last five years were as follows:

1992/93: £0.561 million

1993/94: £0.987 million

1994/95: £1.720 million

1995/96: £1.754 million

1996/97: £1.834 million.

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

The budgets allocated to each Area Directorate are detailed in the attached table. Each Area Director decides on the distribution of these budgets to District Offices to support the operation of the Out Of Hours Service across their Area and details could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many incapacity benefit claimants have been found to be fit for work by the all-work test since its introduction; how many such claimants have since claimed benefits as being unemployed and seeking work; and how many have obtained employment. [1406]

Mr. Burt: Up to the end of September 1996, around 178,000 incapacity benefit claimants had been found capable of work following the all-work test. A total of 73,000 claimed unemployment benefits. A total of 47,000 have since left the register and around 10,000 were placed in employment or on training schemes by the Employment Service.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1916]

Mr. Burt: The information is not available in the format requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Compensation Recovery

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on proposals to reform regulations governing compensation recovery; if there will still be a threshold for compensation payments below which recovery will not take place; if he will review cases affected by current rules backdated to 1990; how he will ensure that compensation components for pain and distress are properly identified; and when he intends to bring forward the proposed legislation. [1549]

Mr. Roger Evans *[holding answer 5 November 1996]:* We have introduced a Bill into the House of Lords today to reform the compensation recovery scheme. We propose that, from October 1997, the compensator will become liable for the repayment of all benefits paid as a consequence of the accident, injury or disease. The compensator will be permitted to reduce relevant damages where a corresponding benefit is repaid to the Department. Damages for pain and suffering will not be reducible. We plan that the new rules should apply to all compensation claims determined on or after the point of change. The present small payments limit of £2,500 below which recoupment does not take place, will be removed. There will be no entitlement to reopen cases determined before the point of change.

WALES

Public Transport

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives are being pursued and how much funding is available to promote increased use of public transport; and if he will make a statement. [1866]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Local authorities have been given powers to promote public transport in their areas. Including concessionary fares schemes, this support is estimated at some £18 million in 1995–96. In addition, assistance is available to local authorities for major projects, as well as through the capital challenge scheme, the strategic development scheme and the bus priority scheme. This support includes more than £8 million over the three years from 1996–97 to improve rail links between Cardiff and the valleys.

Drug Action Team

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he is taking to encourage the formation of a regional drug action team in north Wales. [1929]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend issued "Forward Together-A Strategy to Combat Drug and Alcohol Misuse in Wales" in May 1996. In it, he asked all those organisations which have a part to play in combating drug and alcohol abuse to come together to form drug and alcohol action teams in each of the five new health authority areas; to submit local strategies and plans to him by December 1996; and to implement them from April 1997.

Nursery Voucher Road Show

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what will be the total cost of the nursery education voucher road show to his Department; [1490]

(2) what is the itinerary of the nursery voucher roadshow; [2014]

(3) to whom invitations have been sent to attend the nursery voucher roadshow. [2013]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: My right hon. Friend and I are determined that the voucher scheme will be implemented in Wales as smoothly and efficiently as possible. It is important that providers of nursery education in the maintained, private and voluntary sectors have full information about the detailed operation of the scheme. To that end, the Welsh Office is proposing to hold a number of factual information seminars and is currently assessing demand among private and voluntary nurseries and playgroups for seminars in Cardiff, Swansea, Carmarthen, Llandudno, Wrexham and Llandrindod Wells. So far, over 360 organisations have said they want to attend. The cost of the seminars is expected to be between £2,000 and £3,000, depending on numbers and locations.

Local education authorities were invited to consider holding joint LEA/Welsh Office seminars for schools, but have declined, many, I understand, making separate arrangements to brief their schools.

Dentists

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent initiatives he has taken to assist the recruitment of dentists to rural areas in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [1750]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The £3 million initiative, announced in September last year, enabled Welsh health authorities to offer grants to attract new dentists, into those parts of Wales where they are most needed, and to expand the community dental service.

The initiative has been very successful. Just under £2 million has been offered as grants for 56 new dentists. Twenty-seven of them are already in place and another 14 should be operational by January 1997. Grants of £25,000 are still available to attract new dentists to certain part of mid, west, and north, Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State foe Wales (1) how many NHS dental practitioners there were in Wales in *(a)* each year since 1990 and *(b)* at present; and if he will make a statement; [1853]

(2) how many dental practitioners undertaking national health service work there were in Wales by county in each year since 1989; and if he will make a statement. [1858]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The available information is given in the following table.

Number of general dental practitioners treating at least some NHS patients[1]

	1989	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Clwyd	108	111	105	102	114	117	125
Dyfed	96	98	101	104	104	105	101
Gwent	123	125	139	135	135	138	143
Gwynedd	66	69	65	66	67	66	65
Mid Glamorgan	135	134	123	134	126	125	129
Powys	34	34	36	35	34	33	35
South Glamorgan	132	131	129	127	133	133	145
West Glamorgan	133	135	134	128	130	132	133
Wales	827	837	832	831	843	849	876

[1] At 30 September.

	1996[1]
Bro Taf	216
Dyfed Powys	136
Gwent	158
Morgannwg	170
North Wales	183
Wales	863

[1] At 30 June.

Railways

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what evaluation his Department has carried out of the effect of the imposition of a minimum passenger requirement as currently stated on the north Wales to Crewe train services; and if he will make a statement. [1862]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: I am sure that passengers will welcome the availability for the first time of contractual guarantees of minimum service levels.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what are his Department's responsibilities in respect of *(a)* Regional Railways and *(b)* InterCity West Coast in respect of (i) overcrowding, (ii) punctuality and (iii) reliability; and if he will make a statement. [2260]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: These are matters for the Franchising Director, who sets specifications and places requirements on the train operators through the passenger service requirements and franchise agreements.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many cases of tuberculosis among the registered homeless have been diagnosed in Wales in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1575]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people have died from tuberculosis in Wales in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1559]

Mr. Jones: The information requested, supplied by the Office for National Statistics, is given in the following list:

Deaths from tuberculosis[1]*: Welsh residents, 1986–1995*

1996: 38

1987: 23

1988: 35

1989: 26

1990: 30

1991: 29

1992: 36

1993: 28

1994[2]: 25

1995[2]:32.

[1] International Classification of Diseases (9th revision), codes 010–018.

[2] Figures for 1993 and 1994 represent the number of deaths occurring in each year. All the other figures are the number of deaths registered in the year. Also, new procedures for coding cause of death from 1993 and the absence of medical enquiries mean that figures for 1993 onwards may not be exactly comparable with earlier years.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of school leavers in Wales have been vaccinated against tuberculosis; and if he will make a statement. [1561]

Mr. Jones: Information is not available centrally in the form requested. Over the last three financial years, the average number of BCG, tuberculosis, vaccinations given each year to children aged 15 and under in Wales for their individual protection was 24,000. A further 1,2000, on average, were found to have an existing immunity to tuberculosis. For those aged between 10 and 15 years, the number of children in each school year in Wales is between 36,000 and 38,000—provisional January 1996 figures.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many cases of tuberculosis have been diagnosed in Wales in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [1580]

Mr. Jones: The information is given in the following table.

	Number of cases of tuberculosis notified
1986	251
1987	232
1988	201
1989	210
1990	194
1991	166
1992	205
1993	199
1994	181
1995	184

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many tuberculosis cases recorded in Wales since 1979 related to *(a)* children, *(b)* men and *(c)* women; and if he will make a statement; [2271]

(2) how many tuberculosis cases have been reported since 1979. [2268]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The information for 1995 is given in the following table.

	Number
Children	19
Men	92
Women	66
Total[1]	184

[1] Includes age/sex not known.

The numbers of notifications of tuberculosis for earlier years, giving an age and sex breakdown, are published in table 4 of "Communicable disease statistics", series MB2—No. 6 for 1979 to No. 21 for 1994—available in the Library of the House.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his policy concerning efforts to limit tuberculosis cases in Wales. [2269]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The department has taken a number of measures to combat tuberculosis (TB).

In 1994, the United Kingdom health departments established the interdepartmental working group on TB to consider what further action could be taken to improve current measures to control, and prevent, cases of TB. Two reports emanating from the group, "Recommendations for the prevention and control of TB at local level" and "TB and homeless people" have recently been widely disseminated to the NHS in Wales. In addition, the Department has convened a small working party to consider arrangements for a framework to audit TB, in Wales, including arrangements for diagnosis, reporting and contact tracing. It is anticipated that the audit will be completed by the end of 1997.

Updated guidance on TB with recommendations of persons who should be immunised with BCG vaccine, contained in the UK Health department's memorandum, "Immunisation against Infectious Disease", was issued to the NHS in Wales in September. In particular, this advice recommends the continuation of the school BCG immunisation programme.

General Practitioners

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he is undertaking to assist the recruitment of general practitioners to rural medical practices; and if he will make a statement. [1740]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: There are already a number of fees and allowances available specifically to general practitioners in rural areas. Additionally, in Wales the financial allocation to health authorities includes a rurality component to help defray additional costs associated with rural practices.

Drug Reference Groups

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he plans to take to establish drug reference groups in north Wales; and what financial help he plans to make available. [1928]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend and I have recommended that drug and alcohol action teams establish implementation teams and local advisory teams to assist them in achieving their local strategies to combat drug and alcohol abuse.

Some £3 million of Welsh Office funding for drug and alcohol initiatives was transferred to health authorities in 1994 to help them support local action.

My right hon. Friend and I established a Welsh drug and alcohol unit with new funding of £1.5 million over three years, to provide advice and support to organisations throughout Wales.

Cadw

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when does Cadw plan to establish an office in north Wales; and if he will make a statement. [1747]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to Cadw under its chief executive, Mr. Tom Cassidy. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. J. Cassidy to Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, dated 7 November 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your Question in which you ask when Cadw plans to establish an office in North Wales.

Cadw has a works management unit in Caernarfon and our professional and field staff frequently travel throughout Wales. They provide a direct point of contact for members of the public who may be potential grant applicants; offer advice to local authorities on statutory procedures and best practice in conservation; and liaise with a range of bodies and organisations which have an interest in preserving and promoting the built heritage.

I am most anxious that the services available from Cadw should be readily accessible, but I do believe that service to and communication with the public are already at a high standard and I have no plans to supplement the unit in Caernarfon with an office in North Wales.

Police Authority Funding

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the subject of the funding of police authorities during the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [1855]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend and I received 22 representations between 1 May and 31 October. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend will make announcements about the funding of police authorities shortly after the Budget.

Rail Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what proposals he has to improve the railway services of North West Regional Railways in respect of the Wrexham to Bidston railway line; and if he will make a statement; [2265]

(2) what proposals he has to improve the railway services of North West Regional Railways as they are provided on the Holyhead to Crewe railway line; and if he will make a statement. [2264]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The level of service on North West Regional Railways is a matter for the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising and the train operator. I understand that the franchising director is currently consulting local authorities and rail users' consultative committees about the draft passenger service requirement for North West Regional Railways which will specify minimum service standards. When assessing bids for the franchise, the franchising director will take into account proposed improvements to the level and quality of services.

Green and Brown Field Sites

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the number of *(a)* green field and *(b)* brown field sites which will be developed in the next five years. [2257]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Information on which to make estimates of green field and brown field development sites is not collected centrally. The Government's policy is that full and effective use should be made of brown field sites to reduce pressure for development on green field sites.

Rural Areas (Development)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what research he has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned of low impact development in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [2345]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Welsh Office officials keep abreast of, and appraise, all published research that is relevant to the development of rural Wales. In planning terms, no research on low impact development has either been commissioned or is pending. Our policies for rural Wales are set out in "A Working Countryside for Wales", CM 3180, published on 13 March 1996.

Inward Investment

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of Japanese companies intending to locate in Wales in the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [2259]

Mr. Hague: A number of Japanese companies are considering investing in Wales, some for the first time, some reinvesting in existing operations and another is contemplating a joint venture. While we will do all that we can to convert these prospects into projects, it would be unwise to speculate further at this stage.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many Japanese companies have located in each of the counties of Wales since 1990. [2258]

Mr. Hague: Since 1 January 1990, the Welsh development agency has recorded projects by nine Japanese companies carrying out new investments in Wales; four entering into joint ventures; three acquisitions; and 41 expansions of existing operations.

Ten projects have been recorded for Clwyd; five for Dyfed; 13 for Gwent; one for Gwynedd; 15 for Mid Glamorgan; two for Powys; eight for South Glamorgan; and three for West Glamorgan.

Free School Meals

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each local education authority the proportion of children who received free school meals in *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools in the most recent year for which figures are available. [2004]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information requested is contained in the following table.

Number of pupils taking free meals on the day of the Schools' Census (16 January in 1996) expressed as a percentage of the number of pupils in attendance on that day, by unitary authority

	Primary schools	*Secondary schools*
Blaenau Gwent	29.3	21.1
Bridgend	23.5	15.9
Caerphilly	29.1	20.8
Cardiff	29.0	17.8
Carmarthenshire	20.9	13.9
Ceredigion	17.9	11.3
Conwy	20.5	17.1
Denbighshire	19.7	12.9
Flintshire	16.1	10.1
Gwynedd	21.3	13.9
Isle of Anglesey	24.0	14.7
Merthyr Tydfil	34.0	19.7
Monmouthshire	13.9	9.4
Neath Port Talbot	26.0	17.4
Newport	29.8	18.2
Pembrokeshire	25.2	17.1
Powys	12.8	6.8
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	29.1	19.9
Swansea	24.8	19.8
Torfaen	26.8	20.4
The Vale of Glamorgan	19.5	12.4
Wrexham	18.6	13.1
Wales	24.0	16.1

Rail Investment

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what plans he has to invest in the Wrexham to Bidston railway line; [2263]

(2) what plans he has to invest in infrastructure relating to the Holyhead to Crewe railway line. [2262]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The level of investment in rail infrastructure is a matter for Railtrack.

Mobile Mass Radiography Service

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will restore the mobile mass radiography service to Wales. [2270]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The service was particularly successful, when introduced in the 1950s, in its aim of identifying patients with TB. It would be an inappropriate use of resources, in view of the relatively low annual number of TB cases now being reported in Wales, to continue a mass service.

Emergency Planning

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will establish an urgent review of the emergency planning arrangements for *(a)* industrial plants and *(b)* nuclear plants in Wales to take account of the recent industrial accident at Avonmouth. [2124]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The monitoring of emergency planning arrangements is a matter for the Health and Safety Executive. Sites with significant chemical hazards are already required to prepare on-site emergency plans under the Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazard Regulations 1984. The regulations also require the appropriate local authority within whose area such a site fails to prepare and keep up-to-date an off-site emergency plan.

The operators of nuclear power stations are required under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965 and 1969 to have an emergency plan approved by the Health and Safety Executive for each installation and to exercise these arrangements regularly.

Two new European directives, covering the control of major accident hazards involving dangerous substances and basic safety standards, will have relevance for emergency planning requirements over the coming years.

A487 (Bypass)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will review his time scale for the construction of the Penygroes and Llanllyfni bypass on the A487 trunk road, with a view to bringing forward the commencement date; and what is the earliest possible date by which legal procedures and land acquisition could be completed to facilitate such a start if finance was, at that date, available. [2203]

Mr. Hague: The forward trunk road programme was reviewed as part of the process of preparing the Welsh Office's departmental report in March. This scheme was placed in the "in preparation" pool of the programme. It commands a high priority but is unlikely to start before April 1999. It is not possible to give a precise date for a start of work. The scheme is being progressed as quickly as the constraints of undertaking the detailed design work, completing the necessary statutory procedures and the availability of finance allow.

Aberconwy Borough Council

Mr. Richards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the consequences of his predecessor's decision not to cap Aberconwy borough council in 1993. [2005]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: In 1993, Aberconwy borough council was capped at the budget it set. That decision was taken because of the flooding in Llandudno which created unexpected expenditure pressures on the local authority.

Deregulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what regulations his Department proposes to repeal by the end of 1996; if he proposes to conduct a compliance cost assessment on each regulation repealed; and what is the estimated cost of undertaking a compliance cost assessment to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each repeal. [1405]

Mr. Hague: None.

Information Technology Projects

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many information technology projects have been undertaken since 1992, and are planned for the coming year, arranged in cost bands of £1,000,000. [1919]

Mr. Hague: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

The Old School and School House Caergilig

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will place in the Library a copy of the application and supporting evidence presented to him prior to making an order for the disposal of property known as The Old School and School House Caergilig, Ynys Mon. [2488]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: A copy of the relevant documents has been placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Cash Limits

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report* columns *295–96*, if he will list the main sectors of NHS expenditure covered by the cash limit increase for vote 4 resulting from take-up of end-year flexibility; if he will list those health authorities affected by the take-up and the corresponding sums; and if he will make a statement. [3029]

Mr. Hague: More than £20 million of the expenditure requirement relates to NHS trusts and GP fundholders exercising their freedoms to carry-forward funds from year to year. Other main areas of expenditure include: the programme to expand dental provision; the clinical effectiveness scheme; and the provision of repayable loans to meet in-year service pressures. The precise amounts at authority level have yet to be finalised.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report* columns *295-96*, what assessment he has made of the consequences of the transfer of responsibility for urban investment grants to the Welsh Development Agency; from which bodies or departments responsibility for urban investment grants has been transferred and in what proportions of the total sums involved; if administrative staff previously responsible have been transferred with the responsibility; and if he will make a statement. [3025]

Mr. Hague: The urban investment grant scheme was previously operated by the Welsh Office; £3.882 million has been transferred to the WDA for 1996–97 to fund ongoing and new project. The Welsh Office staff previously responsible for management of the scheme are

on secondment to the WDA until the end of December to ensure a smooth transition in the administration of the scheme.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) on 1 November, *Official Report,* columns *295-96,* if he will list the principal reasons for the increase in the running costs limit of the Office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools in Wales. [3027]

Mr. Hague: The reason for the increase in the running costs limit of the Office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Schools in Wales is the take-up of end-year flexibility as announced by the chief executive in his response to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Banks) on 12 July 1996, *Official Report,* columns *326-31.* This will be largely used for funding early retirement; helping OHMCI to meet the targets set in the White Paper "Development and training for Civil Servants: A Framework for Action"; IT training; and, administrative support for nursery inspection.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report* columns *295-96,* if he will list the approximate percentages of the increase in his Department's running cost limit in the present financial year that is accounted for by *(a)* the BSE crisis, *(b)* the costs of the north Wales child abuse inquiry and *(c)* other reasons; what impact each of these factors has had on the head count of his Department's employees as to (i) permanent and (ii) temporary staff; and if he will make a statement. [3023]

Mr. Hague: The increase will be applied to a number of the Department's budgets, largely to support additional work on BSE and the north Wales inquiry. The work is involving some re-deployment of permanent staff supplemented by temporary support staff recruited in the usual way. A number of these staff also carry out other duties.

My Department keeps under continual review its staffing requirements to ensure that these and other areas of business are taken forward appropriately.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report,* columns *295-96,* what proportion of the cash limit increase in vote 2 is covered by the take-up of end-year flexibility; if he will list the principal schemes covered by such end-year flexibility take-up; and if he will make a statement. [3030]

Mr. Hague: Of the £14.906 million cash limit increase for class XIV, vote 2, £11.357 million was covered by the take-up of end-year-flexibility. Of this total, £1.378 million was allocated to the capital provision of grant-maintained schools and £127,000 to the Welsh Office multi-media and portable initiative. The balance contributed towards the net increase of £25.313 million in the Welsh Development Agency's grant in aid.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report,* columns *295–96,* what assessment he has made of the principal reasons for the lower than expected claims for agrienvironmental and farm conservation schemes; what impact the BSE crisis has had on the level of such applications; and if he will make a statement. [3026]

Mr. Hague: When payment rates are determined under environmental land management schemes administered by my Department, careful consideration is given to the need to achieve satisfactory uptake levels. Regular payment reviews are also undertaken to ensure that payment levels continue to be appropriately set. An example of this is the 20 per cent. increase in payment rates under the moorland scheme.

Payment levels alone may not be the only factor resulting in lower than anticipated uptake. Socio-economic evaluations of the impact of each scheme are carried out on a five-yearly basis. The reports of the socio-economic evaluations of the Cambrian mountains and Lleyn peninsula environmentally sensitive areas are available in the Library of the House. Reports relating to other schemes will be placed in the library of the House as they become available.

An assessment of the impact of BSE on the uptake of schemes has not been undertaken, although an increase in interest has been noticed.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report,* columns *295–96,* if he will list the principal components of that net cash limit increase in vote 3 which arise from the take-up of end-year flexibility. [3028]

Mr. Hague: As announced by my hon. Friend, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, on 12 July, end-year-flexibility entitlements for class XIV, vote 3 totalled £1,177,000. Of this amount, £262,000 was taken up to cover capital expenditure on the central Government roads programme and £915,000 to cover additional departmental running costs, including costs associated with the north Wales child abuse inquiry.

Rugby World Cup

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what arrangements he has made to maximise the economic benefits to Wales of the holding of the final of the 1999 rugby world cup. [3013]

Mr. Hague: My hon. Friend, the Member for Cardiff, North (Mr. Jones) has responsibility for the co-ordination of my Department's efforts to maximise the economic benefits arising from the rugby world cup. He has established a Welsh Office liaison group with core representatives from the Welsh rugby union, the Wales tourist board, the Welsh Development Agency, the Development Board for Rural Wales, the Cardiff Bay development corporation, the Welsh Local Government Association, and Cardiff Marketing. Cardiff county council is also invited to attend. The group provides a focal point to ensure that Wales as a whole gains the maximum economic and tourism benefit from the event.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 4 November, *Official Report*, column *350*, on the Welsh Development Agency's budget, if the sum of £20 million for the LG project is provision for 1996–97 alone; if it is the total provision by the Welsh Development Agency for the project; what is the planned expenditure for 1995–96 by the Welsh Development Agency on the LG project; and what elements of the LG project the £20 million provision will fund. [3021]

Mr. Hague: The £20 million allocated to the WDA of the LG project is for 1996–97; and additional spending requirements will be met as part of the WDA's normal priorities; the details of the funding arrangements are commercially confidential.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 4 November, *Official Report*, column *350*, on the Welsh Development Agency's budget, when construction of the LG factory is planned to commerce; and how much of the £20 million committed in grant in aid for the LG project is allocated to *(a)* land acquisition, *(b)* site preparation and *(c)* factory construction. [3022]

Mr. Hague: Construction of the LG electronics development is expected to start in January 1997; construction of the LG semiconductors development is expected to start in March 1997. Details of the funding arrangements are commercially confidential.

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 4 November, column *350* on the Welsh Development Agency's budget, what is the source of the additional £25.4 million of central Government provision for the Welsh Development Agency for 1996–97. [3020]

Mr. Hague: The additional provision of £25.3 million in class XIV, vote 2 for the grant in aid to the Welsh Development Agency has been funded mainly from (i) end-year flexibility entitlements carried forward from previous years, (ii) a switch of resources from class XIV, vote 1 as a result of claims proving lower than expected agri-environmental and farm conservation schemes, and (iii) numerous cases of virement within vote 2.

Welsh Health Common Services Authority

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the Welsh Health Common Services Authority as regards the movement of staff from Crickhowell house to other Government-owned premises in the Cardiff area; what estimate he has made of the savings in rent for those market-tested units of the authority leaving Crickhowell house for other Government-provided accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [3014]

Mr. Hague: None. The authority is considering options, on a commercially confidential basis, to re-locate staff from Crickhowell house. If this takes place, it will be essential to demonstrate value for money for the health service and a final decision has not been taken.

Cardiff Bay Development Corporation

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Sweeney) of 1 November, *Official Report*, columns *295–96*, if he will list the principal reasons for the increased grant in aid for the Cardiff Bay development corporation during the current financial year; what impact the current increase has had on previous estimates of *(a)* the final outturn cost of the barrage and *(b)* the current cumulative total public expenditure by the corporation; and if he will make a statement. [3024]

Mr. Hague: The grant in aid has been increased to fund additional estimated expenditure on inward investment projects, which could add to the cumulative total public expenditure by the corporation, and to fund the cash flow demands of the barrage project. The estimated final outturn cost of the barrage project remains within the £191 million announced to Parliament.

GP Fundholding

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning approval for the split up of GP fundholding practices; and if he will make a statement [3012]

Mr. Hague: From 1 April 1996, the minimum list size criterion for standard GP fundholding in Wales was reduced to 4,000 from 7,000. Thirty-seven practices previously within 17 fundholding groups, applied to change their status, and were approved. Some 31 are now single practice funds; six practices remain in three groups.

Compulsory Competitive Tendering

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what arrangements for compulsory competitive tendering for work subject to the provisions of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980 will apply to local authorities. [3524]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend has given very careful consideration to the timetable for the re-introduction of compulsory competitive tendering for this work after local government reorganisation. We have consulted on the regulations which provide for the re-introduction of compulsory competitive tendering and, separately, have received representations that a number of local authorities are continuing to have operational difficulties in complying with the timetable which was announced in June 1995.

My right hon. Friend has concluded that authorities should be given an additional six months for the re-introduction of compulsory competitive tendering for this work, that is to 1 October 1997. Welsh Office officials have written today to local authorities and other interested parties seeking comments on this proposal. A copy of this letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

An announcement on the way in which compulsory competitive tendering will be extended to professional services and housing management will be made shortly.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

This index is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Information System (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes and cannot therefore, be used in connection with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

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Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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